



Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories

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EXECUTIVE OFFICE

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Richard Nerysoo, Vice President and chief executive officer of the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories is speaking today in Peterborough, Ontario, to the Committee for an Independent Canada Conference on Northern Development.

Mr. Nerysoo suggested that those who stand for an independent Canada should also support the Dene Declaration and the struggle of the Dene for their independence within Canada. "A government which is allowed to ignore the existence of the Dene nation is not a government that respects the meaning of freedom and independence. It is a government which will ignore the rights not only of the Dene but all Canadians," he emphasized.

Mr. Nerysoo also charged the federal government with dishonesty in its suggestion to the Canadian public that the Dene were not ready to negotiate their land settlement. He pointed out that the Dene had declared their readiness to negotiate at Fort Good Hope, in June 1974, when they stated that any land settlement must recognize, not extinguish, aboriginal rights. He pointed out that the government was preventing negotiation from commencing by insisting that the Dene compromise their position before negotiations begin. Mr. Nerysoo suggested that such a demand was unacceptable and raised doubts about the government's good faith.

In addition to Mr. Nerysoo, other Brotherhood spokesmen at the conference include Georges Erasmus, Francois Paulette and Fibbi Tatti.

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A summary of Mr. Nerysoo's remarks is attached.

FOR RELEASE Friday, 9 January, 1976.

Summary of Remarks by R. Nerysoo, Vice President of the Indian Brotherhood of the N.W.T. to the CIC Conference on Northern Development Peterborough, Ontario January 9, 1976

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1. Opening Remarks

2. Committee for an Independent Canada and the Independence of the Dene

- It is obvious to us that anyone who stands for an independent Canada should also support the Dene Declaration and the Struggle of the Dene nation for its independence within Canada.
- We are a colonized people. Our right to negotiate the terms of our participation in Canada has been ignored and our national territory and culture has been violated by others.
- There are those who want to take our land, steal our resources, and make our people into so-called, "human resources" - to be exploited like oil and gas. It is naturally convenient for these interests to ignore the reality of the Dene nation and to pretend that the needs of all Canadians are the same as those of the multi-national corporation, let alone the same as each other.
- This is, of course, ridiculous - and nowhere is this more obvious than in the Mackenzie District. Where the government of Canada - our government - and the oil companies use the word, "development" to describe what is really a disaster for the Dene. What we see

3. Land Settlement

- Naturally, Judd Buchanan does not want to admit that the Dene are a distinct people, a nation, who see things differently and have a right to do so - a right to develop on their own terms. If the Department of Indian Affairs recognized our nation their job, which is to serve the oil companies on the one hand and the Dene on the other, would become impossible. They have chosen the easy way out - to ignore our existence and work full time for disaster.
- You should now have a pretty good idea of why our land settlement is so vitally important to us. It is the means by which our nation can survive in Canada with enough strength to ensure development of our people and prevent disasters such as the proposed pipeline.
- If any of you are familiar with the history of Northern development you will be aware of how little consideration has been given to the rights of our nation by the federal government and how long ago the federal government blindly committed itself to serve the oil and mining industry in the north. I believe the most recent evidence of this is Professor Dosman's new book The National Interest.

- Unfortunately, the federal government has a constitutional responsibility to protect our interests. History has made this a cruel joke on the Dene Nation. The federal government does not even recognize our interests, let alone protect them. For this reason we badly need the support of all Canadians to bring the government to heel, to take it away from its role of serving the oil industry and make it an instrument for the benefit of the people of the North, and all of Canada.

4. History of the Land Claims Struggle

- Let me briefly remind you of the history of our struggle to achieve a just land settlement.

- the formation of the Indian Brotherhood of the N.W.T. and the Metis Association was obviously very important, but the crucial recent events were:

(i) Mr. Justice Morrow's decision in favour of our right to file a caveat on our traditional lands - a decision now reversed only on a technicality. We are appealing to the Supreme Court of Canada.

(ii) The historic meeting at Fort Good Hope in June 1974 when the Metis and Indian people - the Dene - came together and agreed on their land settlement position. This position is as firm today as it was then: we will not sell our rights for any price (why should we?). Any land settlement must recognize, not extinguish, our rights. At Fort Good Hope we defined those rights as deriving from our use and occupancy

of over 450,000 square miles of land since time immemorial. At that time, June 1974, we told the government of Canada two things:

1. we were ready to negotiate and
2. that no pipeline could be built before our prior rights had been recognized in a land settlement.

(iii) The government's response was disappointing, but not, as I have pointed out, surprising. The government said that the land settlement position of our people was not serious! They were not prepared to negotiate with us unless we compromised first! Finally, the government will only recognize our rights in order to extinguish them - to buy them from us, as they have done elsewhere.

What is especially dishonest, the government has told the Canadian people that we are the ones who are not ready to negotiate! This is a lie. We have been ready to negotiate since June 1974.

What we fear is that the government will use this lie to force a pipeline on us at the last moment - when it is they who have failed to negotiate. We need the support of all Canadians for our right to negotiate on our own terms. How can there be "negotiation" if we do not have that right?

(iv) The most important restatement of our land claim took place last summer in Fort Simpson with the acceptance of the Dene Declaration of rights by our people. This Declaration once again tried to make it clear that a land settlement is not a simple matter of selling property, it is a matter of agreeing to the terms and conditions under which the Dene nation will participate and survive within Canada.

(v) Finally, at Fort Rae last month, the General Assembly of the Brotherhood reaffirmed the principles of the Dene Declaration. What the press saw only as a leadership struggle was in fact a debate over whether we would cooperate with colonialism, by accepting the political institutions, such as Territorial Council, imposed on us without negotiation, or whether we would maintain the position of the Dene Declaration that the political development of the N.W.T. must be based, first, on negotiation with the Dene and Inuit people.

The General Assembly at Rae agreed that to participate in Territorial Council is to allow the government to ignore our right to negotiate for political institutions better suited to the needs of our nation.

5. Conclusion

We call on other Canadians to support us because we believe an Independent Canada is best served by independent Canadians, amongst which must be an independent Dene nation. A government which is allowed to ignore the

existence of the Dene nation is not a government that respects the meaning of freedom and independence. It is a government which will ignore the rights not only of the Dene but all Canadians.