

How to build sovereignty in Canada's north

By Betty Nair

An embryonic communist society and "nation" is taking shape across a vast tract of North American territory despite the best efforts of the authorities to contain it and subdue it.

Already, in dozens of communities, a dual-power situation exists, with the governmental organs of the old established order being shadowed by local institutions based on grass roots consensus and popular will.

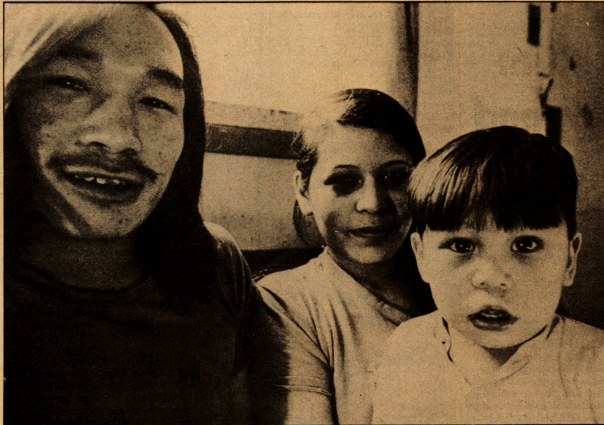
At the same time, a political apparatus is being built — it aims to be both unified and decentralized — to promote the trend in the communities while moving the struggle into the national and international arenas.

This new society, the Dene Nation of Canada's Northwest Territories, represents probably the last best hope of North America's native people to achieve a significant measure of sovereignty and popular self-determination in their traditional homelands.

The Dene's main voice, the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories, is in process of restructuring itself. It no longer aims exclusively to unify the Dene behind a single political leadership. Instead, it pushes "community development" — building a decentralized network in which local traditional band councils and general assemblies are taking on the job of interpreting and carrying out the people's will.

This reorientation is no academic or idealistic exercise. It's a practical attempt to strengthen the Dene society at its base, to build effective sovereignty without bothering to wait for Ottawa to give the okay.

The highest-profile political initiative of the Dene is



Dene Family: Steve Cockney, Bertha Chicksi, and Steve Jr.

their "land claim" over a 450,000 square-mile tract — twice the size of France — extending up the Mackenzie River Valley from the British Columbia — Alberta — Saskatchewan border nearly to the Arctic Ocean.

The Dene pronounced Dennyay, an Athapaskan word meaning The People) have occupied that land of extremes in isolated communal groups and roaming extended families since before history was written, and they insist they never signed away their aboriginal right to it in a treaty and they never lost it in a war. They

want compensation for their land being alienated by the rush of oil and gas development, but they're not interested simply in being bought out, or even in receiving a tract which they would "own."

For the Dene, the land claim is the basis of a political claim for the right to exist as a distinct "nation" and culture — the right to establish a unique form of native sovereignty and autonomy within the wider framework of the white-dominated Canadian federal State. Without a communal land

base, the Dene would not be a people; and without a land claim they would lack the clout to force Ottawa to recognize their distinctness.

Today, there are 10,000 Dene — still the majority in their own land. Most still regularly hunt and fish for part of their food, and very few have entered the wage economy, but decades of colonial rule has undermined their self-sufficiency. Welfare is now the main source of income throughout the Mackenzie Valley.

The discovery of large quantities of oil and natural gas in the Mackenzie Delta in

the late 1960's, and the prospect of a highly disruptive pipeline through their fragile country, prompted the Dene to establish the Indian Brotherhood and make a formal land claim. (The neighbouring Inuit, or Eskimos, have a separate claim.)

The land claim went to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1974, and while it lost on a technicality by a narrow split vote, the moral basis of the claim was firmly established. Further impetus for a settlement to the claim was given last year when, after a marathon series of hearings throughout the North, a federal commission of inquiry into the pipeline project (the Berger Commission) tentatively concluded that the Dene claim should be resolved before any large project goes ahead. (The commission's final report, to deal with whether the project should be approved at all is expected this Spring.)

Even Ottawa has finally admitted there is something to negotiate. The government is reportedly talking of an outright cash settlement in the \$4 billion range. But the Dene have already profited by the experiences of the native people of James Bay, to the east of them, and of Alaska, to the west. In both cases, the natives were forced — literally by bulldozers at their front door — to virtually surrender their land base for cash grants amounting to a few dollars per acre.

DENE DECLARATION

In July 1975, Dene from all over the Mackenzie Valley met at Fort Simpson, 900 miles north of Vancouver, to put their claim in a political context. The resulting Dene Declaration said in part:

"The Dene find themselves as part of a country. That country is Canada. But

the Government of Canada is not the government of the Dene. The Government of the N.W.T. is not the government of the Dene. These governments were not the choice of the Dene, they were imposed upon the Dene.

"What we the Dene are struggling for is the recognition of the Dene Nation by the governments and peoples of the world."

The Dene Declaration is not — despite the attempts of the white authorities to willfully misrepresent it as such — a call for an independent native State, of the United Nations variety. The Dene are not so naive as to believe Ottawa would give away ten per cent of Canadian territory, or that the U.S. would allow it to happen.

But as one of the Brotherhood's staff members puts it: "The Declaration does not point toward a separate jurisdiction within Canada, with political powers roughly equivalent to those of a province, who control over the use of natural resources, and local governmental units devised by the Dene themselves in keeping with their traditions."

"There is nothing set in concrete about this, no blueprints. The Dene need the right to experiment, to design an initial constitution, and to redesign it."

One thing is for sure, the "local governmental units" would not "allow" the municipal model with elected councils answerable only at infrequent election times. Ottawa has already tried to impose this model in the form of settlement councils in 150 communities across the territories to make decisions on water, sewage, housing and similar matters.

The Dene have already rejected the settlement councils; they hardly ever vote in council elections, leaving that particular chore to the resident whites and the more assimilated English-speaking Indians.

BAND COUNCIL

The most respected institution in each Indian community is the band council, which by speaking is only an advisory body, but which actually is the focus of public opinion. At present, there are about 20 band councils, but the Brotherhood is now working toward establishing more and strengthening those that exist.

Already, it's getting difficult for the settlement councils to make decisions without the band councils, says the Brotherhood staff members. When a council is elected, too, but it operates on more traditional Dene lines: There is a great reluctance to make decisions in the absence of consensus. Meetings are held with the entire community, people offer differing opinions and a no-hurry decision is that sense, you don't have to go for majority rule.

"The Dene community is fairly homogeneous — there is no bourgeoisie, no class — so the process for consensual

Toon and nail battle for liberation

By Fred Mabile

Animal Liberation is standing up on its two hind legs in Great Britain. A new clandestine group, the Animal Liberation Front, has launched a guerrilla offensive against those "sportsmen" and business types who traffic in the pain of defenseless animals.

ALF cadre recently rescued three pregnant beagles from a pharmaceutical research centre in Thanet, damaged a badger digger's car in Cheshire and vehicles used to transport animals to vivisection centres in Rye and Heath, and vandalized heads of angling equipment in a Woodworths in Leamington Spa.

Two members of an allied group, the Band of Mercy, were recently released from jail after serving one year of three-year sentences on 14 counts, including setting fire to vivisection laboratories, under construction, damaging animal transport vehicles and torching seal-hunting

boats. One of the two staged a sit-down strike in jail when the authorities tried to force him to wear woolen and leather garments made from animals. After a week sitting naked in his freezing cell, he won his point.

The ALF and Band of Mercy actions may be more illegal, but they are not necessarily more militant, than a whole range of other direct-action tactics employed by the broadening movement against cruel bloodsports and profit-crazy "research." Despite their image as sentimental animal-lovers, the anti-vivisectionists, who oppose experimentation on animals, and the anti-hunters are proving themselves tough-minded militants; their creativity and resourcefulness has demonstrated that you don't need \$80,000 to hire a mine sweeper (a la Greenpeace campaign) or a whaling in the Pacific to raise consciousness about the need for humankind to coexist peacefully with other species on earth.

They have their work cut out for them in Great Britain, where fox and badger hunting are ruling class privileges (Princess Anne is a devotee) and there are 800 experimentation centres where animals are forced to smoke tobacco, have cosmetics injected into them, given skin irritants and are force-fed (86 per cent of experiments are conducted without anaesthetics).

A number of experiments have been shut down permanently as the result of demonstrations, occupations and other forms of public pressure, and hunt clubs, which have had to cease advertising because of harassment, are facing increasing restrictions in future from farmers, property owners and the government.

Hunt Clubs Stymied

The Hunt Saboteurs Association, which has about 2,000 members throughout Great Britain, has co-ordinated many successful disruptions of fox hunts.

HSA members routinely rescue foxes, blow hunting horns to confuse the dogs, smear trees and grass with fox scents and chemical mixtures to create false trails, and feed the dogs stinking cheese to foul their sense of smell. On one occasion the Liverpool branch of HSA hired a helicopter to hover over a field where a rabbit hunt was in progress, thus scaring all the rabbits away before they could be killed.

Though mostly legal, such tactics have naturally brought down the wrath of the hunters on the "sabs," with the result that quite a few animal-lovers have been physically assaulted on the field of honour. The police, who usually attend hunts these days, have tried to stay "neutral," but some of the more outrageous incidents have resulted in arrests and even occasionally fines for the hunters.

More information from the Hunt Saboteurs Association can be obtained from P.O. Box 15, Tonbridge, Kent, England.