

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
7TH COUNCIL, 48TH SESSION

TABLED DOCUMENT NO. 19-48

TABLED ON FEBRUARY 1, 1973

FD 19-48

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Interview with James Wan-shee by Peter Gzowski, CBC. From the program
This Country in the Morning.

GZOWSKI: President of the Northwest Territories Indian Brotherhood and also President of North of Sixty, an organization - how many is it, three native groups in the North of Sixty?

WAN-SHEE: Well there's six native organizations who comprise of a... Peter Gzowski cuts in ... the native, the metis, and Eskimos and Inuit Tapirisat from the east is that?

GZOWSKI: They're all involved together in the North of Sixty. Just before we get into other kinds of discussions will you taste that bannock? Bannock is not a new thing for you right?

WAN-SHEE: Yes, ah...but this one is new. (Laughs.)

GZOWSKI: You didn't have, didn't have marichino cherries in your family when you were growing up, where, in Fort Rae?

WAN-SHEE: Yeh, right...no, we used fish eggs.

GZOWSKI: Really? Caviar in bannock. How's that? Oh, you got your fish eggs fishing on James Bay. Tell me what it's like. I'm going to taste some too.

WAN-SHEE: Um...It's kind of hard to tell. I keep tasting the fruit.... It's all right.

GZOWSKI: Whew....(laughs)...for a moment there I thought...wait till I get this out of my mouth...excuse me...just one minute...enjoy yourself for a second there....Mmm...it's all right..(laughs) I tell you what, we cheated a little bit. There's butter in it instead of lard and a little more water than the recipe called for, but it did work... that's fried and it's kind of nice. It's really good. Anyway, I'd like to talk about some of the things that are going on in the part of the world that you're from and living in and involved in...all kinds of activity

in. One of the things I'd like to find out about is the new northerner, the white northerner, the person whose been going up there recently. And one of the things that Bob Razeka said on the program when we were talking about his experiences in the north. He talked about people going up to see if they could offer some solution to the problems of the north and the first thing they did was become part of the problem. What's your response to that?

WAR-SHEE: Well in some cases I think they become a problem to the situation of the north. Um...I think that if a person really wants to help the native people up north, they'll have to allow the native people to solve their own situation. By this I mean that uh... we want to solve our own...run our own affairs, and be given the opportunities to make our own decisions. And um...not be told this is good for you...that sort of approach and I think that a lot of problems that exist up north are because the native people haven't been given the opportunity and that there are too many consultants, advisors to the governments and private agencies who are doing their own thing up north and that as far as we are concerned there is no such thing as a native problem...um... because before the white man came up north we never talked about an Indian problem or an Eskimo problem, or pardon me, an Inuit problem. But since the fur traders, the missionaries, the Territorial and Federal governments moved in, I think we have a cultural conflict, on both sides and up to now it's a one way process of cultural assimilation, if one wants to look at it that way. We talk about respect for native culture, trying to help the native people try to catch up to the modern world, but up to now there hasn't been a great deal of respect for the native culture. We can see it in the government programming, whether you're

talking about education, economic development, political development, etc.

GZOWSKI: Could we...just change tacts for a minute and move from those general areas into some specifics and talk about some of the communities along the Mackenzie Valley that you know. What was the Old Stope in Yellowknife?

WAH-SHEE: Well in Yellowknife the Old Stope was a great place for the native people to get together. They considered the Old Stope as their kind of place...it was a native gathering center. It was not only the native people who got together, it was, you know, the old timers, prospectors, miners...the whole segment of the community of Yellowknife used to get together and it was a place where a person could be himself. If someone was working out in the bush for about three or four months and wanted to raise hell, well, he'd come into the Old Stope and really enjoy himself and if he wanted to dance on the table and just plain whoop it up, he could do it, and it was a place where it was accepted, to be yourself. But now you've got to be a little more sophisticated... Gzowski interrupts...The Old Stope burned down?...Wah-shee...Yeh, it did, and I think it was a great loss. It should have been replaced, because right now the people have to go from the old town into uptown and that's quite a ways if you haven't got any money for a cab, etc.

GZOWSKI: Yeh...I notice that you very carefully said not only the native people...would be having a good time and feeling that they belonged. But you talked about the old settlers and the old northerners as if there are people who have gone up and have gotten a sense of the land, have gotten a sense of belonging and do belong and who you don't resent in the way you seem to resent a cer...are there two kinds of northerners..of new northerners?

WAI-SHEE: Oh, yeh...I would say so...I think you've got the old timers who lived there for years and years and really got to know the natives. And there is respect on both sides and they get along quite well. But then you've got the new southerners who just move up and maybe they live there for two or three months and they consider themselves full-fledged northerners. It's like me going to British Columbia and saying well I'm part of the scene. You can't really say that unless you get the feel of the country and have a respect for the people who live there. And this is part of the problems as I see them in the north, right now, because, you know, you can't really be an expert on the north, you can be an expert...you can consider yourself an expert on different things but I feel that people are the most important thing that exists up north. It's the people who make the north what it is today.

GZOWSKI: Everybody is predicting...you've heard predictions that Inuvik will go up to 8,500 people from, what is it now, about 3,000; that Yellowknife is going to get bigger and be more than 8,000 and so on... is that, is that....you're not against that? Or are you?

WAI-SHEE: Well, I'm not against development as such. In other words if people from the south want to move up north they're welcome; but let's make one thing clear; as far as the native people are concerned we want the land to be settled with the native people, and, that we want to settle that issue, because up to now the native people haven't had the resources to stand on their own two feet; up to now we've been working for everybody but ourselves. And we haven't been organizing ourselves... we haven't been organizing our own community, our leadership and so forth, and we're just in the process of doing that. So once you have a land settlement, the native people will have the land, will have financial resources and will also have other resources, human resources. And then

they can come from the south if they wish because then we will have some assurance of controlling our own community. Up to now, you know, there have been too many people coming from the south without having our land settled up to now.

GZOWSKI: You've just come back from Alaska.

WAH-SHEE: Yeh, I've been in Alaska for about two weeks, I would say, all together.

GZOWSKI: What did you learn there? 'Cause, I wonder if Canadians have paid enough attention to the Alaska land settlement.

WAH-SHEE: Well, I just went there, as I said, about two weeks ago and the Alaska natives are caught up in a very awkward situation, because they've received the land settlement money; they've got the land they can select, but then there's the....Peter Gzowski interrupts...How much money have they got?....Wah-shee...Well, they've got one billion dollars and forty million acres and they've got two years to select all the land in the State of Alaska.

GZOWSKI: And that was a settlement in the federal court, wasn't it? The federal government said that was rightfully theirs, that was their aboriginal right.

WAH-SHEE: Well, it was a political settlement in the House of Congress, and right now they're also in the midst of enrollment and you have something like up to March 31 to enroll.

GZOWSKI: What does enroll mean?

WAH-SHEE: Well enrollment basically means that if you are an Alaskan native and a U.S. citizen, then that you are entitled to enroll. You have to be 1/4 Alaskan native, whether it's Inuit or Indian, and you don't necessarily have to live in the States but you have to retain your U.S. citizenship and you have to be accepted by one of the villages

in the state of Alaska. Then you are entitled to the land as well as cash settlement.

GZOWSKI: Um...is the precedent that was set there going to have any effect on your own movements in your...in North of Sixty in particular?

WAN-SHEE: Well, I believe that it's going to have a significant impact because up to now the federal government has been stubborn in their approach of not recognizing aboriginal rights. Aboriginal rights has already been recognized by the federal government back in 1921 when Treaty 8 and 11 were signed. Because as far as we're concerned in the Northwest Territories, land was not ceded, and this is the feeling of the people in the Northwest Territories because all Treaty 8 and 11 were was a peace treaty to allow the southern...southerners to move from below the 60th parallel into the Northwest Territories, and that we would live in peace with them. And so this is your Treaty 8 and 11. And that land was not settled. Therefore the native people North of Sixty are in the same position as the Alaska federation of natives.

GZOWSKI: Have you got plans to get this in front of the courts somewhere?

WAN-SHEE: The way that we want to approach it is that we want to work out a basic approach to the land claims among ourselves as individual organizations who are members of the federation of North of Sixty and we will use the political approach as well as using the courts; so we will be using both.

GZOWSKI: So you don't know precisely how you are going to attack...all you know is that you are going to attack and ... attack might be the wrong word...but you're going to work toward something like the Alaska settlement.

WAN-SHEE: Right...and we want to do it as a united native organization,

instead of having different native organizations approaching the land claims by themselves, and this is why you see a lot of meetings now-a-days with the individual native organizations North of 60. You see the land claims are not really the problem as far as I see it, because once you get a land claim, then you also have to implement the land claim and if you're not prepared to do that then you end up with a can of worms. And the land claim itself is not the means to an end, because in Alaska I see that they've got this one billion dollars and forty million acres and right now they have organized 12 regional corporations and they're running out of people to manage these corporations. They have to go on intense training programs to get their people ready to get into the modern world of running the corporation because it's a profit making corporation. And so they have to hire consultants from Wall Street, from all over the southern states, and I can see the same thing coming up in the Northwest Territories and the Yukon. Because once you get an X amount of land, an X amount of money, then you have to form the regional corporations and if you look into the small communities in the north and also statistics as far as the Territorial education is concerned, you have a very small number of native people who are graduated from university and for that matter, the high schools as well. So what is going to happen, is you're going to end up with this settlement and you're going to have to go on an intense training program to get as many native people involved as much as possible. And I believe that the other thing is that once you get a land claim, the government immediately wants to take it away from you so you got to keep on fighting for what you got and this is what's happening in the State of Alaska. The Alaska Federation of Natives is forever sending their people down to Washington to negotiate. You know, the legislation that was passed for the land claim

has some loopholes. It's an agreement between the federal government and also the State of Alaska.

GZOWSKI: So one of the things you found out when you were in the State of Alaska and looked at their settlement, is that it's a lot more complicated than anyone would at first assume.

WAH-SHEE: Right. I think that you've got to have two basic approaches to your land claim. One is to fight like hell to get what you want and number two is to hang on to it and to get as many native people involved to keep your land claim going. When I say land claim going, I mean you've got to train your own people to invest in stocks and bonds and you've also got to get into real estate and other businesses as well as running the corporation.

GZOWSKI: James Wah-shee from North of Sixty.