

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE  
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES  
9<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY, 6<sup>TH</sup> SESSION**

**TABLED DOCUMENT NO. 2-81(3)**

**TABLED ON NOVEMBER 13, 1981**



Northwest  
Territories Legislative Assembly

Tabled Document No. 2-816  
Tabled 13/11/81

Box 2895  
Yellowknife, NWT  
1981 07 22

Honorable John Munro  
Minister of Indian Affairs  
and Northern Development  
Parliament Hill  
Ottawa

Dear Mr. Minister:

Today an historic event is taking place. I refer, of course, to the formal opening of aboriginal rights negotiations between the Dene Nation and the Government of Canada. I speak from conviction, and not from mere formality, when I say that I hope the negotiations will result in a settlement under which the Dene are able to make secure the essential elements of their culture, and thrive both individually, and as a distinctive people within confederation.

However, when I read the opening negotiating position of the President of the Dene Nation ( Dene Nation Newsletter, July 1981 ), there is one matter that gives me cause for considerable concern. In his statement Mr. Erasmus says:

Our position includes the creation of a new kind of government in the western NWT ... which would replace the present NWT government. This government would be a government for all of the citizens living in this area, whether they are Dene or non-Dene, but this government would be in the tradition of the Dene ... So you might as well get used to the idea immediately and the major section of your work is going to be looking at the constitutional future of this part of the world.

That position, from the Dene point of view, is asserted as a premise essential to the successful conclusion of negotiations. If the Government of Canada accepts the premise, then apparently the aboriginal rights negotiations will focus on the creation of a new government for the western Arctic, discussions which will obviously have important implications for all residents of the area.

Personally, I would be disappointed, but acquiescent, if the Dene

insisted upon Dene government for the Dene alone - acquiescent, that is, particularly if the Government of Canada accepted such an eventuality as being compatible with the interests of the country as a whole. At any rate, I am definitely not opposed in principle to the Dene attempting to negotiate a political settlement.

The particular political settlement they are proposing, however - and proposing to deal with in the context of aboriginal rights negotiations - has implications for non-Dene as well as Dene. Again, while I approve and support a single political jurisdiction whose citizens are of mixed heritage, and while I am also amenable to a significantly new form and style of government to accommodate the varying traditions represented in the jurisdiction, I cannot accept what would appear to be the conditions under which that government might be established, namely, an agreement negotiated between closeted representatives of the Dene and the Government of Canada.

I actively support the principle of democracy and justice which asserts that the Dene must have the opportunity - to the extent that this is reasonably possible - to be consulted about, and to give their consent to, that government which will have jurisdiction over them. I insist, however, that this principle must also be observed for the non-Dene in the western Arctic.

If a newly created government is to have jurisdiction over all people in the western Arctic, then all people must have representation in its creation. This obviously means that the creation of such a government must be considered in some forum other than aboriginal rights negotiations, or alternatively, that when the matter is being discussed during aboriginal rights negotiations, that representatives of the non-Dene must be allowed to participate.

It is crucial, I think, that the Government of Canada make its determination in this matter known immediately. Will it accept that the Dene have the right to negotiate such a government, or will it not? Since this is a matter apparently of fundamental concern to the Dene, it is obvious that they would want to know the federal government's position at the outset. And I needn't tell you that those of us who are compelled to sit on the sidelines while negotiations take place, but who might very well be significantly impacted anyway, would certainly like to know the answer too.

I look forward to an early reply.

Yours truly,

*Bob MacQuarrie*

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