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# Negotiating The Indian “Problem”

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### Article abstract

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# Negotiating The Indian “Problem”

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This essay examines the formulation of the so-called Indian “problem” as a significant element in relations between Indians and non-Indians in Western Canada. Making use of the concept of the culture of public problems, the author identifies some of the means by which Indian representatives seek to renegotiate with non-Indians a new understanding of the nature of the Indian “problem”.

*Cet article s'attarde sur la manière de formuler le « problème » indien afin qu'il reçoive plus d'importance dans l'Ouest du Canada, dans les relations entre les Indiens et les groupes non indiens. L'auteur propose l'usage du concept de la culture des problèmes publics afin d'identifier les moyens dont disposent les représentants indigènes dans leurs pourparlers avec les groupes non indigènes pour une meilleure compréhension du « problème » indien.*

“The first step in liquidating a people...is to erase its memory.... Before long a nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.”

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

## I

Remembering can be an act with an ethical purpose as well as a communicative function. This essay is concerned with both dimensions of remembering and with the articulation of a public problem within the context of interethnic communication. Specifically, it considers the formulation of the so-called Indian “question” or “problem” as a significant element in interaction between Indians and non-Indians on the Canadian Prairies.

Having declared these analytical concerns, I must at the outset acknowledge their having been shown to me by John R. McLeod, a Cree friend who practised a rather different approach to penetrate and—as far as it is possible to do so—to resolve these matters. Only gradually have I come to recognize the depth of understanding that informed his public acts of remembering. I am unable to replicate his artistry, but as the essay proceeds I present and draw heavily upon his experiences and insight.

## II

The distinctive character of public problems is central to this discussion. Although many issues generate deep concern and attract considerable attention, not all social problems become public

ones. Social issues are transformed into public problems when they become "matters of conflict or controversy in the arenas of public life" (Gusfield 1981: 5), which, further, initiate demands for public action to rectify that which is deemed unacceptable. A sociological examination of public problems, then, will entail several lines of questioning: for example, why "an issue or problem emerges as one with a public status, as something about which 'someone ought to do something'" (*ibid.*). A sociological examination will also specify the constituent elements of public problems *qua* ideas, and chart the relations between them. At this point I shall deal briefly with the latter, leaving the historical evolution of the Indian "problem" to the next section.

The attribution of responsibility is fundamental to the shaping of public problems as ideas and to their subsequent handling in public arenas. But first, there is a need to fix causal responsibility and thereby to suggest appropriate ways of viewing and understanding public problems. For instance, are automobile accidents and fatalities caused mainly by improper driving or by faultily designed vehicles (cf. Gusfield 1981)? It is also necessary to allocate political responsibility for public problems—to say who ought to resolve the situation. Should more stringent policing of drivers be enforced or should the automotive industry be required to manufacture safer vehicles? Different definitions of causal responsibility can lead to varying assignments of political responsibility and, ultimately, to quite different kinds of proposed "solutions."

Finally, it is important to recognize that ideas about the causes of public problems combine both cognitive and moral judgments: "The cognitive side consists in beliefs about the facticity of the situation and events comprising the problem—our theories and empirical beliefs.... The moral side is that which enables the situation to be viewed as painful, ignoble, immoral. It is what makes alteration or eradication desirable..." (*ibid.*: 9). Without both a cognitive belief that a given situation can, in fact, be altered *and* a moral judgment that this ought to happen, a situation is not at issue and, hence, not a public problem. This linking of cognitive and moral judgments in the rendering of public problems is crucial to this examination of the Indian problem and its affect on interethnic communication.

### III

Politicians, the news media and the public in Canada have taken an increasing interest in the Indian question during the past 20 years, parti-

cularly since the White Paper controversy of 1969-70, when the federal government sought unsuccessfully to terminate its administration of Indian affairs (Dyck 1981; Weaver 1981). Before this time, it was unusual for Indians to receive public attention, except as costumed additions to the local colour at public receptions held for visiting dignitaries such as the governor-general.

Today, extensive coverage is given to Indian claims to aboriginal land rights and to actions such as the Indian associations' recent attempts to block patriation of the Canadian constitution. Indian demands have become prominent issues both in Parliament and in the Canadian press.

The claims being pressed by Indian leaders are based upon arguments and sources of legitimacy that are unusual in Canadian public life and unavailable to other Canadians. One set of arguments involves their status as an indigenous people with special rights to land and to traditional ways of life associated with hunting, trapping and fishing.<sup>1</sup> A second set of arguments is derived from registered Indians' special constitutional and administrative status and from their long experience as the involuntary clients of a paternalistic and stifling form of federal administration. In their statements, Indian leaders regularly compare the present-day actions of the federal government with a deservedly unsavoury image of the Department of Indian Affairs in the past. The use of this tactic, and of frequent references to the established legal basis of Indian rights, arm Indian representatives with a unique set of arguments with which to advance their claims.

But these claims are being pursued primarily within specialized legal, political and administrative channels, the workings of which are not well known to most Canadians. Canadians, therefore, are often confused, not only by the exotic nature of Indian claims, but also by the procedures with which they are put forth, heard and acted upon.<sup>2</sup> In short, although there has been a virtual quantum leap in the amount of media coverage and political attention given to Indian issues, public understanding of these developments has lagged far behind the amount of information being disseminated. This has had the paradoxical effect of making public involvement in this increasingly publicized field more and more indirect, just when appeals to, and manipulation of, public opinion have become part of the new politics of 'special status.' Indeed, a key aim of the strategy of representation adopted by Indian associations in western Canada during the 1970s was to bypass local authorities and prejudices and to appeal to more sympathetic national

and international audiences and jurisdictions for support.<sup>3</sup>

Given that there are relatively few Indian representatives to deal with the many public bodies that exercise control over one or another aspect of Indians' lives, tremendous demands are made on their time and energy. Those who can survive the hectic pace, nonetheless, rapidly acquire first-hand experience of testifying before parliamentary committees, appearing on television newscasts and dealing on a high level with bureaucratic agencies. This wealth of experience increases the growing, but as yet little appreciated, gap in know-how and technical sophistication that separate Indian leaders (and a surprising number of reserve Indians) from most other Canadians.

Although a recent survey of public awareness and opinions of Indians and Indian issues indicated that they were by no means priorities with Canadians (Ponting and Gibbins 1980: 92), there has, nonetheless, been an increased demand among interested non-Indians for explanations of what it is that Indians want. The marketing success of books by Indian spokesmen such as Harold Cardinal (1969) and George Manuel (1974), whose writings have explicitly addressed these matters, provides one measure of this trend. Books and newscasts, however, only partially satisfy this demand. Indian representatives who become public figures are thus regularly invited to speak to church groups, service clubs, teachers' associations, and university classes, as well as being approached by individual non-Indians who want to talk directly to an Indian about these matters.

It is often difficult for Indian leaders to fit such speaking engagements into their schedules, since meetings with band councils and government officials take precedence. But it is also the case that leaders who have taken the time to address non-Indian groups have sometimes found them to be extremely frustrating occasions. Evenings spent trying to explain the intricacies of contemporary Indian claims to ill-informed, though sometimes painfully sympathetic gatherings or individuals who want to "help the Indian people" may seem almost as intolerable as the prospect of facing a crowd whose members openly dispute the legitimacy of Indian claims. Moreover, in the Prairie provinces traditional patterns of interethnic communication and interaction have scarcely prepared Indians and non-Indians to discuss these matters with ease.

Contact between non-Indians and Indians in western Canada has always varied in nature and extent.<sup>4</sup> In some parts of the Prairies it is still possible to meet born-and-bred westerners who have never even spoken to an Indian. In other areas,

especially in the vicinity of Indian reserves, there are well-established, though far from straightforward patterns, of interaction and communication between Indians and non-Indians. Braroe's (1975) study of interethnic relations in a small ranching community illustrates the highly stylized form that these may take, and points out the startling and systematic "ignorance" about Indians that both accompanies and sustains these patterns. The writings of W.P. Kinsella (1977, 1978, 1981) convey the humour that sometimes pervades interethnic situations, but they also draw the reader's attention to some of the less pleasant aspects of Indian/White relations at the local level.

Generally, however, Indians and non-Indians in western Canada stand on the opposite sides of a history of interaction and tend to be divided further by an unequal knowledge of each other. Non-Indians are by and large unaware of just how little they know about Indians and of how sharply the individual and cumulative cultural experience of living on federally administered reserves departs from that of any other Prairie dwellers. Nevertheless, whites are, almost without exception, versed in the body of speculations and beliefs that are identified as the Indian "problem," for this is a cultural doctrine that is communicated freely, extensively and almost exclusively among non-Indians in western Canada. Interaction between Indians and non-Indians is, in consequence, informed not only by the special status and problems of Indians, but also by what non-Indians already 'know' about Indians and the Indian problem.

#### IV

As a genre of discourse among non-Indians, the Indian problem entails both a series of concerns usually introduced as questions and an accompanying repertoire of observations and beliefs proffered as responses. The questions are often, though not always, rhetorical in nature, and can be posed either with genuine curiosity or with obvious antagonism. What are Indians like? How do Indians live? Why are Indians different from whites? What should be done for Indians? What should Indians do? Such questions, in varying ways, are raised by those who seek to understand or simply to comment upon particular events or general situations that in some way involve Indians, either as individuals or as a category of persons.

The responses that these inquiries trigger vary widely, depending upon the identities, inclinations and 'knowledge' of the discussants, the circumstances of the discussions and a range of other

social, cultural and situational factors. As this is a cautiously correct, but not especially illuminating, way of characterizing the responses, let me go on to suggest that probably the most telling feature of non-Indians' acquaintance with the Indian problem is that it is usually shared and expressed only in the company of other non-Indians. As such, it is discourse about others, which, because it takes place within ethnically exclusive channels, cannot be readily subjected to open scrutiny and critical evaluation. Furthermore, since the very broaching of the subject of the Indian problem between non-Indians invokes a sense of "us" as distinguished from "them," it remains a field of discourse that easily accommodates invidious distinctions, rhetorical licence and, sometimes, outright racist sentiments. For the moment, suffice it to say that the above-cited survey of Canadian opinions toward Indians and Indian issues found that respondents from Saskatchewan and Alberta were, on average, much less sympathetic to Indian aims than were respondents in other parts of the country (Ponting and Gibbins 1980: 87).

Some elements of the overall bundle of beliefs held by non-Indians about the Indian problem predate both the political developments of the last 20 years and even the settlement of the Prairies; these ideas are as old as the original forging of the dichotomy between indigenous peoples and the Europeans who came to North America, the dichotomy between "savagism" and "civilization" (cf. Pearce 1965). Recent events, however, have generated a new set of concerns which in turn have been incorporated into the local repertoire of discourse about Indians and the Indian problem. Suddenly, non-Indians are also asking *each other*: "What are Indians asking for? Why do they expect to receive special treatment from the government?" And, sometimes, "why can't they be like the rest of us?"

The gradually mounting urgency of these questions further serves to inflate the currency among non-Indians of traditional White folk wisdom about Indians—'knowledge' that was once largely confined to those who administered Indians and to non-Indians who lived near reserves. Today, after several decades of increased media coverage and of widespread urban migration by Indians, there is scarcely anyone in western Canada who has not had the situation of Indians brought to their notice in one way or another. In an attempt to comprehend what is, for many non-Indians, a relatively novel set of concerns, a veritable premium has been placed upon the insights and knowledge that some non-Indians claim to have about the Indian situation.

Both the content and the modes by which this body of non-Indian knowledge about Indians is circulated reflect, compared to other parts of Canada, a reasonably tightly knit, though seldom recognized, regional non-Indian culture.<sup>5</sup> Superficially, the population of western Canada appears to be ethnically and culturally heterogeneous in the extreme. Yet, although the children and grandchildren of Mennonite, Ukrainian, French, Scottish, and Scandinavian settlers may still refer to their own, and to others', ethnic origins in certain situations, and although some of them may go to extraordinary lengths to maintain and display their respective mother tongues and cultural practices, even the most fiercely 'ethnic' individuals have learned English and subscribed to a set of public values typical of the region.<sup>6</sup>

Foremost among these values is a notion of egalitarianism, which, in its most common form, proclaims that people are different in all sorts of ways but that no one is intrinsically better than anyone else. This is an egalitarianism which permits one to look down on others, but not to look up. In extreme statements this sentiment can be marshalled to censure those who are judged to be trying to raise their own worth and thereby to be belittling others' intrinsic merit by aggressively doing or being something out of the ordinary. Individual proclivities and differences in achievement are, within certain bounds, compatible with such notions of egalitarianism. Nonconformity, which is seen to challenge the legitimacy of accepted modes of thought and public behaviour, is invariably controversial.

Another much-honoured value is that of personal independence, a principle that is reaffirmed constantly in the political rhetoric of the Prairies, having been firmly anchored in the historical myths which western Canadians have of themselves and their past, namely, that "all of our parents or grandparents arrived here with nothing," and worked hard to settle the country and build the communities and the way of life of which Prairie people are proud. The image of hard-working people who take care of themselves is a popular one.<sup>7</sup> Fervent free-enterprisers and dedicated members of the prairie cooperative movement alike agree upon the importance, if not upon the most appropriate means, of people taking action and responsibility for deciding their own destiny.

Non-Indians take these principles for granted when they ponder the ways of Indians and the Indian problem with friends, relatives, neighbours, and workmates. More to the point, Indians are deemed problematic in the minds of many Whites, precisely because they do not seem to measure up in

terms of these values, or, perhaps, even share these beliefs. Some non-Indians declare themselves to be deeply offended by what they take as incontrovertible evidence that Indians are lazy, shiftless and “coddled” by the government. Others recognize the discrimination and lack of acceptance that Indians experience in Canadian society but remain puzzled about why Indians would want to remain Indians rather than seize any opportunity to become “just like the rest of us.” Regardless of whether they are sympathetic or negative toward Indians, Prairie people point more often to Indians’ alleged personality deficiencies and lack of initiative than to any other factor when asked to identify the main differences between themselves and Indians (Gibbins and Ponting, 1978: 85). Whereas they may disagree about the best form of action, they do agree that something needs to be done “to get Indians going,” to solve the Indian problem.

These concerns form a more or less conspicuous backdrop for interaction between Indians and non-Indians on the Prairies. On those infrequent occasions when Indian speakers undertake to speak to non-Indian audiences about contemporary Indian issues, these concerns, more often than not, comprise the main items on the listeners’ unspoken agenda.

## V

As mentioned, I have learned much about interethnic communication from John R. McLeod, a Cree elder from Saskatchewan, who was unable to turn away many invitations to speak to non-Indian audiences, not because of personal vanity, but because he sincerely believed in the importance of creating a better understanding between his people and the non-Indians who also live on the Prairies. I cannot say that his way of dealing with the difficulties inherent in Indian/White communication was typical of how Indians manage these kinds of situations, for these are as yet far from being a common type of interethnic event. Nor can I restrict myself—given my anthropological bent—to following the Cree custom of leaving it to the reader-cum-listener to determine the meaning of what a speaker has said. But first I must introduce the speaker.

Unlike his grandfather and several of his own grandchildren, John R. McLeod lived most of his life on an Indian reserve. His grandfather had been of that generation of Plains Cree that negotiated treaties with Queen Victoria’s commissioners during the 1870s and moved onto reserves in the early 1880s, in the wake of the disappearance of the buffalo from the Canadian Prairies. John was born

into what was, by the 1920s, a well-established system of reserve administration, although his family remained as much as possible uninvolved in activities such as farming, which fell under the direct control of Indian agents and farming instructors. During the Second World War, John, along with many other young Indians, enlisted in the Canadian army, in spite of the fact that as an Indian he was not a full-fledged citizen and could not be conscripted.

After the war, John and his wife Ida raised a family and established a farm that was quite successful, compared with others in the surrounding agricultural district, and outstanding in terms of the reserve. Over the years John came to act as a pace-setter for his band: his was the first farm on the reserve to be connected to the electrical power grid; his house had the first television set, and for some years served as an informal community centre, especially for viewing popular Saturday evening hockey games. Equally enterprising in his activities off the reserve, John became the first Indian member of the district cooperative association.

Education emerged as one of John’s major and continuing concerns, even though his own schooling had not gone beyond the third grade. Well before the federal government adopted a general policy of encouraging bands to send their children to non-Indian schools, John and his wife experimented with enrolling their sons and daughters in an off-reserve country school, managing to overcome the school board’s misgivings about the wisdom of permitting Indians to attend its school. When John and Ida determined that their children were not receiving a superior education, nor being treated fairly by the teacher and other pupils, they withdrew their children and, as part of a federally backed scheme to introduce integrated or “joint” schooling into the area, sent them to larger and, so they were told, “better” schools in a nearby town. John joined the band’s school committee, serving as its chairman for a number of years, and went on to become a key figure in the provincial association of Indian school committees. In time, he was also appointed as an Indian representative to a number of advisory boards created by the federal and provincial governments.

Disappointed, however, by the poor results and unhappy experiences of Indian children in joint schools, John began to question the suitability of integrated schooling. Encountering disbelief from government officials and school authorities that the program could be deficient and then their assurance that matters would improve when Indian children were better prepared to take advantage of integrated

schooling, John started to explore the possibilities of improving on-reserve educational facilities. When Department of Indian Affairs officials advised him that this would constitute a backward step and one that was administratively "impossible" because of existing federal-provincial agreements and regulations, John set out to read for himself the many different pieces of legislation and the joint-tuition agreements that pertained to various aspects of the education of Indian children. Gradually, he developed a detailed knowledge of the legal and administrative structure of Indian schooling in the province.

After being forced to give up farming because of ill health, John joined the first small group of regular employees to be hired by the provincial Indian association when it began to receive substantial government operating grants in 1969-70. He served as the chairman of a task force that investigated the state of Indian education in the province, and subsequently set up an educational liaison program that furnished band councils and reserve-school committees with information and advice to help parents play a larger part in the education of their children. As well as visiting every band in the province, John attended workshops, conferences and liaison meetings with government officials, school trustees, teachers, and other educational personnel. His grasp both of conditions on reserves and of the structure of educational programming, financing and administration enabled him to play a key role in the campaign mounted in the 1970s to establish "Indian control of Indian education" and, more specifically, to reopen schools for Indians on reserves (Cardinal, 1977: 84).

Through his work John received frequent invitations to speak to professional and other non-Indian groups about education and other issues of concern to Indians. Believing it important that those interested should be encouraged, John accepted as many invitations as he could fit into his already busy schedule. He worked hard to prepare for these occasions, striving to overcome deficiencies in his style of presentation. With experience, he developed a relaxed manner of speaking and became adept in using blackboards to illustrate his points. Yet, despite his increasing self-confidence and skills as a speaker, John was often frustrated by his inability to "get through" to audiences.

This frustration finally came to a head in an especially difficult session with university students, to whom John was explaining what it was that Indians wanted; in brief, the group turned painfully silent after John detailed the particularly complex legislative and administrative amendments that

were required in order to permit Cree language programs in schools. In the days following this talk John told his friends that he was finished with speaking to groups that, as he put it, "expect me to tell them what Indians want, but don't even know how their own government works."

Eventually, he was once again compelled by the considerations that had moved him in the first place and by his own obliging nature to meet those groups that invited him to their meetings. Now, however, his presentations took a different tack: he began by telling his listeners that since he only had a grade-three education he could only speak about things that had happened to him, things that he knew about.

On several occasions after this I heard John start his talks with a story about one or another incident that had occurred in his life. I listened to his stories, was touched by them with each telling and noticed that others, hearing them for the first time, were usually similarly moved. Sadly, I had not the wit to record these stories; nor, I discover, did anyone else. I have found, however, that my recollections of John's stories, presented below, tally reasonably well with those held by his family and other friends.

\* \* \*

*I remember a winter day like this when I was a boy. It was late in the afternoon and snowing lightly. I was up on a platform built between some trees back in the bush. I was taking pieces of meat that my father handed up to me and turning them as they froze so that they wouldn't freeze together. I was up on the platform because I was the youngest and the smallest. I must have been only seven or eight.*

*My father had asked the farming instructor for permission to slaughter one of our steers, but the farming instructor turned him down. He told my father that he would have to keep the animal until the summer, when he would get a better price for it. My father didn't say anything; he just walked away.*

*Some time later my father, my uncle and I went far back into the bush on a part of the reserve where no one was living, and we slaughtered that steer. My father had been careful to watch that no one saw us leave with the steer. Since it was snowing our tracks were soon covered over. And that is why I was up on the platform that day.*

*For the rest of the winter my mother would send me out to the bush every now and then to bring back some meat. I would be careful about going out there and coming back so that no one would see me. When I got home my sister would stand at the window to see whether anybody was coming to our place. My mother would use*

birch wood in the stove to cook the beef so that there wouldn't be much smoke coming out of the chimney. After we were finished eating she would throw all of the bones into the stove. Later I would take the ashes and burnt bones and throw them down an old well shaft so that no one would find them around our place.

In the spring my father told the farming instructor that the steer must have got lost in the bush sometime during the winter.

\* \* \*

I want to tell you about how I went to school when I was a boy. When I was about 13 or 14 I was at home on the reserve for the summer. When the fall came and they (the Indian agent and farm instructor) collected the other children to go back to the residential school, I was out fighting fires in the forest reserve across the river. I was old enough to fight fires. Anyway, by the time I got back to the reserve they seemed to have forgotten me, so I stayed at home with my father until Christmas.

After Christmas the Indian agent came to our place and told my father that I would have to go back to school again. I didn't want to go back, and my father said he wouldn't make me go. One of my sisters had died at residential school, and he was still sad about that. But the agent said that I would have to go back because my father had agreed when I first went to residential school that I would stay there until I finished.

In a couple of days the agent came back with an RCMP<sup>8</sup> from Melfort. I was going to try running for the bush, but it was too late. My father was sick, but he took off his mocassins and gave them to me to wear because mine were in pretty rough shape. And the RCMP took me to Melfort to wait at the RCMP barracks for the train to Prince Albert. When the train arrived the policeman handed me over to the train conductor. When we got to Prince Albert another policeman met the train and took me down to the police station because the train to Saskatoon didn't leave until morning. I guess they didn't know what else to do with me, so they told me to sleep in a cell.

The next day I travelled to Saskatoon the same way, and another policeman met me there at the train station. I stayed overnight in the jail in Saskatoon. I was scared. I didn't get much sleep that night because the guy they put in the next cell was really drunk and rough.

The next day I caught the train to Punnichy, but no one was there to meet me at the station. So I had to walk all the way out to the residential school. It was several miles, and it was really cold. No one was up when I got there, so I went down to the kitchen to look for something to eat. I hadn't eaten all day, but everything was locked up there.

And that's how I went to school when I was a boy.

\* \* \*

One time after the war when I was farming I went to the farming instructor and asked him for a permit to sell a couple of heifers. He told me that the prices were not good, so I should wait until later. I didn't say anything; I just walked away.

But I decided that I was going to sell those heifers anyway, so one morning another fellow and I got up before dawn and loaded the animals into the back of my truck. We drove off the reserve with the lights off, taking it real slow and quiet. When we were off the reserve I took back roads all the way to Prince Albert. It took about two hours longer to get there that way, but we didn't want to run into anyone we knew on the way.

When we got to Prince Albert the sun had been up for a couple of hours. I drove over towards the stockyards, but stopped the truck a couple of blocks away. I wanted to go into the stockyards first to see whether the coast was clear. And when I got up to the ring, who do you think I saw leaning on the rail, right at the front? It was the Indian agent. I saw him, but he didn't see me.

So I walked back to the truck and told the other fellow that we weren't going to sell any heifers that day. We got into the truck and drove back to the reserve and unloaded the heifers.

\* \* \*

Another time after the war I was driving off the reserve one day in the winter when I came to a place where a farmer had run his truck off the road. He was stuck in the snow in the ditch and there was no way that he could get the truck out himself. I stopped and pulled him out. He was really happy. He said, "let's stop in town and I will buy you a beer." I didn't know what I should say, so I just said "O.K."

When we got into Birch Hills we parked our trucks on the side street near the hotel. This wasn't the town that I usually came to, so I thought it might be all right and that maybe no one would recognize me. You see, I could drink if I wanted when I was in the army during the war, but when I came home I was just another Indian. And Indians weren't allowed to drink back then.

When we went into the beer parlour I pulled my cap down over my eyes so that no one could see me, and I picked a table at the back of the room. We sat down, ordered a beer and were just starting to drink when an RCMP came in and looked around. I knew who he was looking for. I guess someone must have seen me come in and told the police. He came over to our table and asked me who I was and where I was from. I told him my name and said I was from Kinistino, but he said, "Oh, no you're not. You're not a halfbreed—you're from the reserve, aren't you?" He took me out to the police car and put me in the back.



*A couple of minutes later another RCMP brought a white guy who was drunk out to the car and put him in the back beside me. The drunk told them he was going to throw up, so they let him out. He got out and was sick, and then he tried to make a run for it. When the policemen caught up with him down the alley, he tried to fight them.*

*After a while, when they still hadn't come back, I decided to run for it myself. I got back into the truck and drove to the reserve as fast as I could. I didn't get to finish my beer that day.*

## VI

I remind the reader that the above are not verbatim accounts, but narrative summaries of stories that I and others heard John McLeod recount to non-Indian audiences in locales as diverse as the school gymnasium in a buck-toothed prairie town, a convention hall in an expensive urban hotel and around the table in the kitchen of his own home. As such, these summaries lack much of the rich detail that allowed John's listeners to form visual impressions of the places and events he described. Nor do the summaries convey the engaging style of performance and the masterful metacommunication he practised with gestures, facial expressions and laughter to direct listeners' attention to key parts of his stories. In addition, the telling of these stories sometimes prompted an immediate dialogue in which members of the audience asked John to say more about various points raised in his stories. Thus, a thorough analysis of one of John's performances would require recordings of all of these components as well as others (Bauman, 1975: 298-300; Robinson, 1981: 58-59).

But enough of the shortcomings of the ethnography. Further consideration of what we do know about the content of John's stories and the manner in which he told them reveals not only his well-developed rhetorical sense, but also a sophisticated understanding of the Indian "problem" and of how it could best be addressed and redefined in the company of non-Indians.

John's use of personal narratives in these situations contrasted sharply with the aggressive political oratory that became popular with some Indian spokesmen during the 1970s, especially in their dealings with government officials (Dyck 1983), and also in appearances before non-Indian audiences which they tried to "shake up." Presentations of this sort commonly feature lengthy, often obscure, claims of treaty and aboriginal rights and of Canada's other obligations to Indians, seasoned according to an individual speaker's tastes with

more or less strident and frequent charges of racial prejudice and moral dishonesty on the part of non-Indians in general, or of members of the audience in particular. John was by no means an interactional pacifist, but he was determined to "get through" to non-Indians rather than merely to shock them.

At the same time, his considerable experience of meeting and working with non-Indians left him with few illusions about the kinds of ideas about Indians that Whites on the Prairies are familiar with, whether or not they personally subscribe to these. Hence, he also eschewed another type of performance favoured by some Indian speakers, namely proclaiming the beauty and value of traditional Cree culture and ways of life. Although his own involvement in religious ceremonies and knowledge of both traditional and everyday forms of Cree speech equipped him as well as any other leader to speak about these matters, John recognized the latent scepticism and lack of respect that such a claim could readily encounter among some non-Indians.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, John made use of a traditional Cree genre, the personal narrative (Darnell, 1974; Preston, 1975), albeit in English and with audiences who knew far less about Indians than he knew about Whites. The particular stories that he selected to tell them showed a fine appreciation of the various ways that non-Indians tend to think and talk about Indians and to judge them deficient in one sense or another. His stories spoke directly to these concerns, but in a quite unexpected fashion. And, since so few non-Indians (whether in small towns or in university faculties) know much about the history of Indian administration in this country, his listeners were usually staggered to hear, and sometimes almost unwilling to believe, that Indian agents and farming instructors had so completely dominated their Indian charges as recently as the late 1950s by means of sales permits, travel passes<sup>10</sup> and a variety of other socio-control mechanisms commonly associated with the South African regime. Yet, there was John, standing in front of them and matter-of-factly telling them how these things had happened to him. What is more, the Indians presented in John's stories were never simply the helpless and confused victims of an obviously unjust system; they resented and resisted the institutionalized assaults on their personal autonomy whenever and however they could, although they were not always successful in their attempts.

As well as telling stories about events that were "remarkable," "culturally interesting" and, for these audiences, "highly narratable" (cf. Polanyi 1979: 211; Robinson 1981: 59-60), John McLeod

displayed a style of presentation that almost invariably captured his listeners' attention and prepared them to hear his later statements (often about controversial matters such as the failure of integrated schooling to meet the needs of Indian children) far more openly than would otherwise be the case. As mentioned, several of the techniques John employed were characteristic of traditional Cree narrative presentations: his initial denial of competence ("I have only a grade three education"); the emphasis placed upon his personal involvement in the events he recounted; and the relatively simple form of his accounts, combined with his painstaking concern to describe events accurately, thereby demonstrating his reliability and right to speak about these things.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he made excellent use of "negatives" to underline for his audiences what Labov (1972: 380-81) has termed "the defeat of an expectation that something would happen"; for example, "we weren't going to sell any heifers that day" and "I didn't get to finish my beer."

Indeed, it was precisely *his* refusal to draw conclusions from his stories that enabled John to offend his audiences minimally while he quietly went about dismantling their previous conceptions of the Indian problem.<sup>12</sup> John never said what the point of his stories were; he forced his listeners to discover this for themselves. His efforts were confined to challenging the cognitive basis of their understanding of the Indian problem by establishing *with them* a new set of facts about Indians that are seldom considered, if known, by non-Indians. He then left them to decide the moral of his stories, although his selection of narrative accounts anticipated the values that they would be likely to use in rendering such judgments. The extent to which listeners were willing to play their part in his performances, by recognizing and further pursuing the brunt of his stories through comments, questions or simply nonverbal signs of interest, governed his decisions about how much longer and how patiently he would speak to them.

More often than not, however, John was met with statements of surprise and with questions that could not have been less like those that non-Indians usually ponder in their private speculations about Indians and the Indian "problem." How could government officials deny freedom to someone like John who had voluntarily served his country? Was it true that Indians in Saskatchewan didn't receive the right to vote in federal and provincial elections until 1960? Were Indian children actually taken away from their parents against their will and sent to residential schools? In responding to these and similar questions, John not only told them more

than they had ever heard about Indian administration, but he also unobtrusively demonstrated that, contrary to popular prairie sentiments, all Canadians are not equal because we did not all "start out the same way."

As he warmed to his audiences and proceeded to tell them more about things that had happened to him and to other Indians, his non-Indian listeners would sooner or later have to confess either to him or to themselves, "I didn't know that." When he reckoned that his transition point had been reached and that they were listening to what he had to say rather than expecting him to speak to their conceptions of the Indian questions, then John would turn to some of the contemporary issues that meant much to him, and would offer explanations of what Indians were asking for and why they wished to be treated differently in some respects than other Canadians. And, more often than not, his explanations of fairly complex proposals to achieve goals such as Indian control of Indian education generated serious discussion. It is impossible to say what proportion of his audiences was converted to his way of thinking, but I do know that John was never short of invitations and return invitations to speak.

For those of John's friends who occasionally wondered why he bothered to spend so much effort talking to groups of non-Indians who were not particularly well informed or politically significant, or even sympathetic, it took a bit of reflection to realize that John had done as much for these same friends at one time or another. With his non-Indian friends and colleagues, as in his public performances, John was prepared to discuss frankly matters which, though of increasing importance on the Prairies today, often seem to be too sensitive or complicated to be dealt with openly in interethnic communication. In speaking to non-Indians as he did, John R. McLeod offered them something like the following personal affirmation, although never in so many words:

I am an Indian, and these are some of the things that being an Indian has entailed for me.

What has happened to me as an Indian will never happen to you.

I am still talking to you.

The public remembering of John R. McLeod reveal not only an effective tactic for channelling an audience's attention but, indeed, a more general strategy for working to resolve the concerns that brought him and his listeners together in the first place. By attending first to the 'facts' or the cognitive basis of non-Indians' understanding of

the Indian problem, he forestalled some of the more strident moral judgments, judgments that severely constrain interethnic communication about Indian claims for special status and special legal and administrative arrangements within Canadian society. In offering non-Indians a different way of viewing the problems of Indians, he provided his audience with the means to begin to consider very different solutions than those that in the past have been unilaterally implemented with such sad results by the Canadian government.

## NOTES

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1. The degree of recognition of these rights registered during the past dozen years both in Canadian and in international law has surprised even lawyers who have long been sympathetic to Indian claims.

2. A minority decision of the Supreme Court, for example, might have signal importance in altering the federal government's stance on aboriginal land rights, and would be reported by the media at the time the decision was handed down. Still, it is unlikely that many of those Canadians who pay any attention to such reports, but who are not working in the field of Indian affairs, would fully appreciate the extent to which this marks a vital turning point in Indian/government relations, let alone understand why and how this has happened. A great many, if not all Indians on the Prairies have a remarkably detailed understanding of these and similar matters.

3. I have heard this tactic summarized as: using television and other media to go over the heads of local "red necks" to appeal directly to friendlier folks in Toronto or Amsterdam.

4. A 1976 survey of prairie-Canadian attitudes toward Indians asked specifically about the extent of respondents' contact with Indians: 57 percent reported, "contact with Indians living in their neighbourhood, 55 per cent reported contact at work, 40 per cent cited a close friend who was an Indian, 24 per cent reported contact in clubs or organizations, and 11 per cent mentioned Indian relatives. On the average, Prairie respondents reported at least two of the five types of contact, compared to an average of only one for non-Prairie respondents" (Gibbins and Ponting, 1978: 88). These results may reflect a higher proportion of Indians to non-Indians in western Canada, compared to the rest of the country. The authors also feel that the survey represented a substantial "over-reporting" of contact, especially with respect to the number of respondents who claimed to have Indians as close friends or as neighbours.

5. In contrast to other regions of Canada, such as the Lower Mainland of British Columbia or Southern Ontario, the Prairie region possesses a high degree of demographic stability and social and cultural conformity. The rapid settlement of the Prairies in the early 1900s brought thousands of immigrants from all parts of North America, Britain and Europe, but there has been relatively little in-migration into the region since the 1920s. Instead, a consistent pattern of out-migration, especially of the better educated, has been established during the past half-century.

6. Hutterites may be one exception to this general statement. For more on this theme, see Smith 1981.

7. Interestingly, the phrase used to identify esteemed barroom fighters on the Prairies is, "a man who can take care of himself" (Dyck, 1980). For more on the prairie ethos of independence, see Bennett 1969.

8. A member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

9. As Rodger has put it in a rather different context, "...rhetoric is not merely in the gift of the speaker. For him to declare what he regards as a known truth is not enough; he must know enough about his audience to avoid saying too much and thus earning the response that his rhetoric is false" (1981: 62).

10. As late as the Second World War, Indians were not allowed to travel off the reserve on the Prairies without a pass signed by the Indian agent or farming instructor, specifying the destination, purpose and time of their travel.

11. Preston (1975: 279) notes that members of small-scale societies such as the Cree are fundamentally concerned with honesty in most interpersonal relations and that this carries over into the telling of personal narratives where speakers are expected to demonstrate the accuracy and reliability of their accounts. See also Darnell 1974.

12. In doing this, he honoured Paine's dictum that, "...we can expect a political speaker to 'phrase' himself in a way that minimally offends his 'target' audience.... We shall see that one way of doing this is for the speaker to leave either his premiss(es) or conclusion unstated" (1981: 15).

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