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'We Cannot Go Without a National Organization Any Longer': The Struggle to Build Unity in Canada's National Indian Council, 1961 –1968.

Abstract:

In Canada today, there is no single political body which claims to represent all Indigenous people. Instead, separate organisations – the Assembly of First Nations, Métis National Council, and Congress of Aboriginal Peoples – represent status First Nations, Métis, and non-status communities. This article traces the attempts of the National Indian Council (NIC) to create unity across these different groups. In the early 1960s, Indigenous political leaders from across the country viewed national representation as an urgent need, yet by 1968 the NIC folded to make way for separate organisations. Why did this attempt to build unity fail? Examining the NIC's political aims and contested visions of unity within the organisation, this article will demonstrate that attempting to overcome differences in status and treaty rights led to a failure to engage with the real concerns faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Keywords:

First Nations; Métis; political activism; organisations; National Indian Council

Abstract:

Au Canada, il n'existe pas aujourd'hui d'organe politique unique qui prétend représenter l'ensemble des populations autochtones. A la place, des organisations distinctes - notamment l'Assemblée des Premières Nations, le Ralliement National des Métis et le Congrès des Peuples Autochtones - représentent les Premières Nations inscrites, les Métis et les communautés non inscrites. Cet article retrace les tentatives du Conseil National des Indiens (CNI) de créer une unité entre ces différents groupes. Au début des années 1960, les dirigeants politiques autochtones de tout le pays considèrent que la représentation nationale est un besoin urgent, mais en 1968, le CNI disparaît pour laisser place à des organisations distinctes. Pourquoi cette tentative d'unité a-t-

elle échoué? En examinant les objectifs politiques du CNI et les visions contestées de l'unité au sein de l'organisation, cet article démontrera que la tentative de surmonter les différences de statut et de droits issus de traités a conduit à l'échec de la prise en compte des véritables préoccupations des peuples autochtones du Canada.

Mots-clés:

Premières nations; Métis; activisme politique; organisations; Conseil national des Indiens

Introduction

In August 1961, a group of Indigenous community organisers and provincial political leaders gathered at Saskatchewan House in Regina, with the intention of forming a new organisation to represent 'all Indians' from across Canada. Speaking at the meeting, president of the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia Guy Williams (Haisla) emphasised the need for unity among 'Indian people' and stressed that 'we must not let history repeat itself; we cannot afford to have a split among ourselves: and we cannot go without a National Organization any longer.'¹ Attendees of the conference believed that unity on a national level was necessary in order to wield a greater political impact and advocate for Indigenous rights, a view widely shared by Indigenous political organisers across Canada in the mid-twentieth century (Nickel 2019a: 46). As a result, delegates at the meeting agreed to form such a group and call themselves the National Indian Council (NIC).

As became apparent in the tumultuous years that followed, the deceptive simplicity of representation for 'all' veiled contesting visions for Indigenous unity at the national level. Delegates at this initial meeting agreed to define 'Indian' broadly to include anyone with First Nations, Métis or Inuit ancestry – regardless of status according to the Indian Act.² 'Indian' was thus used, sometimes confusingly, both to mean First Nations groups and *all* Indigenous people including the Métis and Inuit. Yet just seven years later in 1968, the NIC disbanded to make way

for new national organisations according to ‘Indian status’. This resulted in the founding of the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) for ‘status Indians’ in 1968, followed in 1972 by the Native Council of Canada (NCC) for Métis and ‘non-status Indians’. These organisations remain operational to this day, with the NIB being renamed the Assembly of First Nations and the NCC later developing in to the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples and Métis National Council. Why did this attempt to build unity beyond divisions according to the Indian Act fail? Examining the NIC’s political aims and contested visions of unity, this article will demonstrate that attempting to overcome differences in status and treaty rights led to a failure to engage with the real concerns faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada.

To-date, historians typically relegate the NIC to a few brief lines prefacing the organisation’s split, brushing off the council as unsuccessfully attempting to unite groups with disparate concerns: status and non-status, treaty and non-treaty, First Nations and Métis, urban and reserve (McFarlane 1993: 97–98; Newhouse, Belanger, and Quart 2014: 7; Miller 1989: 232). In his biography of Secwépemc political leader George Manuel, Peter McFarlane describes the NIC as ‘controlled by urban professionals with little experience in the grass-roots movement’ and ‘largely a social and cultural organization’ (McFarlane 1993: 61–62). A more generous assessment is provided by historian Sarah Nickel, who refers to the NIC as evidence of national Indigenous political unity pre-dating the 1969 White Paper, but does not provide any detail beyond the council’s split (Nickel 2019b: 234). Historian Karine Duhamel’s PhD dissertation presents an exception, characterizing the NIC as ‘the first truly national organization of Indigenous Canadians’ (Duhamel 2013: 82). Yet no detailed account of the organisation’s founding, work, and impact has to-date been published.

This article recounts the brief story of the NIC to highlight both the council’s significance and its shortcomings. In doing so, this article builds on extensive archival research and reports in

contemporary newspapers. Archival documents were located predominantly in the files of the Indian Affairs Branch under the Department of Citizenship and Immigration (Record Group 10, Library and Archives Canada) and the files of the Department of the Secretary of State (Record Group 6, Library and Archives Canada). These documents include membership lists, NIC newsletters, conference agendas, brief minutes of annual meetings, correspondence between the NIC and federal officials, and internal Indian Affairs memorandums on the organisation. Using federal collections does, however, have clear limitations and does not include the internal communications between leaders of the organisation. In order to build a clearer picture of the views of NIC leaders and members, published biographical and autobiographical works and archived oral history interviews have also been used where possible (Dunn 1971; Wuttunee 1971).

This article traces the founding, actions, conflicts, and final split of the National Indian Council, in order to present the untold history of the NIC. By examining the contested visions for national unity and conceptions of 'Indian descent' held by delegates and critics of the NIC throughout the 1960s, this article will demonstrate that the failure of the organisation was down to its inability to effectively respond to the diverse and differing challenges facing Indigenous communities in Canada as a result of continuing colonial policies by the federal government. Nevertheless, the NIC had an impact on future organisations, as relations with Indian Affairs officials laid the groundwork for the emergence of the system of federally-recognised political organisations which continue to represent Indigenous peoples in Canada today.

Indigenous Political Organising in the Early Twentieth Century

Indigenous political organising in mid-twentieth century Canada was shaped by the federal government in two distinct ways: 1) through categorizations and binaries created by the 1876 Indian Act and 2) through the direct and indirect hindrance of Indigenous organisations. The 1876

Act to amend and consolidate the laws respecting Indians consolidated disparate pieces of legislation in order to streamline administration of Canada's Indigenous population. The Act recognised certain groups of First Nations as having 'Indian status', while denying others. While the Act remains significant in its recognition of the historical and constitutional relationship of status First Nations and the Canadian government, in practice it also worked to eliminate and replace Indigenous forms of governance through the creation of band councils and reserves, while also placing heavy bans and restrictions on cultural practices (Miller 1989: 221; Tennant 1990: 10).

The Act excluded whole communities from recognition based on, for instance, signed treaties, meaning not all First Nations communities were ever granted 'Indian status'. It also functioned as an instrument of Canadian settler colonialism, increasingly removing status from individuals over time. According to the Act and its later amendments, status was conferred through marriage to a man with 'Indian status', meaning status women marrying non-status men, as well as their children, automatically lost status (Barker 2006: 127–61). Similarly, through revisions in 1920 and 1933, status could be lost through a system of enfranchisement, in which either by obtaining a university degree or through the assessment of Indian agents, an individual and his family members could be granted a portion of reserve land fee simple, as well as Canadian citizenship and the right to vote (Belanger 2006: 70; Miller 1989: 206).

While not included in the Indian Act, the Canadian government has recognised Métis rights in some form since at least the 1870 Manitoba Act, which provided for the entry of Manitoba into Canada. It also legislated for over a million acres of land to be set aside for the Métis at Red River in exchange for their land rights, though these provisions went unrealised (Andersen 2014: 114). It was only with the hard-fought Section 35 of the 1982 Constitution Act which consolidated the recognition of three 'aboriginal peoples' in Canada – 'the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples' (Andersen 2014: 80). While today the term 'Métis' is widely understood as meaning anyone of

mixed European and Indigenous ancestry, as Métis scholar Chris Andersen (p. 199) argues, it should instead be understood in terms of the 'historical and contemporary political self-consciousness' of a distinct 'people'.

In the first half of the twentieth century, various Indigenous leaders from across Canada sought to establish political organisations at provincial, regional, and national levels. Provincial organisations were typically founded for separate interest groups rather than as blanket organisations. For instance in Alberta, the Métis Association of Alberta (MAA) was founded in 1928, followed in 1939 by the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA) for status First Nations (Meijer Drees 2002, 9–10). Varied regional organisations were also established by the early 1940s, and regular and consistent communication between these was maintained by leaders like Andy Paull, John Tootosis, Malcolm Norris, and others (Belanger 2006: 351–2). Some of these organisations – most notably Paull's North American Indian Brotherhood – aimed to create a national, even continental, association for Indigenous peoples, though none were quite successful (Miller 1989: 219; McFarlane 1993: 43). These organisations struggled with a lack of resources and funding for travel and communication across the vast scope of Canada, as well as inexperienced leadership and widespread illiteracy (Leslie 1999: 73–74). Moreover, the Canadian government actively sought to prevent Indigenous political organising, for instance by amending the Indian Act in 1927 to limit the ability to hire lawyers, as well as through the intimidation of non-Indigenous advisors and surveillance of the operations of Indigenous leaders (Belanger 2006: 227–8 and 270; Brownlie 2003: 79 and 117; Titley 1986: 59). The limitations on hiring lawyers were eased in the 1951 revisions of the Indian Act, as a result of lobbying by Indigenous leaders like Paull, making political organisation more feasible in the second half of the twentieth century (Belanger 2006: 360).

Founding the National Indian Council

The National Indian Council's initial calls for unity thus built on a trend of active Indigenous political organising since the early 1900s, seeking to bring disparate communities together. Unlike earlier organisations with strong regional roots, the original leaders of the NIC were not from a single region and were largely urban-based. Founding president, William Wuttunee, was a Cree lawyer born on the Red Pheasant reserve, who lived in Edmonton and had been enfranchised on receiving his law degree.³ Marion Meadmore (Ojibwe-Cree), a founder of the Indian-Métis Friendship Centre in Winnipeg, played the role of Secretary-Treasurer.⁴ Indeed, the idea for founding a national organisation sprung from the process of creating Friendship Centres in various provinces.⁵ These individuals, like Meadmore, had not previously worked closely with provincial political organisations, which predominantly represented reserve-based or Métis communities.

NIC leaders initially sought cooperation and collaboration with experienced provincial organisers to help develop the Council's activities, appointing a temporary committee including David Knight (Saskatchewan), Joe Keeper (Manitoba), Telford Adams (Ontario), and George Manuel (British Columbia). For instance, at his time of involvement, Manuel was already president of the North American Indian Brotherhood, and he later became well-known for his leadership on both a national level as president of the NIB, and internationally as founder of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (McFarlane 1993: 57, 123–4, 195). However, Manuel only ever held a marginal and largely advisory role on the council, with urban-based members instead dominating the core leadership positions throughout the NIC's existence.⁶ During the second annual convention in 1962, the NIC's committee structure was consolidated as consisting of a Chief, three Vice-Presidents – initially termed 'sachems' – a Secretary-Treasurer and twelve councillors.⁷

The NIC executive went to great lengths to maintain total independence from the Indian Affairs Branch. Announcements for the founding convention stated unequivocally that it was 'restricted to Indians', and at the meeting the decision was made not to seek external funding from 'White

Organizations' or the federal government.⁸ The NIC's constitution, drafted initially by Wuttunee, outlined a funding model dependent on membership fees alone. Full membership was offered on an individual basis or through affiliated organisations, with rates later set as five dollars and twenty-five dollars, respectively. Membership was open to 'any person who is an Indian, Metis, or Eskimo and is of the age of 18 or above', and affiliates were required to be deemed 'bona fide democratic organizations' by the Council and by no means 'dominated by white people'.⁹ This membership model was likely inspired by the United States organisation the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), founded in 1944, which raised funds through tribal councils becoming paying affiliate members (Cowger 1999: 33). The NIC, however, did not attempt to collect funds from band councils, as Indian Affairs officials remained 'non-committal' when asked whether such expenditures would be approved.¹⁰

By the second annual conference, it had become apparent that this membership model was failing to secure the necessary funds to operate. During its first-year funding drive, the NIC only secured one organisation and three individual members. Manuel questioned the rejection of outside funding, emphasizing the need to appeal 'to white organizations to raise money', while acknowledging that this could 'be construed as a type of paternalism'.¹¹ The NIC leadership had misjudged the financial situation of the majority of both reserve communities and individuals, and executive committee members had little idea of how to finance operations, a problem which would plague the council throughout its existence.

Building Unity by Rejecting Differences

Despite financial struggles, the NIC moved early on toward establishing an image and reputation of retaining 'pride and confidence'. The only definitive choices made during the first convention were to call the organisation the 'National Indian Council of Canada' and to adopt the colours of

'red, buckskin and skyblue'.¹² Many historians have misconstrued this early focus as a lack of real political engagement from the NIC. Yet looking at the organisation's longer trajectory and development demonstrates that it was in fact – as Duhamel (2013: 118) has stated – 'profoundly political' and focused on the challenges of representing a vast constituency and effecting real change. Indeed, in its early years, the NIC made headlines speaking on a range of issues related to Indigenous rights, including the lack of representation on national boards and in positions of responsibility in the Indian Affairs branch.¹³ Acting as a representative of the NIC, Ethel Brant Monture, a Toronto-based writer and community leader from the Six Nations New Credit Reserve, publicly criticised the 1963 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism for overlooking the country's 'Indian' population, stating 'We have no intention of being a forgotten people in our own land'.¹⁴ As these examples demonstrate, the NIC did publicly engage with issues of Indigenous rights beyond merely cultural emblems, and sought practical changes at the federal level.

However, the NIC's politics were informed by a specific view of 'Indian' identity and politics. Though explicitly claiming membership was open to anyone who was 'Indian, Metis or Eskimo', in practice the NIC leadership and members generally referred to people of 'Indian descent'. As such, the organisation rarely explicitly addressed issues that specifically concerned Métis or Inuit communities. Nor did the organisation fully engage with matters of concern to First Nations people either, largely avoiding discussion of the Indian Act, despite this being a major priority for provincial organisations representing First Nations. Some time was devoted in the initial meeting to expressing disappointment that a recent Indian Affairs report had failed to suggest changes to the Indian Act, but little attention was otherwise paid to issues of status or treaty rights.¹⁵ As such, despite speaking of 'Indian descent', the council sought to find and focus on common concerns that impacted all Indigenous peoples in Canada, not addressing differences between treaty and non-treaty, reserve or urban-based, status or non-status communities or individuals.

Largely avoiding issues related to the Indian Act reflected the priorities of the early NIC leadership, many of whom were urban-based and enfranchised, like Wuttunee, or who for other reasons lacked status according to the Indian Act. In fact, a policy issue Wuttunee regularly advocated for on the NIC's behalf was the Indian Claims Commission bill, an act aiming to settle grievances arising from unfulfilled treaty agreements or other land claims. By 1963, the bill had developed into a proposal to create a government-appointed panel to make final decisions on all Native land claims, leading to its outright rejection by most provincial Indigenous organisations. Wuttunee, however, continued to publicly support the bill, particularly advocating for the right of enfranchised individuals to make land claims (McFarlane 1993: 86). In so doing, the NIC pushed for an issue that was of little relevance to most of the people it sought to represent.

Instead of developing a closer working relationship with existing provincial organisations, the NIC's leadership sought inspiration beyond Canada's borders. D'Arcy McNickle, founding member and former president of the NCAI in the US, was slated as a guest speaker at the All-Indian Conference in 1961.¹⁶ Indeed, at the second national conference in Toronto the NIC agreed to work towards establishing contact with US and South American Indians, in hopes of ultimately representing a population of over 39,000,000.¹⁷ The founding members of the NIC, however, did not only draw parallels between the situations of Indigenous peoples across the Americas, but also sought models among racial minorities. Initial plans for the second annual conference of the NIC in 1962 included inviting Black nationalist Malcolm X to speak, with the theme of 'Indian Nationalism' being prominently listed on the agenda.¹⁸ Yet before the second annual convention took place, Wuttunee attended a world assembly of the spiritual Moral Re-Armament movement and experienced a shift in ideology. Having previously 'condemned the white man', in 1962 Wuttunee described his earlier talk of 'separation and independence' for Indigenous peoples as having been motivated by 'bitterness and hatred'.¹⁹ Following Wuttunee's change of heart and a

lift on the ban on non-Indigenous attendance, the speaker for the 1962 convention was swapped from Malcom X to the more moderate figure of John Melling, Executive Director of the Indian-Eskimo Association, a predominantly white organisation aiming to promote Native wellbeing.²⁰ Both this initial theme and sudden change of speaker demonstrates the overwhelming influence that Wuttunee had over the direction of the NIC in its early years.

Despite his changing views, Wuttunee maintained an interest in the more moderate branch of the civil rights movement in the US and the 1963 annual conference in Winnipeg ran under the theme of 'Equal Civil Rights'. During discussions on the theme, Wuttunee explicitly asked delegates if they thought there was anything to learn from the problems of the 'Negro in the United States.' Other NIC members present did not share Wuttunee's views. For instance, delegate Clive Linklater (Couchiching First Nation) brushed off comparisons with African Americans, stating 'The two situations are quite dissimilar. The Indians were here; they were not brought here. They have not been slaves'.²¹ While the disagreement did not lead to any major conflict within the organisation, it reflected a problem that continued to plague the NIC throughout its existence – a disconnect between the priorities of leaders, like Wuttunee, and the diverse communities and individuals the council sought to represent.

During the same meeting, Wuttunee clarified his tactics for creating unity by *not stressing tribal differences*, stating: 'tribalism is out for us. Our concern is with people of Indian *descent*'.²² Such a stance is unsurprising, considering Wuttunee later campaigned in favour of the 1969 White Paper, which would have eradicated the Indian Act altogether. Wuttunee's (1971: 12) views are clear in his book *Ruffled Feathers*: 'Integration doesn't have to mean forced integration, rather it can be a gradual process which will develop Indian men and women into independent, contributing members of Canadian society'. According to Wuttunee, all Indigenous people in Canada should set aside their specific political claims, and the NIC should focus on uniting based on a shared

heritage. As the controversy which followed the NIC over the next few years demonstrated, this stance was not widely shared and was also contested from within the council itself.

Consolidation and Controversy

Throughout these early years of forming the NIC, the Indian Affairs Branch viewed the organisation with suspicion, particularly wary of the blanket exclusion of non-Indians from the founding convention. Officials collected news clippings on the founding convention, and Regional Supervisors advised Agency Superintendents to gather any information they could on the NIC.²³ Further anxiety was caused by letters from Frank Calder, Nisga'a hereditary chief and New Democratic Party member of the B.C. Legislative Assembly, in support of the NIC.²⁴ Despite Calder not being directly involved, his apparent approval of the NIC rankled the Office of the Deputy Minister for Indian Affairs, with officials expressing concern the council was being 'exposed to coercion by professional organizers'.²⁵ Under Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservative Party government, the Indian Affairs Branch clearly viewed the mobilization of a unified Indian voting bloc for the NDP as a major threat to Canadian politics. This combined with the perceived potential for radicalization of Indigenous peoples influenced by Black Power figures ensured that Indian Affairs kept close tabs on the NIC in its early years.

However, as a result of Wuttunee's shift to a moderate approach and the continuing financial struggles of the organisation, the NIC became more willing to work with the government, even inviting Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Guy Favreau to speak at the third annual conference in Winnipeg. Favreau commended the NIC, stating the government viewed a national organisation able to 'speak with one voice' as potentially of great assistance. However, Favreau questioned the legitimacy of the NIC, asserting that to be representative such a body would need to 'consist of *all* the Indian associations and brotherhoods throughout the country'.²⁶ The Indian

Affairs Branch were well aware at this point that the Indian Association of Alberta, for instance, had sent delegates to initial NIC meetings, but ultimately refused to join the organisation (Meijer Drees 2002: 164).

Openness to working with the government also included a reassessment of earlier rejections of external funding. Discussions on financing the organisation at the same 1963 conference revealed that the insistence on total financial independence mainly came from Wuttunee and committee member Percy Bird. Chief Alfred Cook, President of the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, posed the question of how delegates were meant to afford travel expenses to attend NIC meetings, expressing the wish that the organisation accept external donations in order to cover these. Bird responded that accepting funds would mean the council was 'obligated to the donors', claiming that by maintaining financial independence the NIC could better support the needs of Indians and Métis. Wuttunee agreed, stating that 'any monies the National Indian Council accepted must be without strings'.²⁷ Cook challenged this view, questioning instead: 'Why should we not expect white men to help us?' In contrast to viewing grants as dependence, Cook conceptualised external funds as being *owed to Indigenous peoples* due to Canada's colonial history.

This challenge resulted in a reassessment of the council's approach, and in 1964 limited federal funding was granted to the organisation to participate in preparations for the Canadian Centennial. The NIC executive formed a Centennial Committee, chaired by Wilfred Pelletier (Odawa from Manitoulin Island), who saw the project as 'designed to give the NIC a more solid basis for operation'.²⁸ The NIC met with the government's Centennial Commission, proposing to travel across Canada and gather the opinions of Indigenous communities. An initial grant of 9,000 dollars was secured in the spring to launch the travel and exchange programme, and an additional 7,000 dollars to hold a seminar of Indian leaders and representatives to discuss programming.²⁹ Pelletier declared this funding presented a recognition of the role of the organisation, lending the

NIC further legitimacy and significance.³⁰ Wuttunee (1971: 21) later even claimed that the NIC's Centennial Commission funding was a predecessor to the core funding provided by the federal government to later national organisations like the NIB.

This work gained the NIC increasing national press attention, with the *Globe and Mail* in January 1964 reporting that Centennial Commissioner John Fisher had 'congratulated' the NIC's delegation for their energetic and advanced plans for Indigenous participation.³¹ Additionally, a new spokesperson for the NIC was secured in August 1964 through the organisation's 'Princess Canada' beauty pageant. Kahn-Tineta Horn, a 21-year-old Kanien'kehá:ka model and student, was chosen and over the next few months made headlines by criticizing government Indian policy.³² After an initial struggle, in its third year the NIC was finally gaining both funding and national attention.

This seeming upward trajectory was, however, short-lived. Less than a year later, Horn's title of Princess Canada was revoked for her repeated public disagreements with Wuttunee and candid expression of her own political views, which included rejecting the Claims Commission, supporting land rights, and calling for the NIC to focus predominantly on First Nations issues like living conditions on reserves.³³ Following her removal, Horn became an outspoken critic of the organisation, in interviews accusing the NIC of mispending funds and Wuttunee personally of 'trying to affiliate Canadian Indians with the United States Black Muslim organization'.³⁴ While the NIC's early documents show that Wuttunee had an interest in the ideologies of Black Nationalism and Malcolm X, in 1964 he publicly denied any affiliation with US Black organisations.³⁵

The scandal finally came to a head at the NIC's 1964 annual meeting at the Garden River reserve, Ontario.³⁶ Horn attended the conference, supported by host and Garden River band council chief Richard Pine. Horn repeatedly attempted to speak while Wuttunee sought to have her thrown out of the meeting.³⁷ The conflict garnered multiple reports in local and national

newspapers, littered with racial stereotypes of Indians being on the 'warpath' and sexist descriptions of Horn's appearance. Beyond the public scandal, active members of the NIC saw this clash predominantly as a personal issue between Horn and Wuttunee, and NIC sachem John Tootoosis went to great lengths to keep the conference going despite the distraction.³⁸ Tootoosis was a respected Cree leader from Saskatchewan and one of few NIC members with a background in provincial organising, having first been elected president of the Union of Saskatchewan Indians in 1946. According to historian Laurie Meijer Drees (2002: 179–80), Tootoosis viewed the assertion of treaty rights and sovereignty as priorities. This view contrasted starkly with Wuttunee's vision of unity for 'all people of Indian descent', regardless of Indian Act status and treaty relationships. At this 1964 conference, Tootoosis ran against Wuttunee for the organisation's presidency, losing out by only forty-three votes to forty-five, indicating that Wuttunee's views did not have the support of a large majority of the NIC membership.³⁹

Following the conference, Pine and Horn contacted Indian Affairs criticizing the NIC's use of federal funds and claiming the organisation had not paid for food and refreshments.⁴⁰ While Indian Affairs officials were sceptical of Horn and Pine, they also questioned the organisation's legitimacy and claim to have a membership of 28,453 people.⁴¹ By early 1965 relations between the NIC, the Centennial Commission, and the Indian Affairs Branch had seriously broken down. Jean Lagassé, Acting Director of Indian Affairs, announced in an internal 1964 memorandum that all further funding was being pulled from the organisation, as the planned Centennial seminar had not materialised and funds had instead gone towards 'administrative costs for operating the N.I.C. office and other programs.'⁴² An investigation into the NIC's use of money was launched by the federal government and the NIC's short-lived Toronto offices were shut down.⁴³ In a letter to Lagassé in the midst of this dispute, Wuttunee expressed regret that the NIC had accepted federal funds in the first place:

Long after the Centennial Commission is dissolved and long after the Centennial is past the Indians will continue to exist. When we first formed N.I.C. we at that time clearly felt that we should not at any time accept funds from the Government. We broke our policy and so we have suffered the consequences.⁴⁴

NIC executive committee member Edward Lavallee later recalled there being little ground for the accusations of financial mismanagement. According to Lavallee, issues were minor and caused by the NIC leadership's inexperience in handling large budgets, for instance taking unnecessary trips and overspending on long-distance phone calls.⁴⁵ Whatever the truth of the matter, the incident highlighted both internal fractures within the NIC and the government's mistrust of its leadership and legitimacy.

While Horn was the NIC's most outspoken opponent, she was not its only critic. Duke Redbird (Saugeen Ojibway Nation), who later became a well-known poet and lobbyist, was first drawn into political activism through association with the NIC and meetings with Pelletier. Around 1964 he agreed to take charge of the NIC's newspaper, *The Thunderbird*. Yet after just three issues, Redbird became disillusioned with the organisation's tactics and left, describing leadership as suffering from a 'feeling of inferiority and insecurity – in fact a failure-complex' (quoted in Dunn 1971: 55–7). In both Redbird and Horn's cases, the NIC initially appeared to be a forum for enacting change, but practical limitations and the organisation's focus frustrated both young activists.

Nevertheless, the media scandal died down, and over the next two years the NIC was able to at least partially amend its relations with government offices. After hosting several meetings with Indian Affairs and Centennial Commission officials, the NIC secured small grants to cover specific expenses, including travel grants for annual and executive meetings.⁴⁶ The NIC's role in coordinating Indigenous activities for the Canadian Centennial programme was, however, not returned. Instead, Pelletier was hired directly by the Canadian Citizenship Branch to work on the

Centennial programme.⁴⁷ Wuttunee personally, however, continued to be criticised by other Indigenous organisers and organisations. Most notably, in March 1965, the IAA's attorney Ruth Gorman wrote to the Indian Affairs Branch warning against returning funding to the NIC and particularly disparaging Wuttunee. Referring to his enfranchisement, the letter described Wuttunee as 'not even legally Indian' and referred to his having 'admitted a past interest, to some degree in association with the Black Moslems'.⁴⁸ Gorman played on Canadian officials' fears that Black Power ideologies and radical violent activism would spread from the US to Canada (Rutherford 2020: 74). Wuttunee, as a figure, had become so controversial that his heading of the NIC in itself hindered the aim of representing 'all people of Indian descent'. Moreover, the IAA letter's highlighting Wuttunee's legal status also indicated this focus on 'descent' conflicted with the priorities of provincial organisations for 'status Indians'.

The Final Years of the NIC: Unity Unrealised

In the summer of 1965 Wuttunee stepped down as NIC chief, but remained a member of the executive committee.⁴⁹ The following two years saw two new Chiefs appointed to the NIC, starting with Phil Thompson in 1965 and followed by Gene Lahache (Caughnawaga) in 1966. Thompson, elected Chief in August 1965, had some experience in political organising, having been the recording secretary of the IAA the year immediately preceding his election (Meijer Drees 2002: 196). Thompson described his main aim for the NIC as 'uniting the Indian people of this country in thought, ideas and action' and hoped for a meeting of all 'heads of Indian organizations to come together in a bull session with no recorded minutes and come to some mutual agreements'.⁵⁰ Unity thus remained a core goal of the NIC, but Thompson – perhaps due to his background in an organisation previously openly hostile towards the NIC – recognised the difficulty Indigenous political organisations had in working together. Thompson's election fostered change in the NIC's

approach, with the organisation becoming more vocal on policy developments and attempting to take on a stronger political role and closer collaboration with existing provincial organisations. This change was immediately evident, as at the 1965 annual conference the NIC passed a motion calling for a Royal Commission to 'study the relationship of the Indian people of Canada, as it affects their participation in Canadian Society at all levels, and that Indians be well represented at the Royal Commission'.⁵¹

Lobbying for a Royal Commission marked the NIC's shift away from supporting the controversial Claims Commission, as the council had done under Wuttunee. The day after the conference concluded, Thompson sent a telegram directly to Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, declaring the necessity of a Royal Commission with sufficient Indigenous representation. The telegram particularly pointed to the 'blatant disregard for Indian opinion' on the Indian Claims bill.⁵² The Prime Minister's response, drafted by Deputy minister of Indian Affairs C.M. Isbister, declined Thompson's suggestion due to an already ongoing 'country-wide Indian research program' that was being led by 'eminent Canadian social scientists'.⁵³ The study referred to was 1966's *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada*, led by anthropologist and museum curator Harry B. Hawthorn. It was conducted by a team of fifty-two social scientists, with no significant Indigenous representation (Weaver 1981: 21).

This change in the NIC's approach was not only sparked by new leadership, but by broader developments in Indigenous political activism and emerging public discussions surrounding Indigenous rights in Canada. In November 1965 protests against the racial discrimination of Indigenous people in Kenora, Ontario, made national headlines (Rutherford 2020: 23–4). The NIC's December bulletin paid special attention to the situation in Kenora, noting that 'Indians are employing new methods such as marches to draw attention to their plight'. During the ensuing media controversy, the NIC held a two-day meeting in Kenora to discuss the situation and speak to

Indigenous communities on their experiences. The bulletin also noted that NIC Vice-Chiefs John Tootoosis and Duke Redbird were staying in the area to see what role the NIC could play in aiding the local community.⁵⁴

Both Tootoosis and Redbird had been elected Vice-Chiefs in August 1965. Tootoosis, living on the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan, remained involved with the NIC following the 1964 controversies and continued to advocate for the needs of reserve communities. Redbird, at this point well-known by the NIC executive for his past criticism of the organisation and radical views, was elected first Vice-Chief by a large group of friends attending the conference. Redbird's 1971 biography describes this move as being designed to cause upset, leaving the 'older, more conservative' members of the NIC 'flabbergasted' (Dunn 1971: 64). It is unclear what exactly came of the NIC's involvement in Kenora, but Redbird was likely a driving force. Yet his time with the council was again short-lived. He later described his role as 'like being vice-president of nothing' and he resigned at the end of his term (quoted in Dunn 1971: 74). Redbird's frustration with the NIC as old-fashioned and ineffective attests to the organisation's inability to appeal to the rising young radical movement, despite attempts to acknowledge and aid in direct action protests such as that in Kenora.

Seeking to appeal to the grassroots at Kenora was part of a concerted effort of the NIC to be more active and relevant. Simultaneously, the council reflected on its failures in representing varied Indigenous communities. In a news bulletin following the Kenora protests, the NIC commended the transfer of Indian Affairs to the Department of Northern Affairs from Citizenship & Immigration, but noted that the Métis remained largely overlooked:

While these changes are taking place for the benefit of the Treaty Indian, still there is a large segment of our society known as the half breed or the Métis which have been completely ignored even to a point where no reference is made to them in this Bulletin.

The NIC, which welcomes these people into its membership, should put greater effort on their behalf.⁵⁵

Indeed, the 1966 annual conference sought to address these issues with representation, hoping to draw in both 'status Indian' and Métis provincial organisations as members.⁵⁶ Held in Calgary and drawing on Thompson's networks in Alberta, the conference included words of welcome from both the IAA President, John Samson, and the president of the Métis Association of Alberta, Adrian Hope.⁵⁷ The conference also included discussion of the structure and future of a 'national Indian organization', indicating that change was sought.

However, in many respects the NIC was still bogged down by the same problems it had faced in its early years. The August 1966 conference included extended discussions on 'who would be eligible for membership in the National Indian Council' and 'means of raising money'.⁵⁸ Later that year, an executive committee meeting the organisation only had five dollars in its bank account. Moreover, the executive committee had to fill in several vacancies, as in addition to Redbird, Tootoosis and long-term secretary Marion Meadmore stepped down following the 1966 conference. Despite these challenges, NIC's executive committee continued to attempt to build bridges with provincial organisations, reaching out to several well-known provincial leaders, including the IAA's Samson and Walter Dieter of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, inviting them to act as 'directors' of the NIC.⁵⁹

However, following years of little active engagement from the NIC, provincial leaders had little interest in the organisation. In fact, leaders of provincial status organisations already met frequently between 1965 and 1967 as part of the National Indian Advisory Board, a committee established by the Indian Affairs Branch, and which the NIC had not been invited to join (McFarlane 1993: 96–7; Weaver 1981: 28–30). The NIC's exclusion confirmed that the federal government viewed it as illegitimate, instead seeking to create its own consultative body. In these

meetings, a group led by Dieter and president of the Union of Ontario Indians, Omer Peters, formulated plans to found a new national federation of status Indian organisations.

In order to establish such an organisation, Peters suggested a meeting with NIC delegates, including new NIC chief Gene Lahache, to discuss the future of Indigenous national politics. In addition to the NIC's executive committee and leaders of status organisations, heads of provincial non-status and Métis organisations, including Stan Daniels of the Métis Association of Alberta and Tom Eagle of the Manitoba Métis Federation, were invited. Minutes of the meeting show that status delegates were unwilling to join a national organisation including non-status members. Métis delegates were similarly unsatisfied with the NIC, attesting that the Métis were 'the forgotten people' and had been overlooked by the organisation. As a result of discussions which Dieter later described as 'emotional',⁶⁰ it was decided that the NIC should split. A motion was passed for two new national organisations to be formed, one a 'registered Indian organization' and the other a 'non-registered Indian organization', with the stated aim to 'ensure the resovement [sic] of their common goals.'⁶¹ The NIC's attempts to represent everyone had finally concluded with a distinct separation into two organisations, with membership determined according to status as set by the Indian Act.

Conclusion: The Challenges of Unity

Since its very founding, the NIC's focus on building unity for 'all people of Indian *descent*', revealed an ideology centred on Indigeneity as a shared cultural heritage, rather than as a continuing political reality within the settler colonial structures imposed by the Canadian state. These ideas were most prominently advocated by William Wuttunee, the one figure who most strongly shaped the NIC's early public image and the organisation's aims of ending 'tribalism'.⁶² Wuttunee sought inspiration particularly from civil rights discussions in the US, ultimately viewing integration into

Canadian society while maintaining an 'Indian' heritage as the goal for all Indigenous peoples. The NIC was not, however, a one-man show and behind-the-scenes the organisation contained conflicting viewpoints from the very beginning. Other NIC executive committee members vocally disagreed with Wuttunee's views, for instance refuting comparisons to African American civil rights struggles and seeking stronger political action. While these viewpoints coexisted within the organisation, they could not be fully reconciled.

Yet provincial and local Indigenous groups across the country shared the belief in a need for national representation. At the 1961 founding meeting, Native Brotherhood of British Columbia president Guy Williams' statement that Indigenous peoples in Canada could no longer 'go without a National Organization' was coupled specifically with the need to: 'be organized solidly in each province'.⁶³ In attempting to focus on problems shared by all people of 'Indian descent', the NIC in its early years failed to address the diverging challenges imposed by, for instance, the Indian Act or the failures of the federal government to live up to treaty promises for First Nations or the provisions of the Manitoba Act for Métis communities. Indeed, land rights in their varying forms was the issue that most concerned provincial organisations. In focusing on other issues, the NIC lost legitimacy and could not attract these organisations and their constituents as long-term members. In attempting to represent the many, the NIC ended up representing the interests of very few. While in later years the NIC, under new leadership, attempted to revitalise itself and re-establish a political role in national discussions of Indigenous affairs, trust could no longer be gained with either the federal government or provincial organisations. The NIC was unable to reconcile idealistic visions of political unity, challenges surmounted by Indian Affairs, and the conflicting and often competing interests and concerns resulting from the Canadian government's imposition of differing categories of Indigeneity.

The dominant narrative in the historiography of Indigenous political organising in Canada is that the 1969 release of the Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, popularly known as the White Paper, sparked the contemporary Indigenous self-determination movement. According to many scholars, this attempt to eradicate the Indian Act and the consolidated protest from provincial organisations and the National Indian Brotherhood acted as a catalyst for Indigenous political organising (Coulthard 2014: 5; Weaver 1981: 4; Miller 1989: 230; Tennant 1990: 149). Yet, as Sarah Nickel (2019b: 227) argues, this argument works to unduly centre settler-colonial policy as the starting point of the modern Indigenous rights movement. Though short-lived, the NIC's work in the 1960s contradicts the White Paper narrative, demonstrating that Indigenous groups were actively working to establish political organisations on a national level *well before* the release of the White Paper.

Despite its shortcomings and even failures, the NIC's impact on the growing Indigenous political movement should not be overlooked. The NIC acted as a model of the challenges and pitfalls of constructing unity, and worked as a trial ground for the Indian Affairs branch in working with an Indigenous political association. For individuals like Redbird, the NIC acted as a first step into activism, and annual meetings aided in connecting provincial and urban political figures. Though some NIC leaders adopted controversial stances, the organisation contained and fostered multiple viewpoints on the direction that Indigenous political unity should take. As it ultimately folded to make way for the separate organisations that still operate today, the NIC's failures demonstrated that any national movement must address the differing needs of varied Indigenous groups in Canada. As such, the National Indian Council's seven-year attempt to build unity is an important chapter in the history of the Indigenous political movement's development in twentieth century Canada, playing its part in shaping the landscape of Indigenous political organising today.

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Notes

¹ *Prairie Call* newsletter, 23 September 1961, RG10 8480 File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

² A note on terminology: throughout this article, I use Indigenous as a more inclusive umbrella term including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people. Though widely considered offensive, I use the terms 'Indian' and 'Eskimo' when quoting a historical source. I also use 'Indian status' where it relates to constitutional or legal issues related to the Indian Act.

³ Initially Wuttunee was co-president, but his fellow co-president Alex Brass was elderly and soon stepped down, likely due to health concerns. NIC News Bulletin, undated, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

⁴ National Indian Council of Canada, brief document on founding, undated, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

⁵ Interview of Edward Lavalée by Murray Dobbin, November 1976. Saskatchewan Sound Archives. Held: University of Regina Canadian Plains Research Centre. Accessed: <https://ourspace.uregina.ca/handle/10294/1334>.

⁶ Manuel was initially appointed sachem in 1963, but by the 1964 annual convention had stepped down from the role. The 4th Annual NIC Conference, Garden River, Ontario, undated, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

⁷ National Indian Council of Canada, brief document on founding, undated.

⁸ Registration Form: All Indian Conference, undated and All Indian Conference, undated agenda, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

⁹ Draft Constitution of the NIC, undated, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

¹⁰ Memorandum to Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, 6 June 1961, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

¹¹ Minutes of the Second Annual Conference, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.

¹² *Prairie Call* newsletter, 23 September 1961.

¹³ 'Want Safeguards: Canadian Indians Ask More National Posts', 17 August 1963, *Globe and Mail*, 2.

¹⁴ 'Problem of Defining Biculturalism Illustrates Task Facing Commission', 8 November 1963, *Globe and Mail*, 1.

¹⁵ All Indian Conference Agenda, undated, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Lotta Dempsey, 'Private Line: Indians Have Something to Give', 4 September 1962, *Toronto Daily Star*, 42.

¹⁸ Agenda, NIC, 30 August 1962, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

¹⁹ Address by W.I. Wuttunee to NIC, 30 August 1962, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.

²⁰ Minutes of the Second Annual Conference, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.

²¹ Program for Conference "Equal Civil Rights, 14-16 August 1963, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC. Emphasis in original.

²² Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference, 14-16 August 1963, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC. Emphasis added.

²³ Letter from Superintendent M.W. McCracken to T.L. Bonnah, 29 August 1962, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

²⁴ Frank Calder letter to Marion Meadmore, 18 May 1961, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

²⁵ Memorandum to the Deputy Minister by E.L.F., 3 June 1961, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

²⁵ Minutes of the Second Annual Conference, National Indian Council.

²⁶ Emphasis added. Draft Speech for Minister Guy Favreau, 15 August 1963, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.

²⁷ Minutes of the Third Annual Conference, 14-16 August 1963,

²⁸ History of the NIC, Address by Wilfred Pelletier for the Annual Conference of the NIC, June 1964, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.

- ²⁹ Memorandum to Deputy Minister of Citizenship and Immigration by Jean Lagassé, 4 January 1965, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ³⁰ Address by Wilfred Pelletier for the Annual Conference of the NIC, June 1964, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ³¹ 'Lore to the Fore: Indians Are Accorded Praise for Plans for Centenary, 28 January 1964, *Globe and Mail*, 9.
- ³² 'Second-Class Citizens: Beauty Queen Critical of Indian Treatment,' 14 August 1963, *Globe and Mail*, 10.
- ³³ 'Council Meeting "Fake": Princess Vows Fight Over Indian Crown, 6 June 1964, *Globe and Mail*, 1; 'Beautiful, Fire-Breathing Kath-Tineta Supports Segregation for Indians', 3 July 1964, *Globe and Mail*, 10.
- ³⁴ 'Princess up in arms: Charges Indian, Black Muslim link', 12 June 1964, *Toronto Star*, 45.
- ³⁵ 'Kahn-Tineta Appears as Uninvited Guest', 15 June 1964, *Globe and Mail*, 15.
- ³⁶ 4th Annual NIC Conference, Jean Lagassé, August 1964, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.
- ³⁷ 'Indian chiefs in big fight over their rebel princess', 31 July 1964, *Toronto Star*, 2.
- ³⁸ Lavallee interview; 'Wuttunee Re-elected by Indians; Council's Future Called Uncertain', 1 August 1964, *Globe and Mail*, 4.
- ³⁹ 'Struggle Over, Wuttunee Says', 13 August 1964, *Globe and Mail*, 2.
- ⁴⁰ Memorandum on Visit of Miss Horn, Chief Pine, and Mr. Reid by C.I. Fairholm, 11 August 1964, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC
- ⁴¹ Memorandum on the NIC by Jean Lagassé, 13 April 1965 and Letter by Jean Lagassé to Director of the Indian Affairs Branch, 20 August 1964, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ⁴² Memorandum to Deputy Minister of Citizenship and Immigration by Jean Lagassé, 4 January 1965, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ⁴³ Memorandum to Indian Affairs Branch by W.J. Brennan, 11 December 1964, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 1, LAC.
- ⁴⁴ Letter from William Wuttunee to Jean Lagassé, 22 December 1964, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ⁴⁵ Lavallee interview.
- ⁴⁶ News Bulletin, undated, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC; Letter to Jean Lagassé from Gene Lahache, 20 October 1966, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ⁴⁷ News Bulletin, March 1965, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC.
- ⁴⁸ Letter to R.F. Battle from Ruth Gorman, Legal Advisor, Alberta Indian Association, 3 March 1965, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC.
- ⁴⁹ Unrevised Summary of Proceedings of the fifth annual convention, 9-11 August 1965, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC.
- ⁵⁰ News Bulletin, National Indian Council, undated, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ⁵¹ Unrevised Summary of Proceedings of the fifth annual convention, 9-11 August 1965.
- ⁵² Telegram from Phil Thompson to Lester B. Pearson, 12 August 1965, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC.
- ⁵³ Unsigned draft of letter from Prime Minister to Phil Thompson, 30 August 1965, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC.
- ⁵⁴ News Bulletin, undated, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Unrevised Summary of Proceedings of the fifth annual convention, 9-11 August 1965.
- ⁵⁷ 6th Annual Meeting Agenda, 18-21 July 1966, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC.
- ⁵⁸ Memorandum by A.G. Leslie, 3 August 1966, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC.
- ⁵⁹ Executive and Board Meeting, 17-18 December 1966, RG10 8480, File 1/24-2-22 pt. 2, LAC.
- ⁶⁰ Interview of Walter Dieter by Murray Dobbin, November 1977. Saskatchewan Sound Archives. Held: University of Regina Archives, <https://ourspace.uregina.ca/handle/10294/1317> (accessed: 20.05.2021).
- ⁶¹ Minutes of Meeting of Representatives of Provincial National Organizations and Executive of the NIC, 3-4 February 1968, RG6-F-4, Box 92, File CB 9-390-10, LAC.
- ⁶² Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference, 14-16 August 1963.
- ⁶³ *Prairie Call* newsletter, 23 September 1961.

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