

# Native Indian Political Activity in British Columbia, 1969-1983\*

PAUL TENNANT

Since 1969 political activity has been both prominent and pervasive among British Columbia Indians. In that year the first substantial province-wide Indian political organizations were formed. They grew and prospered; then, in 1975, quickly collapsed as young activists challenged the assumptions that had sustained the big organizations. In the subsequent rebirth of political organizations two new ideals were evident: one was the ideal of unity between status and non-status Indians; the other was the ideal of tribalism. Tribal groups became accepted as the basic political unit within the Indian population. To accommodate tribalism a new device, the co-ordinating forum, emerged at the provincial level. Federal departments eventually adjusted their funding to accord with the new arrangements. One group of Indians, however, believing in the old assumptions, bitterly resisted the new arrangements. As it lost popular Indian support and then government funding, the group turned outside to the media and opposition MPs in Parliament in a final but futile attempt to discredit its Indian opponents. Throughout the post-1969 period, however, pursuit of the aboriginal land claim remained the major goal of Indian political activity in the province.

\* This paper is based upon records of the Indian organizations and material in the archives of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs in Vancouver, as well as upon my own field research. Since January 1980 I have travelled to most parts of the province to interview district-tribal council leaders and to attend Indian meetings. During this period I have attended a greater variety, and, I believe, greater number of major Indian meetings in the province than any other person. The conclusions in this paper about the most recent developments are thus based on my own observation of the major events and meetings. The research is part of the B.C. Project of the University of Victoria. I am grateful to the Project and to the University for granting me a visiting research scholarship, research assistance, and travel funds during 1980, and to the University of British Columbia for granting me travel funds during 1981 and 1982. I am especially grateful as well to Andrea Smith for research assistance.

*The Big Organizations*

As 1969 began there were six Indian political<sup>1</sup> organizations in the province. The Native Indian Brotherhood drew its support from the west/central and north coast areas. It had been formed in 1931 and was Canada's oldest Indian organization. The North American Indian Brotherhood drew its support from the south coast and interior areas. It had been formed in 1959 by George Manuel, building on earlier activities of Andrew Paull. The two organizations, representing two different "pan-Indian" spheres or outlooks,<sup>2</sup> were to some degree political rivals — less in competing for support in each other's areas than in resenting efforts of the other to speak on behalf of all British Columbia Indians. On the coast there were three organizations representing separate tribal (that is, linguistic) groups: the Southern Vancouver Island Tribal Federation; the West Coast Allied Tribes (of the Nuu-chah-nulth, also on the Island); and the Nishga Tribal Council. The Nishga Tribal Council had been formed in 1955 by Frank Calder and had served as the model for the other two. The sixth organization, the Indian Homemakers' Association, had been formed in 1968; it drew its initial support from women in the lower Fraser Valley and the southern interior.

As 1969 began there was no province-wide Indian organization and no organization or forum bringing together spokesmen from both pan-Indian spheres. Attempts during the mid-sixties to unite the various organizations, in pursuit of aboriginal land claims, had served only to reinforce hostility between spokesmen from the two spheres.

During 1969 two new province-wide organizations were formed. Both were formed in response to actions of the federal government; and both included members from all parts of the province. The long-standing political feuds and divisions within the Indian population seemed at an end. The British Columbia Association of Non-Status Indians (BCANSI) was formed in March by H. A. "Butch" Smitheram. Smitheram, a non-status Indian from Penticton and a career federal public servant, believed that non-status Indians and Metis were entitled in the short term to the same sort of benefits that status Indians obtained from

<sup>1</sup> "Political" refers here to an organization which devotes itself to a range of matters seen by it as important to the particular interests of Indian people, and which addresses its activities within the larger society primarily towards government.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this dual pan-Indianism, and an examination of Indian political organizations before 1969, see my "Native Indian Political Organization in British Columbia, 1900-1969: A Response to Internal Colonialism," *BC Studies* 55 (Autumn 1982): 3-49.

the federal government. Federal government actions in consulting only status Indians about proposed amendments to the Indian Act prompted him to form the organization to enable non-status persons and Metis to press for such benefits. His long-term objective, however, was to ensure the full assimilation of both non-status and Metis into Canadian society. BCANSI membership was open to any person of one-quarter or more Indian blood who was not a status Indian. Local community chapters, or "locals," were the component units within BCANSI.

The Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs was formed in November 1969. A number of status Indians, who had come together through the government's consultation process, formed the Union in order to oppose the policies put forth earlier in the year by the government in its "white paper." Those policies were directed to the final assimilation of Canadian Indians. The Union was formed in direct response to the white paper. Its major goal was to attain a comprehensive land claims settlement for British Columbia Indians. The Union was to consist of the chiefs of the province's Indian bands, which were about 190 in number. In each annual assembly the chiefs from each of fifteen districts would appoint one person to be their delegate on the council of chiefs, which would function as the board of directors. The council of chiefs would select three of its members to be the executive, which would guide the activities of the organization.

With the advent of generous federal funding in 1970 both organizations grew rapidly, each coming to have annual budgets of some \$2.5 million and staffs of some 200 employees. Important funding was obtained as well from the British Columbia First Citizens' Fund, an endowment established earlier by Premier W. A. C. Bennett. Each organization undertook a number of programs intended to serve the needs of Indian people. BCANSI came to have more than seventy active locals throughout the province. The Union established a Land Claims Research Centre in Victoria and commenced an ambitious research program. During the first few years of rapid growth there was little controversy or questioning within either organization, although within BCANSI there were some signs of tension between non-status members and Metis members — as in the displacement of Smitheram as President by Fred House, a Metis originally from Alberta.

During these early years the pre-eminent positions of the two province-wide organizations were accepted by the other organizations. There was general agreement that the distinction between status Indians and non-status Indians (together with Metis) should be reflected in separate

political organizations, and that only the Union should pursue a land claims settlement — and on exclusive behalf of status Indians. There was also general agreement that the two major organizations, with their large staffs and centralized operations, represented the appropriate form of Indian political organization at the province-wide level. The one challenge, modest and implicit, to these notions came from the Nishga, in whose tribal council status and non-status Nishga participated equally without any distinction being made. The Nishga were pursuing their own land claim through the courts. And the Nishga soon came to object to the centralized bureaucracy of the Union. As a result the Nishga withdrew from the Union at an early stage. The significance of the Nishga's preference for a tribal basis of political and legal action was not appreciated at the time within either BCANSI or the Union.

It was within BCANSI that the emerging status quo first came into question. At its annual assembly in late 1972 BCANSI endorsed the principle that all persons of Indian ancestry were entitled to share in land claims. The proposal to adopt the principle was presented to the assembly in a paper prepared by Bill Wilson,<sup>3</sup> a status Indian employee of BCANSI. Endorsation of the principle provided a further example of the different outlooks within BCANSI of non-status Indians and Metis, for the principle was strongly endorsed by the former (with especially strong support coming from those of British Columbian ancestry) but not by the latter. Underlying the acceptance of the new principle, and in part explaining the difference between non-status and Metis on the issue, was the rapidly emerging view among non-status activists within BCANSI that non-status Indians should seek to retain their Indian identity rather than seeking to assimilate completely into the larger society. The corollary to this view soon appeared; it was the view that BCANSI and the Union should unite into one organization which would act on behalf of all British Columbia Indians. Wilson played the leading, although by no means the only, part in promoting the new views and principles. As a status Indian Wilson could be employed by BCANSI but not be a member of the organization. In 1973 he was appointed as BCANSI's director of land claims research.

In adopting the goals of retaining Indian identity and seeking a land

<sup>3</sup> At this time Wilson, a Kwawkgewlth from Comox, was in his late twenties and completing his law degree at UBC. Previously he had obtained his BA from the University of Victoria in English and political science. He was the second B.C. Indian to obtain a law degree. (In this paper I use the spelling of "Kwawkgewlth" favoured by most politically active members of the group. It is more frequently spelled "Kwakiutl" by non-Indians.)

claims settlement, BCANSI came to have the same basic goals as the Union. Moreover, the activists within BCANSI advocated the goals with the fervour of true believers. The leaders of the Union did not reciprocate. They were hesitant about sharing any land claim settlement with non-status Indians and resistant to any merger of BCANSI and the Union. In 1974, however, Wilson became the delegate from his Kwawkwewlth district on the Union's council of chiefs.<sup>4</sup> Supported by a few other members of the council, he now actively advocated within the Union the views and principles that had already been accepted within BCANSI.

By early 1975 the Union's council of chiefs was in disarray — as much over personality conflicts as over matters of principle. On the matters of principle there was now no firm majority, and there were even some indications that merger with BCANSI might be approved by the council. However slight these indications, the BCANSI activists were now convinced that merger would soon take place. For its part the BCANSI board of directors, now firmly controlled by non-status Indians of British Columbia ancestry (including Bill Lightbown, a Kootenay, and Neil Sterritt, a Gitksan), proceeded to arrange their part of the merger.

### *Collapse and Chaos*

The Union's annual assembly for 1975 was held in Chilliwack. The assembly revealed considerable dissatisfaction with the results of six years of Union activity, for no land claim had yet been prepared, and the leaders seemed, to their critics, to be more concerned with travel and high living than with the grass roots concerns of people on the reserves. In response to the immediate frustrations felt by the delegates, and even more in response to accumulated hopes and ideals, the assembly, which included hundreds of observers, took on a life of its own. Such a possibility had not been anticipated. The assembly now became a political and cultural revival meeting of profound emotive significance to many of those taking part. During the week the assembly lasted, Wilson and George Watts,<sup>5</sup> the Nuuchahnulth leader, played the major roles in

<sup>4</sup> In the 1973 Union assembly he had been appointed as the alternate delegate from his district; he became the regular delegate in early 1974 when the regular delegate resigned. Unlike most of those who have served on the council of chiefs, Wilson has never held any position at the band level.

<sup>5</sup> Watts, who studied Engineering and Education at UBC, was at this time in his late twenties. Unlike Wilson, Watts has been active at the band level and has served as both chief and band manager. "Nuuchahnulth" has replaced "Nootka" as the name of the group, as the latter is not a recognized word in the language.

leading the meeting in the new directions. Delbert Guerin and Philip Paul<sup>6</sup> played major parts as well, but they were more cautious — and concerned with the practical outcome.

Among the resolutions approved by the assembly were several of special importance. One resolution provided that the assembly delegates rather than the council of chiefs would choose the Union executive. Another resolution stated that a primary purpose of the Union would be “to provide a central organization for uniting together the Indian people of the Province of British Columbia for the purpose of settlement of Land Claims and Aboriginal Rights.”<sup>7</sup> A related motion provided that only persons having at least one-quarter Indian blood and having their ancestry in British Columbia could benefit from the land claim settlement. The Union thus officially endorsed the major principles that had first emerged within BCANSI.

Another motion proclaimed that British Columbia Indians would no longer accept funds from government. The idea of rejecting government funds, which were virtually the sole source of financial support for the organizations, had first been raised by Wilson several months earlier. He believed that the quality of Indian leadership had declined as government funds had increased, the reason being that many leaders were motivated mainly by personal financial gain. Wilson believed that the organizations would be much more effective if they were leaner and dependent upon such financial support as individual Indians would be able to contribute. The faith in Indian self-sufficiency was so enlarged by the spirit prevailing in the meeting, however, that the assembly voted not merely to reject government funding for the Union but to reject all government funding of any sort to status Indians — including band-level education, welfare and administration funding.

At the close of the assembly the delegates elected Wilson, Watts and Paul as the new Union executive. Several weeks later, in a special assembly called for the purpose, BCANSI voted to reject government funding and to proceed to merge with the Union. The Metis component within BCANSI was by this time largely eclipsed, and Fred House had ceased to act as president. Bill Lightbown had become the actual leader.

<sup>6</sup> Paul, who had studied at the University of Victoria, had played a major part in Indian political activity during the sixties, and was the most influential Union leader prior to 1975. He remained active as a Union leader until 1981. He was for a time chief of his Tsartlip band on southern Vancouver Island.

<sup>7</sup> Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, Minutes of 1975 Annual Assembly (day #4), pp. 3 ff.

At the reserve level fear and confusion reigned as the federal government began to withhold funding from status Indians. (Non-status Indians were unaffected, at least in their personal lives at the local level, because they had never received special Indian funding.) At the provincial level, with their funding stopped, BCANSI and the Union closed their offices and laid off their staffs while their leaders limped along on funds already in the bank. Within the Union enormous pressure to return to funding came from the reserves. The three executive members failed to function with any sort of coherence. Watts and Paul resigned during the summer. Replacements were appointed by the council of chiefs, but the replacements found their tasks no easier than had Watts and Paul.

In the autumn of 1975 the Union held a special assembly in Kamloops. Because of reduced travel funds it was poorly attended. Return to band-level funding was now desired by the delegates. Band-level funding was soon restored by the government, which saw itself as responding more to the local outcry from across the province than to any formal request by the Union. Wilson submitted his resignation to allow the delegates to choose a new executive. Wilson, Steven Point (Musqueam) and Bobby Manuel (Shuswap, son of George Manuel) were elected as the new executive. The new executive was scarcely more successful than the previous one. The Union, in fact, had ceased to be a meaningful entity.

### *Rebirth and New Directions*

Lightbown and a few others managed to maintain a semblance of continuity within BCANSI and by the spring of 1976 were attempting to revive the organization. Return to government funding was accepted as necessary for the purpose. The BCANSI leaders remained in touch with Wilson, whom they saw as still upholding their ideals. Seeing themselves as rebuffed by the Union in seeking to merge the status and non-status political organizations, they now decided upon the alternative of opening BCANSI to status Indian membership. The change in membership provisions was approved, over considerable opposition, at the 1976 annual assembly. Membership would now be open to any person of one-quarter or more Indian blood, and only to such persons. To signify the organization's change in orientation, it was renamed "United Native Nations," with the term "nation" signifying tribal group. Wilson immediately joined and, with Lightbown's support, was elected president of the UNN.

Because of its inclusion of status Indians the UNN was not allowed to continue BCANSI's membership in the Native Council of Canada, the

national organization of non-status Indians and Metis. Hitherto BCANSI had played a major part in the NCC — Butch Smitheram had been mainly responsible for its formation and Gloria Gabert (née George) had been NCC president. At the next meeting of the Native Council the UNN delegation walked out just before they were formally excluded. During ensuing years (in fact until 1982) the isolation of the UNN from national Indian politics was a factor of some importance in affecting the outlook of the UNN and its willingness to ally itself with other organizations similarly isolated within British Columbia. The UNN's inclusion of status Indians did not affect its standing with the federal Department of the Secretary of State as the provincial organization representing non-status Indians, and thus the UNN continued to be funded under the department's program supporting non-status organizations.

The Union too returned to government funding and re-established itself as an organization. Unlike BCANSI, however, the Union returned essentially to its old form. It made only one major organizational change, that of replacing the executive with a president and four vice-presidents, all to be elected by the annual assembly. George Manuel, having retired from the presidency of the National Indian Brotherhood, became the Union's first president, in 1977. Unlike the UNN, the Union remained part of a national organization, the NIB; and, with Manuel as president, now had an even more effective set of contacts than previously with national Indian political leaders, with federal officials in Ottawa, and with the news media. The Union remained the one status Indian political organization in the province recognized for funding by the Secretary of State, and the one Indian organization in the province recognized by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) for land claim research funding.

### *Tribalism*

If the events and developments of 1969-1976 seem complicated, they fade into simplicity when compared to those of 1977-1983. The failure of both major organizations to achieve evident progress or benefits for the Indian people served to weaken the assumptions evident at the beginning of the earlier period, while the collapse of both organizations in 1975 left several hundred persons, those who had been employed by the organizations or active in their leadership, as free agents. Simultaneously, the temporary disappearance of the major province-wide organizations served to make emergent tribal organizations suddenly more visible —



and at the same time gave them room to grow. Tribalism became the key new element in the 1977-1983 period. It was promoted in almost every case by the "free agents" going back to their tribal areas to become employees or leaders of bands, or of tribal or district organizations. They provided a pool of experienced leadership which would not have been available locally had it not been for the growth and collapse of the big organizations.

Tribalism, of course, was not a new phenomenon. The Nishga Tribal Council had for some time been providing an obvious example. The success of the Nishga in taking their own land claim to the courts, and obtaining a successful political outcome in the Supreme Court in 1973, had provided a positive example of what could be achieved by independent tribal action. The Nishga success, obtained without government funding, served also as an obvious contrast to the Union's failure to prepare a land claim even with abundant government funding.

The Nishga Tribal Council was created in 1955 under the leadership of Frank Calder. The council was seen by the Nishga as the continuation of the Nishga Land Committee, which had been formed at the beginning of the century to seek recognition of Nishga title to Nishga lands. The impetus to form the council came entirely from the Nishga. The council consists not of the chiefs but of the Nishga people, who meet in annual assembly to vote on resolutions and elect the council president and executive members. Every Nishga, status or non-status, has one vote. The council's board of directors consists of two representatives from each of the four home villages in the Nass Valley as well as from the off-reserve centres of Prince Rupert and Port Edward. The major goal of the council is to obtain a land claim settlement, although local autonomy, as has now been obtained in schooling and health care, is also an important objective. While each Nishga village has its own band council which administers the affairs of the village, the tribal council is the undoubted voice of the Nishga people. Once a decision has been made by the tribal council no band council has ever expressed public disagreement. The major elements in the structure and operation of the Nishga Tribal Council are thus autonomy from DIAND, popular sovereignty, linguistic group exclusiveness, status/non-status unity, band council acquiescence to the tribal council in matters of general concern, and pursuit of the land claim as the primary political goal.

Tribalism had been encouraged directly, although unintentionally, in the remainder of the province by DIAND as it proceeded to form "district councils" within its administrative districts. The process commenced

in 1969 as the Department sought to adjust to the newly evident fact of widespread lack of support among Indians for departmental policies. The councils were simply meetings of the chiefs of each band in the district, called for the purpose of giving advice to DIAND. In many cases in British Columbia DIAND districts were coterminous, or nearly so, with traditional linguistic group areas — in these cases the district councils had the effect of promoting a new level of communication and awareness within tribal groups. The Union's structure had a similar effect, since the Union used, with a few adjustments, the DIAND districts as the basis for its council of chiefs structure.

Several of the district councils quickly assumed an identity and outlook of their own and began to meet on their own without DIAND officials present. As a district council came to see itself as separate from DIAND and as having an Indian orientation, it would usually start referring to itself as a "tribal council." Initially, indeed, "tribal" connoted "Indian-ness" and autonomy from government, rather than any necessary confining of membership to bands of one linguistic group. The Williams Lake District Council, for example, composed of bands from three linguistic groups (Shuswap, Chilcotin and Carrier), became the Caribou Tribal Council in the early seventies — and proceeded to occupy the DIAND district office in protest against various DIAND actions.

Even within the tribal councils composed of more than one linguistic group, however, the linguistic groups retained a clear notion of their identity. As land claims preparation became a major activity at the district level it was the linguistic groups which in almost every case came to prepare individual claims. Land claims preparation, along with development of various activities unique to linguistic groups, such as native language programs, provided increasing incentive to linguistic groups to ignore DIAND district boundaries and to form their own exclusive tribal councils. During the 1977-1983 period, however, both district and tribal councils existed, with some accepting DIAND boundaries and others ignoring them. The term "district/tribal councils" was commonly used during the period to refer to both types together.

The emergence of tribal councils served to weaken the Union, with this circumstance especially evident in the west/central and north coast areas. There were six district/tribal councils in these areas. Four of them were tribal councils: the Nishga, the Gitksan-Carrier, the North Coast and the Nuuchahnulth Tribal Councils. In 1977 they were the most active and well organized in the province. In each case the local leaders believed in principles that stood in opposition to those embodied in the

Union. Unity of status and non-status Indians was accepted; the notion of a centralized province-wide organization with a large bureaucracy was resisted; and, clearly, the notion of the band as the only grass roots community or constituency was rejected. In consequence, in all four cases all or most of the bands in the tribal councils withdrew from the Union as the tribal councils developed. Moreover, it was precisely among these tribal councils that land claims preparation proceeded more expeditiously than anywhere else in the province. The other two councils, the Kwawkwewlth and Terrace District Councils, remained as district councils. (The former, however, had styled itself a tribal council for a brief period, but had reverted to "district council" upon failing to maintain unity and autonomy from DIAND.) In both these cases a number of bands continued to support the Union and to rely upon the Union to prepare a land claim.

In general, then, the emergence of strong tribal councils was initially a phenomenon of the west/central and north coast areas, with a corresponding weakening of Union support in these areas. A further factor in the decline of the Union in the west/central and north coast areas was the continued strength of the Native Brotherhood. From 1977 onwards the Brotherhood often acted as the general spokesman for west/central and north coast Indians and in effect filled the political gap left by the weakening of the Union in these areas. In general, too, the new distribution of support indicated the continued existence of the two pan-Indian outlooks in the province.

### *Co-ordinating Forums*

One new political organization appeared in the province during the collapse of the two major organizations. This was the Alliance of British Columbia Indian Bands, formed in 1976 and composed initially of the Musqueam and Squamish Bands in the Vancouver area and the Westbank Band in the Okanagan Valley. Ultimately the Alliance expanded to include seven more south coast bands. Joe Mathias of the Squamish Band and Delbert Guerin of the Musqueam Band were the major spokesmen for the organization. Opposition to the Union was a major unifying factor within the Alliance. As the Union's support came to rest largely on the south coast and in the interior the Alliance's support grew in these same areas. The Alliance proved unable to overcome internal divisions, and a number of bands withdrew during 1982. From 1977 until 1982, however, the Alliance was accepted as one of the provincial organizations.

During 1976 there had been rather frequent personal contact in Vancouver among those who had been, or remained, active in the various organizations. Over the preceding years a particular pattern of Indian meeting places had emerged in the city. BCANSI members used certain hotels, notably the Nelson Place Hotel, while Union supporters used others, primarily the Marble Arch Hotel. These places provided not only assured hospitality to Indians but also an assurance to politically active Indians that they would encounter whichever of their political friends and allies happened to be in town at the same time. Moreover, now that the head offices of both BCANSI and the Union had been closed, the places provided political nerve centres for the prominent political figures, who continued to spend much of their time in Vancouver.

Politically active Indians did on occasion make forays into hotels of the other camp (or, more precisely, into the bars of the hotels), but usually displayed as they did a jocular bravado, as though they were entering into enemy territory, and a feigned deference towards any members of the other camp whom they encountered. One critical encounter took place in January 1976. Bill Wilson came upon George Watts in the Nelson Place bar. From this happenstance meeting developed a lasting personal friendship and subsequently an important political partnership, for Watts' Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council became the first tribal council to align itself with the United Native Nations.

Among those in personal contact were the leaders of the Native Brotherhood, the UNN and the Alliance. Wilson and Joe Mathias had attended law school together, and both were strong admirers of Ed Newman, President of the Brotherhood. The leaders of the three groups met formally in early 1977 to consider ways in which land claims action and other Indian concerns could be co-ordinated at the provincial level. In March they publicly announced the formation of The British Columbia Coalition of Native Indians, and invited the Union to affiliate as the fourth member. The Union, through Philip Paul, rejected the invitation, stating that those who had failed to destroy the Union from within were now seeking to destroy it from without. In turn the Coalition spokesmen stated that the Union no longer represented a majority of either Indian bands or the Indian population. Soon the Coalition spokesmen demanded that federal funds for status Indians be distributed to the Union and other groups on the basis of popular support among status Indians. Over the next four years the Union found itself having to fend off a series of similar demands.

The Coalition was not intended to be a new organization, much less to

have any staff or power of its own. It was intended simply to allow the three organizations to co-ordinate their activities and to gain strength through common action. The Coalition could thus be termed a "co-ordinating forum." It was the first such entity to appear in the post-1969 period.

As soon as George Manuel became president of the Union, he proceeded to arrange a formal method of consultation between the Union and DIAND in British Columbia. In 1976, in good part as the result of pressure from Manuel as president of the National Indian Brotherhood, the federal cabinet had issued a policy directive to all federal departments that Indian organizations (that is, status Indian organizations) be consulted on all policy matters affecting status Indians. The "secretariat" was now established to provide this consultation between the Union and DIAND. It would consist simply of periodic meetings between Union leaders and senior DIAND officials. Before the first meeting of the secretariat, in July 1978, several other organizations (the Indian Homemakers, the Native Women's Society,<sup>8</sup> the Native Brotherhood and the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council) approached either DIAND or the Union asking to participate along with the Union. The Union, however, took the position that it could represent the interest of all status Indians in the province. The continuing challenge to the Union was henceforward very much influenced by the Union's monopoly position in the secretariat and by DIAND's support for this monopoly.

Little came of the British Columbia Coalition of Native Indians. Its founders continued to believe that land claims activities required co-ordination at the province-wide level, and that the groups not represented by the Union should have a collective voice in dealing with government. They concluded that these purposes could not be achieved without direct grass roots participation by both status and non-status Indians. They believed that tribal groups (that is, linguistic groups) were the appropriate grass roots entity. In the late summer of 1978 they invited all linguistic groups (which they referred to as "aboriginal tribal groups") to send spokesmen to meet with them in Prince George in October. The Coalition leaders were successful in obtaining funding from DIAND for the meeting.

The Coalition leaders gave no initial thought to inviting the Union to the Prince George meeting. DIAND officials in Ottawa, however, wished

<sup>8</sup> The British Columbia Native Women's Society was formed in the early seventies. Its centre of support has been in the interior around Kamloops.

the Union to be represented, and the Coalition leaders agreed to allow the Union to send two delegates. The Ottawa officials, moreover, urged the Union to step forward to act, along with the three Coalition groups, as co-sponsor of the meeting. The Union refused to be associated with the meeting. As Manuel explained:

The conference is being organized on a tribal basis and there isn't any recognition of Bands and Band Councils as the governing structures with authority. The UBCIC structure recognizes status Indians by way of their chiefs, and our goal is to strengthen Band Councils. What concerns us is that the delegates to this conference are not going to be chiefs, they are just going to be Band members. A Tribal negotiating structure is being proposed and this appears to be a strategy to break down the authority of Band Councils. The Government's funding of this conference indicates a shift in the Minister's position because he is suddenly recognizing tribes rather than Band Councils. This is in direct contradiction to the structure recognized in the Indian Act, and is in complete opposition to the UBCIC's goals. Strong Band Councils are going to be at the heart of our land claims and we are very concerned that our work not be undermined by this tribal structure.<sup>9</sup>

The motives of DIAND relating to the Prince George meeting, and the effect of DIAND's funding it, remained matters of disagreement. Union officials saw DIAND as having actively promoted the conference in order to weaken the Union. Those who organized the conference saw DIAND as having at last responded to the realities of Indian politics in British Columbia, but as seeking at the same time to shore up the Union by putting it in touch with the realities and by putting it in a position to influence and claim credit for the new developments.

The Prince George meeting agreed to form the Aboriginal Council of British Columbia to replace the Coalition and to consist of two delegates, one status and one non-status, from each tribal group. Its purpose would be to co-ordinate land claims activity by the individual tribal groups. The founding meeting for "AbCo" was scheduled for May 1979 in Prince Rupert. Shortly after the Prince George meeting the Union held a special general assembly to discuss, among other matters, the question of AbCo. A resolution that the Union participate in the new organization was defeated. As Manuel later stated:

When this resolution was put forward on the floor of the assembly, there was a long and earnest discussion and debate as to our participation. Concern

<sup>9</sup> "Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs' Position on the Aboriginal Tribal Council Meeting (as explained by George Manuel at the Secretariat Meeting on Friday, September 22, 1978)." Typescript.

for our own future was paramount. When the final vote was called there was one vote in favour, two abstentions, and the rest against. . . .<sup>10</sup>

The Prince Rupert meeting formed itself into the Aboriginal Council. Twenty-two tribal groups were represented — each by one status and one non-status Indian, thus marking the first time that spokesmen from the two categories had participated together in forming a province-wide entity. The goals put forward at the Prince George meeting were reaffirmed in this meeting. AbCo was not to become an organization itself, but was to provide a forum in which tribal groups (i.e., linguistic groups) could come together to exchange information and to present a common voice for those Indians who believed in status/non-status unity and who believed tribal groups were the primary communities within the Indian population. AbCo thus provided a direct challenge to the Union. At the time of the Prince Rupert meeting, however, the challenger did not appear overly substantial, for only two of the established tribal councils — the Nuu-chah-nulth and the North Coast — were represented officially and many of the delegates had been selected by the meeting's organizers rather than by any decision of the tribal group. It was also evident that few of the delegates were well informed about land claims or aboriginal rights more generally.

### *Conflict and Hostility*

The United Native Nations grew rapidly during 1977 and 1978. Some 1,200 persons attended the 1977 assembly while 2,200 attended in the following year. George Watts was now playing an active leadership role in the UNN and serving as a prominent reminder that one major tribal council had not only, like others, left the Union, but had also aligned itself with the hitherto non-status political organization. The attendance of Sophie Pierre, leader of the Kootenay Area Council<sup>11</sup> and also a member of the Union's council of chiefs, implied, however, that not all Indians felt impelled to choose either the Union or the UNN over the other. Indeed, the view that the two organizations could co-exist peaceably, with overlapping support but different policy emphases, was almost certainly widespread within the Indian population.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, George Manuel to Fred Walchi, Director-General, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, British Columbia Region, 19 March 1979.

<sup>11</sup> The Kootenay Area Council uses the term "area" rather than "tribal" because only part of the tribal group lives in British Columbia — the other portion lives across the border in the United States.

Among those most active in the day-to-day leadership of each organization such a view was absent. The leaders of each organization regarded those of the other with increasing hostility and very often intense personal antipathy. Until 1975 there had been much social and personal contact between those active in the two organizations. After 1977 these contacts were virtually non-existent. The pattern of reciprocal hostility together with the lack of communication served to define two camps: the Union was on one side, supported by the Indian Homemakers; on the other side were the UNN, together with the Native Brotherhood, the Alliance and the active coastal tribal councils. Leaders from one camp at times refused even to speak to leaders of the other when passing on the street. Forays into hotels of the other camp became less frequent in Vancouver, and were rarely made alone. On occasion George Manuel, Bill Wilson and Ed Newman each made attempts to restore personal contact with individuals on the other side, but felt themselves rebuffed.

The Union did not succeed in re-establishing its original extensive support, and even after the reappearance of the organization its support continued to decline. After 1976, as before, the Union accomplished little in the way of political education and mobilization at the local level. The chiefs had little incentive, let alone the means and skills, to create new structures or roles for individual Indians. For the chiefs to provide new information and to encourage activism would have been to threaten their own positions. The great majority of chiefs perceived the Union as demanding little more than their periodic attendance at Union meetings. The circumstances were different within BCANSI and the UNN, for these organizations provided new structures and roles among a people that had previously had no political organization whatever. The locals held frequent membership meetings and provided many executive and committee positions for those willing to fill them. Since membership in BCANSI and the UNN was voluntary, the members were for the most part persons open to new ideas and willing to devote themselves to the organization. BCANSI and the UNN came to express a new and vital political identity capable of providing support and legitimacy to its provincial leadership. The Union, based on an established and conservative local leadership, found itself ill-equipped to respond to the new ideals and new circumstances which became evident after 1976.

The most explicit method used by bands to show their lack of membership in the Union was a formal resolution passed by the band council. A number of such band council resolutions had been passed by the summer of 1978, most of them by bands in the Alliance and the major coastal



tribal councils — there were at least twenty-five such bands, including many of the large bands. Some thirty additional bands, many of them very small, had taken no part in Union activity since 1975. By this time, then, no more than 140 of the 194 bands in the province could be said to support the Union.

Support from a number of the 140 bands was expressed in no more than attendance by the chief at Union meetings; such attendance was not a reliable indicator of popular support, since the motive could well be simply to have a free trip to one of the major centres in the province. The Union paid airfare, hotel and meal costs of each delegate. (Attendance at UNN assemblies was a somewhat more reliable indicator of support for that organization, since most delegates paid their own way and tents were the only free accommodation.) The Union, however, continued to claim much more support than it had. For example, in a letter to the Minister of Indian Affairs on 16 October 1980 Manuel claimed that 179 bands supported the Union; and, when writing to the Minister declining to sponsor the Prince George meeting, Manuel referred to “our 186 member bands.”<sup>12</sup>

The Union’s strategy was to maintain the impression in Ottawa within DIAND and among MPs that the Union remained strong in British Columbia. Particular efforts were made to obtain support from the three opposition Progressive Conservative MPs from British Columbia who were members of the House of Commons Committee on Indian Affairs. As it happened, each of these three represented an interior riding in which the Union did remain fairly strong. (Opposition NDP members of the Committee, on the other hand, were from coastal areas where Union support was weak or lacking entirely.) While the Union’s efforts were apparently of some success in Ottawa, their only effect in British Columbia was to further embitter the feelings of the other camp and to cause the leaders of the other organizations (none of whom, it will be recalled, had the Union’s connections or contacts in Ottawa) to intensify their pressure upon DIAND for the same sort of access and funding the department was granting to the Union.

DIAND officials in British Columbia faced a dilemma. On the one hand the federal cabinet directive of 1976 seemed to instruct them to consult all major groups representing status Indians; on the other, any attempts to do so would be objected to by the Union. In turn, the Oppo-

<sup>12</sup> In reporting on its 1977 activities to the provincial Registrar of Societies, as required by the Societies Act, the Union claimed 213 members — that is, nineteen more than the number of bands in the province.

sition Conservative MPs could be expected to take up the Union's cause, thus embarrassing the Liberal Minister in charge of their department. During the early summer of 1979, Fred Walchli, the director-general of DIAND's British Columbia Region, instructed his officials in the various districts to consult each band to determine which provincial organization the band regarded as its representative. At the same time Walchli began to consider ways to escape the dilemma. The survey of bands indicated that 102 bands, which contained 48 percent of the status Indian population, were in support of the Union. The results could not be taken as fully decisive, however, since fourteen of the 102 bands, containing 7 percent of the population, were also supporters of the Native Brotherhood, and seven bands also supported the UNN.

### *The Regional Forum*

Walchli's next step was to invite five Indians, each of whom was well known as a successful leader at the band level, to the regular meeting of DIAND district managers held in December 1979. Of the five bands represented by the Indians, one was Nishga, one belonged to the Alliance, one supported the UNN, and two supported the Union. At the meeting Walchli proposed that a "regional forum" be established in which the organizations not represented in the secretariat could meet with DIAND officials on a regular basis. The five Indians were favourably disposed to the proposal, as were the district managers.

Immediately after the meeting Walchli invited the Alliance, the Homemakers, the Native Women, the Native Brotherhood and the nineteen district/tribal councils to meet with him to implement the proposal. (The Union leaders had been informed of Walchli's proposal, but stated that they wished to continue with the secretariat and would not take part in a new forum. The UNN, still officially regarded as representing only non-status Indians, was not invited.) The invitation began by asserting that progress had been made in consultation, as in the secretariat, but went on to state:

Despite such progress, however, there is still a serious communication gap with respect to those District/Tribal Councils and four other provincial groups for whom no Regional mechanism has been developed. With this in mind, a Regional "forum" is now proposed whereby District/Tribal Councils and Provincial groups may be directly and significantly involved in the decision-making process by means of regular meetings with the Regional Director General concerning management of Indian Affairs.

The Alliance, the Native Women and the Native Brotherhood accepted the invitation, as did eight coastal and three interior district/tribal councils. The Indian Homemakers did not accept the invitation. At the meeting, which took place on 30 January 1980, the delegates resolved unanimously to accept the principle of the regional forum, to take the idea back to their organizations or councils for discussion and to meet again one month later. The three organizations and fifteen district/tribal councils were represented at the February meeting, which was taken as the official beginning of the Forum.

One of the first acts of the Forum was to pass a resolution inviting the UNN to take part in the Forum. Henceforward the UNN participated fully. At about this same time two of the Union's four vice-presidents, Ray Jones (Gitksan) and Ernie Willie (Kwawkgewlth) parted ways with the Union. Jones became chairman of the Gitksan-Carrier Tribal Council; Willie became chairman of the Kwawkgewlth District Council. Both men represented their councils in the Forum. Soon afterwards, the Homemakers, who had until this time been closely involved with the Union, announced that they had ceased to be associated with the Union, and sent representatives to several Forum meetings (although subsequently the Homemakers withdrew from the Forum also).

Three major goals were now pursued within the Forum by the Indians. First, they sought to demonstrate popular support for the Forum by having band councils pass supporting resolutions. By the end of 1980 just over 100 band councils, representing considerably more than half the status Indian population, had produced such resolutions.

Second, the Indians took control of the agenda and conduct of Forum meetings. A visit of the Minister, John Munro, to Vancouver in May 1980 provided the opportunity for several developments. Munro, advised by Walchli, had agreed to meet both Union leaders and the Forum. Until this time, Walchli had chaired all Forum meetings and intended to continue to do so. At the scheduled beginning of the Forum meeting, however, Walchli was still with Munro, who was spending more time than expected with the Union leaders. When Walchli's assistant began to chair the Forum meeting, Joe Mathias and Wilson promptly moved to have Delbert Guerin, chief of Musqueam (in whose hall the meeting was being held) become chairman. Had Walchli been present as chairman no thought of replacing him would have arisen. As it was, the practice of having an Indian chairman began and was maintained from that time on.

The meeting was especially well attended because of Munro's presence.

The Minister, accompanied by the Deputy Minister and the Minister's new special assistant (who had until his appointment been the Union's senior staff official) seemed, initially, to have little notion of what the Forum actually was.<sup>13</sup> The proceedings consisted largely of forthright statements to the Minister about the nature of Indian politics in the province, as well as demands that he and his officials recognize the Forum as a major voice of British Columbia Indians. The Minister agreed to take the Forum seriously and to be available in Ottawa for meetings with Forum leaders.

In subsequent Forum meetings all DIAND officials and non-Indian observers were periodically requested to leave to permit "in camera" discussion. A four-member steering committee, composed of Indians, was established to arrange meetings and set agendas. George Watts was appointed as Forum "co-ordinator," a stenographer was hired, and office space for the co-ordinator and stenographer was rented. The co-ordinator assumed charge of all records and paper work related to the Forum.

The third goal pursued by the Forum was to have both DIAND and the Secretary of State's Department cease recognizing the Union as the sole recipient of funds intended for status Indians, and instead grant such funds to district/tribal councils and provincial organizations on the basis of proportional popular support. In early 1981 both departments held separate meetings in Vancouver to which all district/tribal councils and organizations were invited. Union spokesmen attended both meetings. Both meetings accepted the principle that they were appropriately constituted to advise the departments. Both voted to approve having funds allocated to district/tribal councils and provincial organizations on the basis of popular support as demonstrated in band council resolutions. Thus a band having, say, 1.7 percent of the status Indian population would direct 1.7 percent of allocated funding to the district/tribal council or provincial organization of its choice.

The new procedure was first applied to allocation of DIAND's "policy, research, and consultation" funding for the 1981-82 fiscal year. Of the 194 bands, 154 submitted resolutions by the deadline. The resulting percentage allocation of the funding was:<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I spoke to two of the officials accompanying the Minister. One of them stated that he himself had not heard of the Forum before that morning, and the other that he had understood beforehand that the Forum was concerned with economic rather than political matters.

<sup>14</sup> DIAND, B.C. Region, "1981-82 Policy, Research and Consultation Fund" (mimeo., June 1981). In addition, as had not been anticipated, several of the resolutions directed funding to AbCo (0.7 percent) and to the Forum (1.9 percent).

Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs	23.50
Alliance	4.10
Native Women's Society	.04
Indian Homemakers Association	.01
Native Brotherhood	2.00
District/Tribal Councils (total)	49.00
No allocation	19.00

Forum supporters regarded these results as a clear victory and as a final vindication of their efforts since 1977. Similar results were obtained for other funding allocation by both departments for the 1981-82 and 1982-83 fiscal years, although for the latter there was a small decline in Union support and a corresponding increase in district/tribal council support. The bands which supported the Union were all located on the south coast and in the interior.

The question of responsibility, and motives, in creating the Forum became, and remains, controversial. Union spokesmen, along with several of the British Columbia Conservative MPs on the Commons Indian Affairs Committee (in particular Frank Oberle), accused Walchli of creating the Forum as a method of weakening the Union and looked upon the Forum as a house organ of DIAND in British Columbia — and these accusations continue to be made in 1983.

Clearly Walchli was instrumental in creating the Forum — it was even referred to in the beginning as “Walchli's Forum” (“for want of a better term” as Joe Mathias once remarked during a Forum meeting). The real question is whether Walchli created the Forum out of thin air or whether he was responding to substantial and legitimate demands from Indian leaders. It is appropriate to observe first of all that the Forum was created only after the Union's decline in support had become evident and after the Union had made clear that it was unwilling to allow other groups to participate in the secretariat.

The fact that the Forum combined in its structure the principal features of the Coalition and the Aboriginal Council (that is, representation of provincial organizations and of district/tribal councils) suggests that the Forum was not a casual DIAND contrivance. That the Forum was quickly accepted by major Indian leaders and organizations, and promptly taken over by them, indicates that the Forum was in accord with major Indian demands. Forum leaders, indeed, claimed that the Forum was their creation, since they viewed Walchli as having copied the Coalition and AbCo, which they had undoubtedly created, and since

they viewed the development of the Forum after the first few meetings as having been in their hands.

Aside from representing a continuation of the well-established animosity between the Union and its opponents, the differing viewpoints about the Forum rested on differing views about the fundamental questions in Indian politics. The Forum was supported by those who believed that the distinction created by the Indian Act between status and non-status Indians should be ignored; that tribal groups and tribal councils, rather than bands and band councils as set out in the *Indian Act*, should be the primary decision-making bodies; and that the federal government should recognize and respond to the social and political diversity among British Columbia Indians rather than allowing one minority organization to have a monopoly over access and funding. The Forum was bitterly opposed by those who took the opposite points of view.

### *Continuing Skirmishes*

In addition, the controversy over the Forum was obviously related to the financial interests of the competing organizations — and to the financial security of their leaders, since the funding provided full-time salaries for them as well as for employees. The main effect of the new allocation was to reduce the Union's funding to match its popular support and to initiate funding to district/tribal councils. The Native Brotherhood was not much affected, for, alone among the provincial organizations, it had always obtained much of its income from membership fees. The UNN was not affected either, since it remained the recipient of all funding for non-status Indians. Indeed, in the summer of 1981 Bobby Manuel, then a Union vice-president, and a number of Union followers attended the UNN assembly in Kamloops, took out memberships, and supported the presidential candidacy of a former UNN vice-president then working with the Union. The takeover attempt failed, as the assembly re-elected the incumbent president, Bob Warren, who had assumed the presidency upon Wilson's retirement the previous year.

By this time, however, the UNN was gaining increased, and genuine, support from status Indians. In addition to the Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council, each of the other major coast tribal councils — the Nishga, the Gitksan-Carrier, and the North Coast — had now aligned themselves with the UNN and were represented at UNN assemblies by their leaders. In 1980 the UNN was admitted to membership in the Native Council of Canada, and in 1982 Bill Wilson was elected vice-president of the

NCC, the first status Indian to gain office in the organization. In 1980 Bobby Manuel had been defeated in his attempt to become president of the National Indian Brotherhood. Del Riley, of Ontario, the new NIB president, attended meetings of both AbCo and the Forum in British Columbia. In short, the UNN came to have more prominent representation in Ottawa than did the Union — and the Union's connections were further weakened with George Manuel's retirement as Union president in late 1981. (Bobby Manuel was elected as the new president.)

Having lost out in the competition for substantial popular support in British Columbia, the Union leaders redoubled their efforts in Ottawa and in the news media. The charge that Walchli had unilaterally created the Forum was repeated, the alleged motive being to punish the Union — especially for the Union's opposition to the federal Liberal government's proposals for the new Canadian constitution. (Actually Walchli had supported the Union's being given a substantial government grant in 1980 for the purpose of preparing counterproposals. Shortly after receiving the grant, however, the Union announced that it would not be preparing such proposals; this action served to weaken the remaining support for the Union within DIAND.)

The fact that a majority of bands with a majority of the status Indian population no longer supported the Union was explained by the Union leaders as resulting from DIAND's having bribed anti-Union bands with more financial support than they were entitled to. No general evidence was, or, indeed, could be, produced to sustain this accusation — much less to explain how so many Indians could be bought off so quickly and uniformly with what must in any case have been relatively small amounts, while the Union leaders could resist the same fate despite the millions the Union had itself received from DIAND. Furthermore, the district/tribal council whose bands have received the lowest per capita funding in recent years has been the North Coast Tribal Council, whose bands have been strong supporters of AbCo and the Forum.

Union leaders, and band spokesmen in Union areas, gained considerable and continuing publicity in charging Walchli and his officials with ignoring poverty-stricken reserves and with allowing economic development projects to further enrich a few already wealthy Indians. During the summer of 1981 an ad hoc group calling itself the "Concerned Aboriginal Women," and composed of former and current Union employees and women from Union bands, occupied DIAND's regional headquarters in Vancouver to protest poverty on their reserves. Male Union leaders acted as spokesmen for the group.

Union leaders, however, did gain considerable popular support among Indians in all parts of the province for two major policy initiatives begun in 1980. Wayne Christian, chief of the Spallumcheen Band of Shuswap at Enderby, played a key role in both. One initiative was to publicize and challenge the removal of Indian children to non-Indian homes by the provincial Ministry of Human Resources; in this connection Christian organized a well-publicized march upon the Vancouver home of the Minister of Human Resources. The other, more substantial, initiative concerned the new constitution. From the beginning the Union took an active stance on the issue and lobbied vigorously in Ottawa, in Europe and in London. The Union, in fact, was more active in opposing the new constitution than any other Indian organization in Canada.

With the passage of the new constitution, the question arose as to whether the AbCo/Forum leaders and Union leaders could unite to prepare a common position for presentation at the required constitutional conference on aboriginal rights. Immediately after the constitution was passed, Ed Newman, George Watts and James Gosnell, chairman of the Nishga Tribal Council, went to the Union's head office to meet with Bobby Manuel and other Union leaders. (The UNN was not informed of the meeting and as a result the UNN leaders felt some temporary resentment.) It was agreed to hold a meeting of all district/tribal councils and provincial organizations to seek a unified approach on aboriginal rights. The meeting, which included the UNN, took place in Vancouver in January 1982. It voted to accept the Nishga policy statement on aboriginal rights as applicable to all British Columbia. When the constitutional conference took place in March 1983, however, the British Columbia Indian who played the most prominent part was Bill Wilson, in his role as vice-president of the Native Council of Canada.

### *Conclusion*

A decade ago Indian politics in British Columbia was based upon the division of status and non-status Indians and the existence of large, centralized organizations. This pattern was common to most other regions of Canada. Today in British Columbia an entirely new pattern exists. Unity of status and non-status Indians is a widely accepted ideal; and tribal groups are generally accepted as the basic political unit. This pattern is unique to British Columbia. It was developed by Indians themselves and marks a departure from the principles set out by Parliament in the Indian Act — for the two fundamental principles set out in the Act are separa-



tion of status and non-status Indians and establishment of band councils as the basic decision-making unit within Indian society. Those Indians who sought to maintain these two principles fought bitterly but unsuccessfully against acceptance of the new ideals. Paradoxically, those who wished to maintain the principles imposed by the Indian Act sought to depict the advocates of the new ideals as following the dictates of government officials.

The unchanging feature of Indian political activity since 1969, and before, has been pursuit of the aboriginal land claim as the paramount goal. Perhaps the most telling measure of the appropriateness of the new arrangements lies in the fact that the province-wide organization established to present a land claim failed to do so, while many of the tribal councils have now succeeded in doing so.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Sixteen land claims have been formally presented to the federal government. Most of these have been presented by tribal groups, but several have been presented by individual bands.