

Sechelt Women and Self-Government

THERESA M. JEFFRIES

“The people of Sechelt upheld the belief that the right and privilege of determining our destiny must remain within our community.”

SXIXXAY, a mother and grandmother whose English name is Theresa Jeffries, is a member of the Sechelt band council. She holds the distinction of being the first member of her band to graduate from high school. Born in Sechelt, she returned in 1987 after an absence of thirty-six years. She spent twenty years in Prince Rupert, where one of her many jobs was for the Department of Indian Affairs as a cultural consultant. In her sixteen years in the Vancouver area she worked with a number of native organizations and was an active volunteer seeking solutions to social and political issues affecting aboriginal people. Throughout that time she was well known for her own struggle to legally regain her birthright as an Indian.

For the past three years, Theresa has worked as an employment counsellor in Sechelt and actively participates in the Sechelt people's struggle to control and direct their own destinies.

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In October 1986, my band, the Sechelt Indian band, became the only legislated self-governing band in the province of British Columbia when federal legislation was passed restoring ownership and government of Sechelt reserve lands to the Sechelt people. In 1987, the province passed the complementary Sechelt Indian Government District Enabling Act to extend municipal benefits and provincial home-owner grants to the new Indian district — it should be noted, however, that the powers exercised by the Sechelt Indian Government District flow from the band and not from the province — and subsequently enabled Sechelt lands to be registered within the provincial land title system.

I have written this article to explain to you what this means to the Sechelt people and more specifically to Sechelt women. My name is Sxixixay. I am from the village of Sechelt, Eagle clan, and daughter of the late Sara Jeffries. Through my grandmother we go back as far as there is oral history. I want to take you on a journey. This journey will encompass our past, where we are today, and our hopes and aspirations for tomorrow.

Past

The concept of self-government is not new to the Sechelt. As a people we have been self-governing since the beginning of time. My ancestors were totally self-sufficient, utilizing the resources of the environment to keep the people gainfully employed in contributing to the maintenance of our community. We gathered and harvested our sustenance from the sea and the forest; we built our communal homes from the materials around us. There were teachers, political and spiritual leaders, healers, care-givers, and entertainers all within our community and all having been trained from birth in their roles and responsibilities.

The people of Sechelt were governed from within through a system of laws which was handed down from generation to generation. Decisions were made and witnessed by hereditary chiefs in the feast hall. While the chiefs were male, it was the responsibility of the women to raise, groom, and prepare the future chiefs. Women were thus the keepers of the culture and the teachers of the culture and influenced all that transpired in the Sechelt world.

Memories of my grandmother, Mollyann, and my great-grandmother, Tah, come to mind. My grandmother was born and raised in the village of Tsonai. She was married at fifteen and had fifteen children. It was the custom at that time for a man to have more than one wife.

The missionaries' zeal to Christianize forced my grandfather, Pah, to make a serious decision. He had to choose one wife. Fortunately for me, it was my grandmother. My grandmother and grandfather were extraordinary people in their own right. My grandfather was an orator and interpreter. He spoke for people on issues of importance in the feast hall, and acted as a translator from Sechelt into English. They were both a strong force in my life. My grandfather insisted that I complete my education. In those days it was almost unheard of for an Indian person to go beyond grade 8, but because of his support I was the first graduate of the Sechelt band.

My grandmother loved life. In addition to her own fifteen children she raised ten of her granddaughters. She was the first woman to work off reserve, but I remember her best in a more traditional role. She was a basket weaver *par excellence* and used to trade baskets to clothe us. In the spring, when it was time, we would gather the roots. We always looked forward to it because it was an occasion for teaching and an occasion for affirmation of the family and our traditions. She would teach us to recognize the right cedar trees, pinpoint the straight roots, and gather far enough

from the tree so that the tree would survive. Through stories and myths, she would teach us about our family, our history, and our responsibilities. It was always in the language of the Sechelt, and there was always a lesson to be learned.

Present

The threads which bind us to our past — our language, laws, culture, and traditions — have over time become tenuous. This is the result of government intervention and the breakdown of the family unit through residential schools. At five or six years of age children were taken from their families to be educated in church-run residential schools. In these schools, children were punished for speaking in their own language. Everything we respected was ridiculed. We were made to feel strangers in our own land. When we went home, often after eight years in that system, some of us couldn't talk to our parents. With the erosion of the language, culture, traditions, and self-esteem, we became dependent upon another government and systems which were meaningless to us. We were forced into compliance by legislation, specifically the Indian Act, and by its administrative arm, the Department of Indian Affairs.

The feast halls, laws, and system of hereditary chiefs were supplanted by duly elected chiefs and councillors. A patriarchal system was superimposed upon the matrilineal society of the Sechelt. Divisions were created within families and the community by government assuming the right to decree who would be recognized as being Indian. Parallel to this was the requirement that certain benefits or rights could only be granted after one had denied his or her ancestry. Acquisition of the right to vote, enter public drinking places, and pursue an education could only occur after an individual had been stricken from the government's list of registered Indians.

The government's treatment of women under the Indian Act was particularly devastating and tantamount to cultural genocide, because women were responsible for maintaining culture. If a woman chose to marry a non-Indian man, she was removed from government's list of registered Indians. Bear in mind that the definition of non-Indian included Indian men who had, at the hands of government, suffered loss of status. Upon marriage, the woman could no longer live in the community in which she was born, nor could she participate in any matters respecting the community. The final insult was upon death: neither she nor any of her children could be buried in a family plot on band land.

These actions of government served to create divisions not only in the community but within and between families. The responsibility of women

as guardians of the culture was, in essence, negated from the perspective of government.

In similar fashion, the government bequeathed Indian status upon women who married status Indian men. Even if the woman was Euro-Canadian by birth, she became recognized as Indian and became entitled to enjoy all rights, benefits, and privileges associated with Indian status.

I speak of this from personal experience. In 1963, I married an Indian man whose mother had lost her status upon marriage. I can recall the shock and disbelief I felt upon receipt of a "blue card" from government which stated that I was no longer "deemed to be Indian." Not able to accept that anyone should have the authority to alter my birthright, I became involved in a twenty-two-year quest for justice. In 1985 the Indian Act was revised, and although changes were partially retroactive, the Act continues to detrimentally affect the lives of many people.

Given all that has transpired, you will agree that there was ground and cause to accept the situation as futile and to suppose that the stereotypical images held of us as Indian people would endure. I will not deny that the life course of some people has been negatively altered by this sense of futility. Fortunately, the majority have accepted the past as gone and have become committed to meeting the challenges associated with removing the shackles placed on us by the federal government.

The people of Sechelt uphold the belief that the right and privilege of determining our destiny must rest within our community. Rather than making our community fit federal legislation, we have made the legislation fit our community. On June 24, 1988, a ceremony commemorating the achievement of self-government was hosted by the people of Sechelt.

What does self-government mean? Self-government emerges from Indian people. Our leaders can but express it and refine it by negotiation. Always, they must go back to whence it came, back to the people for approval or rejection. The Sechelt Band Act creates the band as a legal entity having the capacity, rights, powers, and privileges of a natural person. The provisions of this Act include the right to enter into contracts or agreements, to acquire and hold property or sell it, to expend or invest money, and to borrow money. All such powers and duties are carried out in accordance with the Sechelt band constitution. The concept of the band constitution allows us as the people of Sechelt to implement change at a pace chosen by us. It respects our autonomy as a people and enables us to be economically independent. Given that the constitution alone is fifty pages in length, I will only provide a thumbnail sketch of that which is encompassed.

In accordance with this new agreement, the Sechelt band has achieved a high degree of political and administrative autonomy. Decisions can be made without having to await a yea or nay from Ottawa. The ability to establish a membership code means that we can define ourselves in tribal terms, while the ability to control the disposition of Sechelt lands means that the land and resource base which form the foundation of the band economy are under our control. Possessing a rich land and resource base, the band is engaged in land development, specialty forest products manufacturing, gravel extraction, forestry, aquaculture, aircraft leasing, and operating a charter and scheduled airline.

Although encumbrances have been removed, the Sechelt band is very concerned that powers be exercised responsibly, particularly as they relate to non-Indians. Residents on band land who are not Sechelt participate and express their interests and concerns by way of an advisory council. The council does not have legislative powers. It is strictly an advisory body to the District Council.

The band, wishing to remain an integral part of the larger Sunshine Coast social, economic, and political culture, asked that the Sechelt Indian Government District become a full member of the Sunshine Coast Regional District. Through the District, the band takes its place at the regional table, participates in the politics and government of the region, and avails itself of the services of the Regional District.

You may be wondering to what extent the practice of self-government today parallels the traditional form of government of our ancestors. The likenesses are few, since what we have today is in essence an interpretation negotiated with the federal and provincial governments which takes into account today's realities. We are administered now by an elected council rather than by our families and clans under the laws of the feast hall. The language of government is English and not Sechelt. Our meetings are conducted more in accordance with parliamentary rules than traditional law. Our education is for the most part from the public system and not from the laps of our grandmothers. In order to feed and clothe our families, we rely on outside jobs rather than on the natural resources of the land. We recognize that sacrifices have been made. We recognize as well that what was fitting for Sechelt people one hundred years ago is not, in some instances, fitting to Sechelt people today. *What has not changed and cannot be altered is our distinct cultural identity.*

The role and responsibility of women as keepers of the culture remains in place. I discussed earlier the manner in which our language has been weakened. Now, largely through the efforts of women, our language is

being revived. It is said that once a language dies, so does the culture. We as a people have taken steps to strengthen the ties with our ancestors by strengthening our language and culture.

What I hope for my granddaughters is no different from what you wish for yours. It is my wish that together they will reap the benefits of our struggles. I hope they will learn to respect the differences found in ancestry, language, and traditions and will carry on working to advance common goals and aspirations for the benefit of all people.

The process of change that we, the Sechelt nation, have undertaken will not be an easy job for anyone. As a people, we must accept the difficulties that come with this process, including frustration, setbacks, and long periods of seemingly no progress. This process applies not only to the Sechelt but also to the people living on the outside communities. The erosion of the Sechelt lifestyle took decades, and it will take much time to rebuild a strong and dynamic community. The women will contribute much to the process by maintaining the traditions and continuing to train our sons and daughters to be worthy leaders.

We will remember the past so that mistakes are not repeated and all the best and strongest traditions are maintained. We will live fully in the present, seizing opportunities and growing stronger daily. We will look forward to tomorrow and to living a good life. At all times we will be thankful for the life and gifts that our Creator has given us.

It is an exciting time to be an aboriginal person, making so many seemingly impossible dreams come true. It is not too late to start implementing our visions. The best time to begin this journey is right now.

Our Story Not History

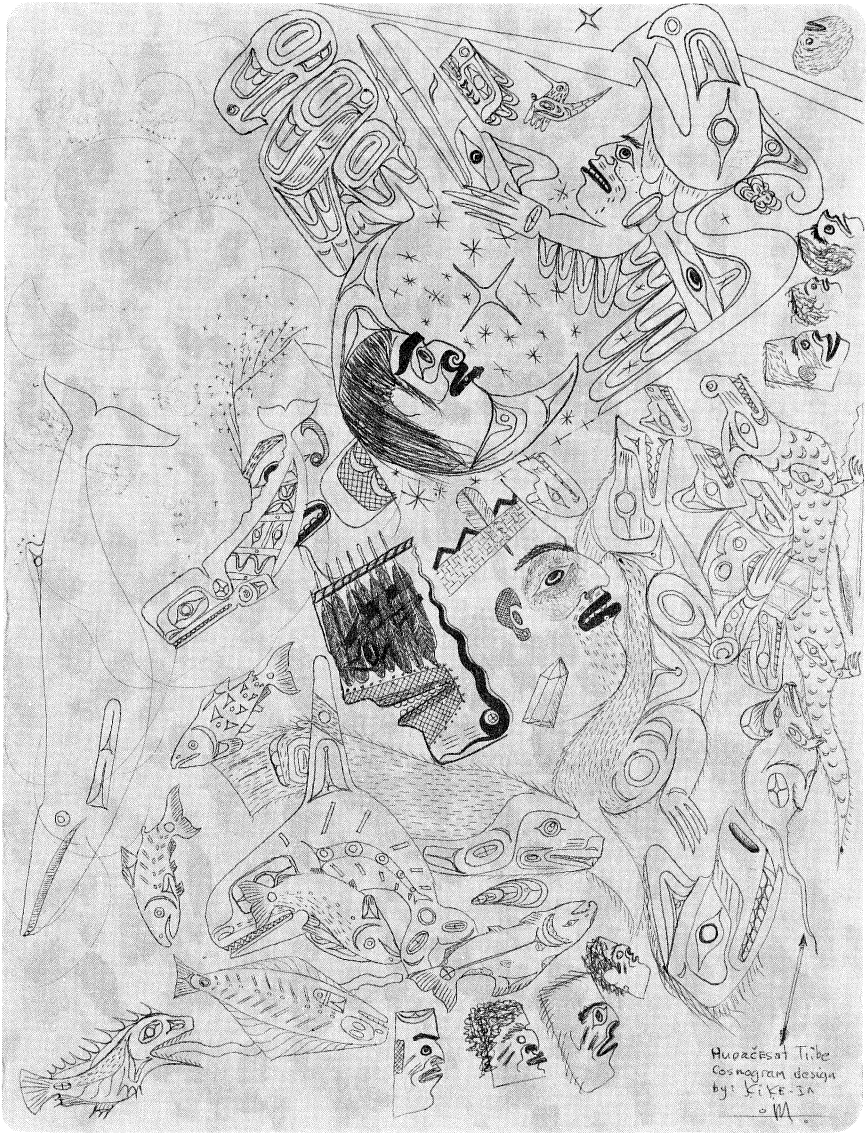
We are walking up the road
That leads to history.
Some are being led peacefully
Others are driven from within.

Some are dragged kicking and screaming.
Pulled forcefully
Down the road that leads
Away from their history.

A very few are changing history.
Redefining the meaning of history.
Making history responsible
To those caught in its sticky web.

Sadly some are prisoners of history,
Their very lives defined,
And their futures determined,
By a history compiled by their enemies.

Some are being made by history
Some are “making” history.



Life and Death and Life

Pen on Paper, by Ki-ke-in