

A "FANTASTIC RIGMAROLE":

*Deregulating Aboriginal Drinking in British Columbia, 1945-62**

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THE *PRINCE RUPERT DAILY NEWS* immediately dubbed the event the "Centennial Riot," and the word "riot" certainly stuck. The city was in the midst of celebrating mainland British Columbia's 100th birthday. Prince Rupert's seven beer parlours closed at 11:30 P.M. on 2 August 1958, and people spilled out into the streets. While accounts vary, just after midnight the RCMP apparently tried to arrest two women and one man, all Aboriginal, for fighting in the street. That action provoked a violent response from bystanders, and eventually some 1,000 people were battling among themselves and (especially) with police. Mayor Peter J. Lester read the Riot Act twice, and "the mob answered with more rocks and bottles." The police replied with "25 teargas bombs," which finally dispersed the crowd after more than two hours of conflict. About eighty people were detained and thirty-nine, twenty-four of whom were Aboriginal, were charged with various crimes. The fracas in Prince Rupert warrants more analysis than it received as it set in motion a series of events that helped achieve legal liquor equality for British Columbia First Nations peoples in 1962.¹

In this paper I seek to do two things. First, using British Columbia as the frame of reference, I emphasize that, after the Second World War, many Aboriginal people sought to reduce or eliminate the Indian Act's liquor restrictions as part of their campaign for equality without assimilation. Yet Aboriginals were not of one mind on liquor, and some

* I thank Bob McDonald, Craig Heron, and three anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions. I also want to acknowledge the generous assistance I received from the staff at the Union of BC Indian Chiefs in Vancouver. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Dorothy and Darrell Campbell. They were killed in a car accident in May 2003, just as I had begun to read the *Prince Rupert Daily News*.

¹ *Prince Rupert Daily News* (hereafter *Daily News*), 4 August 1958, 2, 1 (quotations), 5 August 1958, 1; *Vancouver Sun*, 5 August 1958, 1, 3.

believed that access to alcohol would accentuate social problems. Second, I put this liquor campaign within the context of a related federal-provincial dispute. The federal government sought the active cooperation of British Columbia to allow legal access to liquor for First Nations peoples. British Columbia, with its large Aboriginal population, long history of cantankerous relationships with Ottawa, and, after 1952, a temperance-leaning government, balked at such cooperation. Provincial leaders wanted federal officials to assume all responsibility for the consequences of giving "Indians" the right to drink. Caught in the middle, but hardly passive, were the various First Nations of British Columbia.

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Joy Leland chose the phrase "Firewater myth" to describe the conceptual tie between alcohol and Aboriginal peoples. The myth emphasized that they were "more constitutionally prone to develop an inordinate craving for liquor and to lose control over their behavior when they drink." Europeans used this metanarrative to construct a variety of negative images of the "Indian." Yet, as Peter Mancall has shown in his study of Aboriginal peoples and alcohol in early North America, the myth has little foundation in reality. Like others, Aboriginal peoples respond to alcohol in many ways. No genetic trait leads them to drink excessively, and they metabolize alcohol at the same rate as do non-Aboriginals. European stereotypes about Aboriginal drinking revealed concerns about excessive drinking in general and the place of Aboriginal peoples in society in particular. In European discourse the latter suffered from liquor because they were not civilized, and the implication was that they probably never would be civilized.²

² Joy Leland, *Firewater Myths: North American Indian Drinking and Alcohol Addiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies, 1976), 1; Peter C. Mancall, *Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) 6, 28. See also, Reginald G. Smart and Alan C. Osborne, *Northern Spirits: A Social History of Alcohol in Canada* (Toronto: Addiction Research Foundation, 1996), 106; A.D. Fisher, "Alcoholism and Race: The Misapplication of Both Concepts to North American Indians," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 24 (1987): 81-98. Many years ago Judge F.W. Howay argued that "the Indian of the Northwest Coast had no inborn desire for or knowledge of intoxicating liquor, and his first reaction to it was one of disgust." See F.W. Howay, "The Introduction of Intoxicating Liquors amongst the Indians of the Northwest Coast," in *Historical Essays on British Columbia*, ed. J. Friesen and H.K. Ralston (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 46. Jan Noel has argued that "we still do not know very much about the ways in which alcohol transformed native cultures. The evidence of traders, missionaries, and settlers on the deleterious effects of drink, at least in the early nineteenth century, tends to be overwhelming." Yet she adds that Aboriginal people and sailors had similar drinking patterns and that "Indians were not the only ones ... who fell prey to fiery fluids." See Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades before Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 183, 187-8.

Liquor restrictions were one of the many ways that the Canadian state regulated Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, they constituted one of the methods by which the state defined or created Aboriginal peoples, even those who technically were not status Indians. The 1876 Indian Act outlawed intoxicants for both status and non-treaty Indians. A non-treaty Indian included all those who followed "the Indian mode of life." The only authorized way for a First Nations person to use or possess alcohol was to become "enfranchised," that is, to become a Canadian citizen and to cease to be an Indian. Between 1857 and 1940, fewer than 500 volunteered to become Canadian citizens.³

In British Columbia, legislation pertaining to liquor and Aboriginal peoples had been on the books since the 1850s. As Renisa Mawani has argued, much of British Columbia's liquor legislation was directed at mixed-raced people, or "half-breeds," who could legally possess alcohol. They were often accused of supplying liquor to "real" Indians. With the implementation of government control after prohibition, the Government Liquor Act, 1921, denied liquor permits to individuals under the jurisdiction of the Indian Act. Legal paternalism placed Aboriginal peoples somewhere between minors (those under twenty-one) and interdicts (those denied access to alcohol because of excessive drinking). Unlike minors, however, no guarantees existed that the Aboriginal population would shed its dependent status.⁴

Still, despite the firewater myth and the paternalistic discourse, few would deny that alcohol has been linked to much pain and suffering in Aboriginal communities. In February 2001 the *Vancouver Sun* ran this front-page headline: "Sober Up, Top Chief Tells Native Leaders." Speaking to reporters after a First Nations health conference in Ottawa, Matthew Coon Come, then national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, implied that many Aboriginal leaders abused alcohol and that "we need to clean up our own act." While a number of his colleagues were critical of his comments, Nuu-chah-nulth chief Larry Baird supported him the next week at a First Nations summit in British Columbia.

³ *Statutes of Canada, 1876*, 39 Vic., c. 18 (The Indian Act, 1876), s. 4 (quotation), 79, 88; Olive P. Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 225. See also John L. Tobias, "Protection, Civilization, Assimilation: An Outline History of Canada's Indian Policy," in *As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows: A Reader in Canadian Native Studies*, ed. Ian A.L. Getty and Antoine S. Lussie (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1983), 41, 44; Nicholas J.S. Simons, "Liquor Control and the Native Peoples of Western Canada" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1992).

⁴ Renisa Mawani, "In Between and Out of Place: Racial Hybridity, Liquor, and the Law in Late 19th and Early 20th Century British Columbia," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 15 (2000): 12-6; British Columbia, *Statutes, 1921*, c.30 (Government Liquor Act) s. 11, 36, 57-60.

Baird received applause when he said that “alcohol is barred at functions” in his community. According to the reporter, Coon Come added that, despite their problems, Aboriginal peoples had to “have the power to decide what is best for themselves.”⁵

This final comment is a telling one and links the recent to the more distant past. While more than willing to confront the problem of alcohol abuse in Aboriginal communities, Coon Come argued that the solution had to come from within. First Nations peoples had to decide for themselves if and how alcohol should be part of their lives. This trite statement acquires more analytical interest when one considers that Canadian colonial and then federal law completely banned Aboriginal access to alcohol from the 1850s to the 1950s, with little apparent positive impact.⁶

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For Aboriginal peoples, the Second World War era was a watershed. In September 1939 Professor Thomas McIlwraith of the anthropology department at the University of Toronto organized and co-hosted a two-week Toronto-Yale University conference on “The North American Indian.” The conference included thirteen Aboriginal representatives who demanded that Aboriginal peoples, rather than government officials, academics, or missionaries, speak for themselves.⁷ More important, though, as Megan Schlase has emphasized, was the war itself. Thousands of Aboriginal veterans returned to a country that began to acknowledge the “flagrant inconsistencies between the aspirations of freedom and democracy and the manner in which Canada was treating

⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 28 February 2001, 1; 1 March 2001, A14; 8 March 2001, A9 (Baird).

⁶ Dickason, *Canada's First Nations*, 225. On alcohol abuse and Aboriginal peoples, see, for example, Brian Maracle, *Crazywater: Native Voices on Addiction and Recovery* (Toronto: Viking, 1993); Paul C. Whitehead and Michael J. Hayes, *The Insanity of Alcohol: Social Problems in Canadian First Nations Communities* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 1998); Janet Golden, “An Argument that Goes Back to the Womb: The Demedicalization of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome,” *Journal of Social History* 33 (Winter 1999): 269–98. Sherry Saggars has done some interesting comparative work between Canada and the South Pacific. See “Dry Damp and Wet Revisited: Alcohol Control Policies in Indigenous Australia and Canada,” *Australian Canadian Studies* 19 (2001): 83–104; and Saggars and Dennis Gray, *Dealing with Alcohol: Indigenous Usage in Australia, New Zealand and Canada* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷ R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, and Donald B. Smith, *Destinies: Canadian History since Confederation*, 4th ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Canada, 2000), 419–20; J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 220–2. The conference proceedings were published as C.T. Loram and T.F. McIlwraith, ed., *The North American Indian Today* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1943). In that volume, C.W.M. Hart of the University of Toronto Department of Sociology suggested that “it might decrease drunkenness among Indians, for example, if the Indian had to observe the same liquor laws as the rest of the population, instead of being put in a special category.” See “The Problem of Laws,” 251.

its own Native peoples." Aboriginal leaders, veterans – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – and others lobbied the federal government to change the Indian Act.⁸

In 1946 the federal government appointed a special joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons to examine the Indian Act. It met from May 1946 to June 1948, and two British Columbia-based Aboriginal groups appeared before the committee. The dominant group in the 1940s was the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia, which was formed in 1931. According to Paul Tennant "it opposed the singling out of Indians for prohibition against alcohol consumption." In August 1947 the *Native Voice*, the official organ of the Brotherhood, commented in an editorial on Native issues: "If the right to drink in a beer parlor signifies to us equality, then let us through an official voice decide for ourselves. Let's grow up." After the hearings had ended, Alfred Scow, business agent for the Brotherhood, published an article in the *Native Voice* with the headline, "Drinking Liquor Should Be Matter For Natives Themselves to Decide."⁹

The other major Aboriginal organization based in British Columbia was the North American Indian Brotherhood (NAIB), which at the time was largely a vehicle for Andrew Paull, a member of the Squamish Nation in North Vancouver. He had quit the Brotherhood in 1945 as a result of a dispute over some missing funds. Paull appeared twice before the committee, and when, at his second appearance, he was directly asked for his views, he said that Aboriginal peoples should have equal liquor rights and responsibilities. Back in British Columbia, he became a vocal critic of the liquor provisions of the Indian Act. As he put it a few years later: "Indians should have all the privileges under BC liquor laws and, of course, the same penalties as anyone else."¹⁰

Yet we should be cautious about these liquor endorsements for a couple of reasons. First, British Columbia Aboriginals were not of one mind when it came to liquor. The Native Brotherhood was not as united as the *Native Voice* made it seem. In the former's written and oral brief to

⁸ Megan Schlasse, "Liquor and the Indian Post WW II," *BC Historical News* 29 (Spring 1996): 26-7 (quotation).

⁹ Canada. Parliament. *Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons Appointed to Examine and Consider the Indian Act*, "Orders of Reference of the Senate," 16 May 1946, vol. 1, iii; Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990), 116-7 (quotation); *Native Voice*, August 1947, 8; January 1950, 3 (Scow).

¹⁰ Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples*, 89, 120-1. *Special Joint Committee*, 6 May 1947, vol. 4, 896-7. Paull appeared before the committee in June 1946 and May 1947, as did the Brotherhood. *Province*, 13 December 1951, 17 (quotation).

the joint special committee in 1947, liquor was not mentioned, and one wonders about the controversy behind that silence. Dr. Peter Kelly, a prominent member of the Brotherhood and a United Church minister on Vancouver Island, technically supported drinking rights for Aboriginal peoples; however, as for himself: "I do not drink nor do I approve of drinking." In a 1958 Brotherhood debate about liquor, he said that, while liquor was "no problem" for 60 per cent of his people, the other 40 per cent "went off the deep end."¹¹

Other Native leaders also expressed concern about alcohol and its effects. Consider, for example, Chief Simon Baker of the Squamish Nation. He was active in the Brotherhood and supported its campaign for liquor equality. Yet he was very aware of the effects of alcohol abuse on his people and himself. As a longshoreman he drank "to be one of the boys, the longshoremen. When the fishermen came in, it was another celebration. We would all go drinking." Pressured by his wife, Emily, he gave up drinking in the 1950s and joined Alcoholics Anonymous. As an elder in the 1980s, he was active in drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs for young people.¹²

Second, one must be more specific about liquor and Aboriginal women, although giving them a voice is difficult. For example, no Aboriginal women appeared before the joint committee, but that is not surprising since the Indian Act restricted their public activities. Until 1951, Aboriginal women could not vote, even on band-related issues. Moreover, until the 1980s, a status Indian woman who married a non-Indian lost her Aboriginal status. In contrast, a non-Aboriginal woman who married a status Indian was legally transformed and subject to the provisions of the Indian Act.¹³

While we do not hear from them, Aboriginal women were referred to at the joint committee. In June 1946 Major D.M. MacKay, the commissioner for Indian affairs in British Columbia, said that liquor impeded the progress of Indians and that its abuse often led "to the debauchery of Indian womanhood, domestic difficulties in the home and neglected

¹¹ *Special Joint Committee*, 1 May 1947, vol. 4, 764-72. The Brotherhood's brief to the special committee was reprinted in the May 1947 issue of the *Native Voice*. See also, *Native Voice*, March 1951, 16 (1st quotation); *Daily News*, 5 December 1958, 1 (2nd quotation).

¹² Verna K. Kirkness, ed., *Khot-La-Cba: The Autobiography of Simon Baker* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1994), 82 (quotation), 87, 172.

¹³ *Revised Statutes of Canada*, 1927, 18 Geo. 5, c. 98, ss. 2, 14, 157. In 1947 an "English war bride" who had married an Aboriginal veteran was fined for illegal possession of liquor. The woman, now legally an Indian, had obtained a liquor permit and purchased some beer, wine, and gin, which was not taken to a reserve. Her husband, who had served six years overseas, paid the twenty-five-dollar fine. See *Province*, 2 April 1947, 1.

children, with the consequent heavy cost to the people of Canada in the way of medical and hospitalization services." Reverend Ahab Spence, an Aboriginal teacher who worked on the Little Pine Reserve in Saskatchewan, added an important dimension in May 1947. While he admitted that his views might be "old-fashioned" and "unpopular," he opposed liquor for Aboriginal peoples. He suggested that the liquor issue be voted on by First Nations peoples across the country. He emphasized that, "since the family life of the Indian is tangled up in the whole question of liquor ... the Indian women on these reserves [should] be permitted to vote," the implication being that they would vote against liquor. A few days later J.P.B. Ostrander, inspector of Indian agencies in Saskatchewan, reinforced the gendered quality of alcohol abuse on reserves. He stated: "when an Indian arrives on his reserve drunk or with liquor his wife and children are the sufferers. They even suffer injury at that particular moment, but if he is a habitual drunkard they suffer throughout their lives while they are dependent on him." He admitted that "some white men" also abused women this way, but he still feared that if the Indian Act was "thrown wide open," the result "would be a lot of black eyes amongst the women," at least in the short term.¹⁴

Obviously we need to be wary of the paternalism embedded in this testimony. Implied in the comments of all three men was the belief that men knew what was best for women. Moreover, we can detect the vestiges of a colonial trope that is probably still best described as the "White man's burden." European men must save indigenous women from abuse at the hands of indigenous men.¹⁵

Still, directly or indirectly, alcohol abuse affected Aboriginal women. Sage Birchwater interviewed some eighty people to learn more about Chiwid, a member of the Tsilhqot'in people, who was born in 1903 and baptized as Lillie Skinner. Three people told Birchwater that Chiwid's husband beat her after she and he had been drinking: "Alec Jack made homebrew, then the beatings would start." When Chiwid was about thirty, Alec Jack "beat her up with a logging chain and cut her with a knife." Mentally, Chiwid was never the same, and she became a legend for living outside, even in the dead of winter, on the Chilcotin plateau west of Williams Lake.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Special Joint Committee*, 11 June 1946, vol. 1, 129; 9 May 1947, vol. 4, 1072-3; 12 May 1947, *ibid.*, 1093.

¹⁵ For a good overview of settler constructions of Aboriginal women in North America and British Columbia, see Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 49-58. One of the few charitable constructions was that Aboriginal women were "overworked and abused" (49).

¹⁶ Sage Birchwater, *Chiwid* (Vancouver: New Star, 1995), 64, 66.

Florence Davidson, daughter of the well-known Haida artist Charles Edenshaw, told her life story to Margaret Blackman in the 1970s. Blackman described her as circumspect. Davidson did not want to dwell on the negative: "I don't tell everything – what's no good." Yet she candidly admitted that her son Reggie, who was killed in 1958 launching a boat, worried her because of his drinking. She also bluntly concluded: "When I was little I didn't see anyone drunk; that's the biggest change I see, drinking. After we come to be like a white people, that's what happened. It used to be so peaceful here. The church was full; no TV, no beer, no Canadian Legion."¹⁷

In her ethnography of Coast Salish (primarily Sto:lo) peoples, Crisca Bierwert pondered the relationship between Aboriginal drinking and family violence. At first her conclusion sounds a bit odd. She said that drinking "was not particularly gendered." What she meant, though, was that, "as in most Native communities, men and women who drink usually do so to the point of drunkenness." As for violence: "in every case I know drinking was involved at least some of the time, and in most situations both men and women drank ... Some women said they decided they had to stop drinking and had to leave their relationship to do so." Thus, while we should be mindful of colonial tropes, for many Aboriginal women, those black eyes hurt. And the damage could be much worse. In 1958 Dr. Peter Kelly said that he had seen the "charred bodies of a mother, father and brother and two children lying in the ruins" of a burned house. A nine-year-old child who survived could not wake his father because he was "dead drunk."¹⁸

Let us return to the special committee's deliberations. Despite the caution urged by some witnesses, overall, the dominant attitudes expressed before the committee, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, favoured liberalizing the liquor provisions of the Indian Act. Many of the former resented the discrimination, which they found patronizing and demoralizing. In May 1947 John B. Tootoosis, president of the Union of Saskatchewan Indians, accepted the possibility of some problems but maintained that "the Indian would learn to handle whiskey." His

¹⁷ Margaret B. Blackman, *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson: A Haida Woman* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 19, 104, 136.

¹⁸ Crisca Bierwert, *Brushed by Cedar, Living by the River: Coast Salish Figures of Power* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999), 208, 209; *Daily News*, 5 December 1958, 1. In August 2002 fifteen-year-old Patricia Jacobs, "a bright and athletic young woman" and member of the Squamish Nation, died after consuming large amounts of alcohol at a birthday party in Sechelt. The party was at the home of the Sechelt Nation's education coordinator, and, according to the *Vancouver Sun*, Jacobs' death soured the relations between the Sechelt and Squamish bands. See *Vancouver Sun*, 10 September 2003, A1, 2.

colleague, Chief Joseph Dreaver, former president of the Saskatchewan Indian Association, went even further. He claimed that "the sooner the Indian has the same privilege as the white man it will be better for him." His assertion was in part based on his service in both world wars. Aboriginal soldiers drank in military canteens, and Dreaver "found no difference whatever between the Indian and the white man."¹⁹

Even Roman Catholic Church officials supported some liberalization. While they were not unanimous in their views, Father J.L. Plourde, OMI (Oblates of Mary Immaculate), said in May 1947 that "the consensus of opinion was that they would favour an amendment to the Indian Act permitting Indians, when off the reserve, to go into a beer parlour or to buy a bottle of whiskey at government stores," which could be consumed on a reserve. All opposed any sale on reserves, and Father Fergus O'Grady, OMI, then principal of the Indian residential school in Kamloops, added that each band and council should assume the responsibility for retaining or removing liquor restrictions.²⁰

The committee's recommendations on liquor constituted a compromise. The members concluded that the Indian Act should allow "the consumption of intoxicating beverages on licensed premises, but there shall be no manufacture, sale or consumption, in or on a Reserve." The committee also suggested that adult Indian women be able to vote for band councillors and on issues affecting the band. The members concluded that the federal government should raise the issue of provincial liquor legislation at the next Dominion-provincial conference.²¹

The draft amendment to the Indian Act provided for Aboriginal drinking "upon any premises where any intoxicants may lawfully be sold and consumed." The final revision to Section 95 of the Indian Act, however, changed the wording to "for consumption in a public place in accordance with a law of the province." In British Columbia this change proved to be especially significant for Aboriginal veterans.²²

For an Indian to legally drink in a licensed public place, the province had to give its approval, which British Columbia did effective December 1951. Yet the provincial Liquor Control Board (LCB) interpreted the Indian Act quite narrowly. The board ruled that the only licensed public places in British Columbia were hotel beer parlours. Government liquor

¹⁹ *Special Joint Committee*, 9 May 1947, vol. 4, 1071.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27 May 1947, vol. 4, 1465 (quotation), 1469.

²¹ *Ibid.*, "Fourth Report," vol. 6, 187 (quotation), 189.

²² "Note for File," 26 March 1952, National Archives of Canada (NAC), "Indian Affairs," RG 10, reel C9736, vol. 8850, file 1/18-6, pt. 3; Canada, *Statutes of Canada*, 15 George VI (20 May 1951), c. 29 (Indian Act), s. 95.

stores and licensed clubs, including veterans' clubs, were still off-limits to Aboriginal people. According to the LCB, clubs were "not public places" since they were open only to members and not the general public.²³

Andrew Paull was outraged that Aboriginal veterans could not drink in licensed veterans' clubs, and he protested to both federal minister W.E. Harris and the province's attorney general, Gordon Wismer. Apparently Harris told Paull that the Indian Act would not be violated if the province designated veterans' clubs as public places and that the matter came within provincial jurisdiction. Andrew Paull then implored the provincial attorney general to "allow native Indian veterans to meet their old comrades in arms, in a social way, as they carried guns together [sic] they should enjoy this privilege [sic] together."²⁴

Wismer, however, refused to act and placed all the responsibility with the federal government. He agreed with Paull that the "present situation was not a sensible one," but he claimed that veterans' clubs were "not public places and cannot be public places" because, under their charters, they were only open to members. Moreover, he doubted that the provincial government could legally change the situation. The solution, therefore, was for the federal government to amend the Indian Act and to broaden the liquor provisions beyond "public places."²⁵

As much as anything else, Gordon Wismer's actions, or lack thereof, were driven by political discomfort that was not directly connected to Aboriginal veterans. He had been under almost constant newspaper criticism since 1947, when he had allowed private clubs to sell liquor to members and guests. Unlike the province's beer parlours, clubs could sell spirits or hard liquor, which added to their popularity. The result was the creation of many new pseudo-clubs that were "private" in name only (as just about anyone could join). In June 1948 the *Vancouver Sun* had exposed the hypocrisy of these alleged clubs, but Wismer maintained that they were indeed private. The only licensed public facilities were the hotel beer parlours, and, thus, it was only there that Indians could drink.²⁶

²³ Berry to Vendors, 14 December 1951, Liquor Control and Licensing Branch, Victoria.

²⁴ Paull to Wismer, 21 January 1952, *British Columbia Provincial Secretary and Government Services, Records Management Branch (RMB)*, Attorney General Correspondence, 1938-65, reel 372, file L217-3. This Attorney General Correspondence is now housed at the British Columbia Archives, GR1723-6.

²⁵ Wismer to Paull, 25 January 1952, *RMB*, reel 372, file L217-3; Paull to Harris, 12 February 1952, RG 10, reel C9736, vol. 8850, file 1/18-6, pt. 3; Harris to Paull, 5 March 1952, *ibid.*

²⁶ See Robert A. Campbell, *Demon Rum or Easy Money: Government Control of Liquor in British Columbia from Prohibition to Privatization* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press [now McGill-Queen's University Press], 1991), 97, 100; and Robert A. Campbell, *Sit Down and Drink Your Beer: Regulating Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925-1954* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001), 118.

If local political concerns motivated Wismer (at least in part), then what explains the lack of action on the part of the federal government? To a certain extent one has to speculate as the federal minister simply repeated his argument that the veterans' club problem should be solved provincially. Yet Harris was aware that a slight change to the Indian Act would also do the trick. One of his officials had told him that he did not know "why 'public place' took the place of 'licensed premises,'" but it had nothing to do with any federal opposition to "Indians drinking in service clubs."²⁷

Perhaps he was reluctant to open a section of the act that had proved controversial even among First Nations peoples. Just as important, though, the federal government had written Section 95 in a way that required the active participation of the provinces. If a province did not request the federal government to implement Section 95, then Indians could not drink. The retail sale of liquor was primarily a provincial responsibility, as was the administration of justice. Thus, from a federal perspective, if British Columbia wanted to limit Aboriginal drinking to licensed beer parlours, then so be it. Indians in beer parlours appeared to be as much responsibility as the province was willing to bear.

By March 1952 Andrew Paull was obviously frustrated, and he probably took some solace when Gordon Wismer and his provincial Liberals were defeated in the June 1952 election. Moreover, in a provincial plebiscite on liquor, the BC voters, who now included Aboriginal peoples, endorsed the sale of spirits by the glass in licensed public places. The plebiscite had nothing in particular to do with Aboriginal peoples, but the results represented support for looser liquor laws. Unfortunately, at least for those who wanted easier access to liquor, the voters also elected W.A.C. Bennett, a teetotaler, and his temperance-leaning Social Credit Party. Rather than pass new liquor legislation immediately, Bennett stalled and struck a commission to study British Columbia's liquor laws and to make recommendations.²⁸

British Columbia eventually proclaimed a new liquor act in 1954, which counted restaurants, cocktail lounges, and some nightclubs as licensed public places. Technically, all were open to First Nations peoples, which meant that, for the first time, they could legally consume spirits (and not just beer) by the glass. Yet the changes were less liberal than they first appeared. Prices, compartment expectations, and outright discrimination often kept First Nations men and women out of these facilities.

²⁷ Paull to Harris, 12 February 1952, RG 10, reel C9736, vol. 8850, file 1/18-6, pt. 3; Harris to Paull, 5 March 1952, *ibid.*; "Note for File," 26 March 1952, RG 10, reel C9736, vol. 8850, file 1/18-6, pt. 3 (quotation).

²⁸ Campbell, *Demon Rum*, 101-3, 112-3.

Moreover, according to the *Vancouver Sun*, the provincial government had allowed Aboriginal people into these facilities only because, their being public places, it “could see no way of keeping them out.”²⁹

Andrew Paull went to his grave in 1959 with Indian veterans still being denied access to service clubs. In 1961 the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans of Canada invoked, without success, the new Canadian Bill of Rights in its attempt to persuade the province to change its policy. The provincial government’s lack of enthusiasm had been even more apparent in the mid-1950s, as federal authorities cautiously continued to liberalize liquor access for Aboriginal peoples.³⁰

The Aboriginal population was not of one mind about liquor, but many First Nations leaders remained critical of the restrictions and distinctions incorporated into the revised 1951 Indian Act. Andrew Paull, as we have seen, demanded complete liquor equality. Just as British Columbia’s beer parlours were about to open to Aboriginal peoples in December 1951, Chuck Thorne, a Cowichan chief on Vancouver Island, captured the sentiments of many First Nations people: “It’s not right to open the breach a little bit. It should be wide open, same privileges as for whites and same penalties.” The same month the *Native Voice* referred to beer parlours as “a step – a tiny step – but we must not rest satisfied till the full status of equality with protection of our Aboriginal rights is assured.”³¹

Those sentiments were reinforced by two scholarly studies of Aboriginal attitudes towards liquor in British Columbia. In the early 1950s Edwin Lemert of the University of California interviewed Aboriginals on the mainland coast and Vancouver Island. He concluded that they felt “a deep sense of injustice because they are fined and sent to provincial prison for drinking, a pleasure which white persons enjoy with impunity.” For many Aboriginal people “drinking has become associated with political consciousness and has grown into a symbol of native solidarity.” One Aboriginal man he interviewed was more blunt: “When I get drunk I keep thinking about all the crooked things the white people have done to us, and I keep getting madder and madder – and pretty soon I am ready to fight.”³²

A study sponsored by the federal government and led by University of British Columbia anthropologist H.B. Hawthorn concluded that “there can be no doubt that many Indians strongly resent the denial to them

²⁹ British Columbia, *Revised Statutes*, 1960 c. 166 (Government Liquor Act, 1953) s. 34; *Vancouver Sun*, 6 October 1953, 10; 1 October 1953, 2 (quotation).

³⁰ Daniel Francis, ed., *The Encyclopedia of British Columbia* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2000), 534; *Vancouver Sun*, 25 September 1953, 14; Fontaine to Black, 3 February 1961, *RMB*, reel 449.

³¹ *Province*, 13 December 1951, 17; *Native Voice*, December 1951, 4.

³² Edwin M. Lemert, *Alcohol and the Northwest Coast Indians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 356 (1st quotation), 346 (2nd quotation), 337 (third quotation).

of full liquor privileges." Hawthorn and his colleagues acknowledged that some Aboriginal leaders still leaned towards complete prohibition, but the researchers concluded that prohibition "would be harmfully discriminatory"; instead, they recommended "that the Indian of British Columbia should be in no different a position from the White citizen of British Columbia in respect to liquor laws." Equal liquor access "would remove the major reason for the Indian to assert that there is still discrimination in Canadian law and social practice."³³

On the surface it would seem that the views of these non-Aboriginal academics and those Aboriginal people who supported full liquor equality were in accord. Yet for the latter, liquor rights were only part of the broader campaign for equality without assimilation. While sympathetic to First Nations peoples, some academics believed liquor equality would facilitate assimilation. Hawthorn, for example, said that equal access to liquor for Aboriginal peoples would promote their "cultural adjustment," which is, admittedly, an ambiguous phrase. Yet, as Alan Cairns argues, assimilation had widespread academic support at this time, in part because it "was thought of as a progressive policy."³⁴

In the summer of 1956 the federal government again loosened the liquor sections of the Indian Act. The changes provided for the possibility of both off-reserve and on-reserve possession and consumption of liquor. The legislation envisioned a three-stage process that actively involved local Aboriginal bands and the affected provincial governments. The first stage, in place since 1951, was that a province could request that the federal government allow Aboriginal people to drink in the still ambiguously defined "public place." Next, a province could request that the federal government allow Aboriginal people to purchase liquor for off-reserve consumption, subject to provincial laws. This stage would allow First Nations consumers to buy liquor in provincial government liquor stores. If a province requested this second stage, then, finally, local bands could petition the federal government to hold a band referendum

³³ Henry B. Hawthorn, C.C. Belshaw, and S.M. Jamieson, *The Indians of British Columbia: A Study of Contemporary Social Adjustment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), 332-3 (1st quotation), 382 (2nd and 3rd quotations), 383 (4th quotation).

³⁴ Hawthorn, *Indians*, 382; Alan Cairns, *Citizens Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 53-6 (quotation). According to Cairns, by the 1960s Hawthorn had clearly rejected assimilation in favour of his idea of Citizens Plus. See Cairns, *Citizens Plus*, 161-2.

No ambiguity seemed to exist with the conclusions reached by a major study of Manitoba's liquor laws chaired by John Bracken. Its 1955 report entitled one of its chapters "The Use of Liquor by Indians." The report concluded that more liquor equality would help to promote, in the words of an unnamed "prominent official of the Indian Health Services in Ottawa," the "complete assimilation of the Indian." See, Manitoba, *Report of the Liquor Enquiry Commission* (Winnipeg: n.p., 1955), Part 2, 617, 619, 618.

to see if the members wanted on-reserve possession and consumption. If a province did not give its approval for off-reserve possession, then a band could still hold a referendum for on-reserve possession but only after the federal government had given the provincial attorney general sixty days notice to object to the band's request.³⁵

Unlike Ontario, which granted off-reserve liquor rights to First Nations peoples almost immediately, British Columbia took no action. Attorney General Robert Bonner's initial explanation, in February 1957, was that the government was still studying the changes and that the "Indians themselves are quite divided."³⁶

That is where things stood when the rocks, bottles, and teargas bombs flew in the early morning of 3 August 1958 in Prince Rupert. While the *Vancouver Sun's* headline ("34 Face Charges in 'Rupert Riot'") was more restrained than that of the *Province* ("Tear Gas Smashes Prince Rupert Riot"), both papers included a quotation from Mayor Peter Lester to stress the Indian base of the riots: "Indians can only drink in beer parlours and not in their homes. They don't like it." The *Prince George Citizen* did not include Lester's quotation, but its headline ("1000 Rupert Rioters 'Bombed' In Streets") was just as sensational as was that of the *Province*, and the *Citizen* said that "many of the arrested were reported to be Indians, some of them cannery workers."³⁷

The *Prince Rupert Daily News* was more restrained ("Clamp-Down on Street Fighting to Follow Riot Near City Hall"), although a subhead referred to the rioters as "Mobsters." The front-page story did not mention Aboriginal people. The accompanying editorial on the next page stressed that "the racial origin of the crowd makes no difference" and that "the complexion of those who seemed to be getting the most kick out of things on Saturday night was predominately white."³⁸

In Prince Rupert, First Nations residents were a significant social and economic presence. The *Vancouver Sun* estimated that at least 3,000 of the city's 10,000 people were Aboriginal, which was "the largest native Indian population of any city in BC." Harold Sinclair, a cannery worker and spokesman for Aboriginal people in the days after the troubles, reinforced the importance of his people to the city. He reminded the mayor that "our Indian people, fishermen and cannery workers, have pa-

³⁵ Fairholm to McCumber (?), 27 April 1964, RG 10, reel C9736, vol. 8850, file 373/18-6, pt. 6 (quotation); *Native Voice*, December 1955, 2; *Statutes of Canada*, 4 Elizabeth II (14 August 1956), c. 40 (An Act to Amend the Indian Act), s. 23.

³⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 20 February 1957, 19.

³⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 4 August 1958, 1; *Province*, 4 August 1958, 1; *Prince George Citizen*, 4 August 1958, 1.

³⁸ *Daily News*, 4 August 1958, 1, 2.

tronized every business firm at all times and no one should discriminate against our native population." He also said that First Nations peoples had shown their loyalty by "celebrating the birth of the white population 100 years ago, which is just like yesterday to all our native people, since they were born here from their ancestors." To Sinclair the word "riot" was inappropriate since what had happened was "an affray" caused by RCMP mistreatment and discrimination. Sinclair had the support of the Prince Rupert Labour Council, which called for a royal commission to investigate "law enforcement in this city and alleged discrimination against the native population."³⁹

Neither the mayor nor the press accepted the mistreatment charges, and "affray" did not replace "riot." Yet less than a week after the outburst, the initial city investigation recommended that city officials meet with the Native Brotherhood and other Aboriginal leaders, that "serious consideration" be given to appointing special Aboriginal constables to work with the RCMP, and that a larger investigation examine all the circumstances of the "recent riot" and "make recommendations for future relations with the native population." In September city council passed a resolution calling for liquor equality for Aboriginal peoples. Later that month the council appointed a three-member commission to investigate the riots. It included local MLA William Murray, who was a strong advocate of complete liquor equality for First Nations peoples.⁴⁰

At the Native Brotherhood's annual meeting in November, Murray urged the delegates to take a clear stand on liquor, and he added that his committee did not believe "that the riot was the fault of the native population." Mayor Lester welcomed the Brotherhood to Prince Rupert, and he assured the delegates that they were "not alone in [their] struggle for equal rights." At the convention a resolution calling for full liquor rights for First Nations peoples provoked much "sound and fury," but it passed "overwhelmingly." Not long after that, the mayor and city council hosted the Brotherhood executive and the publisher of the *Native Voice*, Maisie Hurley, at an informal dinner at the Broadway Café.⁴¹

³⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 5 August 1958, 2; 6 August 1958, 1 (quotation); *Native Voice*, October 1958, 4, 8 (Sinclair quotations); *Daily News*, 7 August 1958, 1 (Labour Council). In 2001 the Prince Rupert Virtual Library estimated that in 1958 "almost half the 10,000 residents of Prince Rupert were First Nations." See "One of Prince Rupert's Darkest Days" <http://www.citytel.net/library/prince_rupert/riot.html> (consulted 15 August 2003).

⁴⁰ *Daily News*, 8 August 1958, 1, 5 (quotation); 2 September 1958, 2 ("Law and Order Must Come First"); 11 September 1958, 2; 26 September 1958, 1.

⁴¹ *Daily News*, 3 December 1958, 1 (Murray); 5 December 1958, 1 (resolution); *Native Voice*, January 1959, 4 (dinner). In the spring of 1959 Ed Nahanee, the Brotherhood's business agent, said the majority really did not support more liquor access. He also described alcohol as "swill." As well,

Despite the resolution, the province still refused to allow Aboriginal people to purchase liquor off-reserves except in licensed public places. Any further initiative, the attorney general said, would have to come from First Nations peoples and the federal government. In 1960 Frank Calder, president of the Nishga (Nisga'a) Tribal Council, took a different direction. The council requested that the federal government implement reserve votes so as to bypass stage two and, thus, the provincial government. This new tack was strengthened by a number of factors. In 1960 the federal government had granted voting rights to status Indians, which meant that the categories "citizen" and "Indian" were no longer mutually exclusive. This change added to the moral authority of the argument that, in liquor matters, Indians should be treated the same as any other citizens. Second, the Prince Rupert City Council supported the Nisga'a move, and in June Mayor Lester told Bonner that the liquor provisions were unjust and unenforceable. The Nisga'a were also assisted by MLA William Murray. His investigative committee had found that white people were at least "partly responsible" for inciting the Aboriginal population to acts of defiance in the 1958 fracas, and his committee recommended complete liquor equality for First Nations peoples. Third, in September 1960 Frank Calder was re-elected to the provincial legislature as the member for Atlin, a seat he had held from 1945 to 1956 and from 1960 to 1979. Finally, Calder could also count on the support of his federal counterpart. Frank Howard, the MP for Skeena, described the liquor rules for Indians as "asinine," and he blamed the provincial government.⁴²

In November 1960 Indian Affairs Branch officials received a resolution from the "Nishga Band" at Canyon City (now Gitwinksihlkwj) near Prince Rupert. It requested that the federal government allow the possession of liquor on the Canyon City reserve. The branch soon received other similar requests from other Nisga'a communities. Branch officials quickly concluded that the only way the requests could be implemented was to give the province sixty days notice that a vote would be held unless it objected. This provision had never been used before, and one official said it "might be an interesting experiment to see what action the province would take." He hoped that the federal notice might prompt

in 1959 his colleague Guy Williams stated that "many of our people are bitterly opposed to allowing liquor on the reserves. They have seen liquor cause so much damage to their families and friends." Williams became the Brotherhood's president in 1960 and in 1972 was appointed to the Senate. For the liquor quotations, see *Province*, 18 March 1959, 21 (Nahanee); *Native Voice*, February 1959, 3 (Williams). On Williams's career, see *Saskatchewan Indian*, May 1972, 12.

⁴² *Province*, 4 March 1959, 6; 18 March 1959, 21; *Daily News*, 1 August 1960, 1 (Calder); *Native Voice*, February 1960, 2 (voting rights); *Daily News*, 19 September 1960, 1; *Native Voice*, July 1959, 7 (fracas); *Daily News*, 16 September 1960, 1 (election); *Native Voice*, July 1960, 7 (Howard).

the BC government to grant Aboriginal peoples the right to off-reserve possession and consumption.⁴³

Because all of the local resolutions were "in the same form and handwriting," Col. E. Ackland, Indian Affairs Branch senior administrative officer, suspected that they had been "initiated by one person." Therefore, he asked F. Earl Anfield, the new Indian commissioner for British Columbia, to investigate. Anfield, who was well known in the Prince Rupert area, discovered that all of the resolutions had been drafted by the same lawyer at the request of Mayor Lester. While the liquor issue still provoked much discussion at the 1960 meeting of the Native Brotherhood, again held in Prince Rupert, delegates continued to support equal drinking rights. The Brotherhood executive also conferred honorary membership on Mayor Lester.⁴⁴

The political implications and sensitivities of the band requests were not lost on Indian branch officials. William Murray was a member of the governing Social Credit Party, but both Calder and Howard were members of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (ccf), predecessor to the New Democratic Party, and the provincial ccf was the official opposition in British Columbia. Frank Howard had not only mentioned the band resolutions in the House of Commons but he had also prepared blank copies of the resolutions for other bands to use. Aboriginal leaders only had to fill in the appropriate spaces. For Howard the issue, as he told one chief, was "not a question of whetehr [sic] the individual should or should not drink, but it is a question of whether your people should have the same rights as I do." According to the BC Indian commissioner, by the end of 1960 the resolutions were "becoming a very live issue" in the province.⁴⁵

After much internal debate within the branch, in February 1961 the acting deputy minister (and director of the Indian branch), H.M. Jones, recommended that Minister Ellen Fairclough sign a prepared letter to the BC attorney general. It stated that, if the province did not object, then within sixty days reserve votes would be taken. Jones admitted, though, that there were "certain unfortunate implications in this procedure," the "most objectionable" of which was that some bands would have on-reserve liquor rights and some would not, which would increase

⁴³ "Liquor Resolution," 9 November 1960, RG 10, reel C9738, vol. 8852, file 901/18-6-1, pt. 1; Adm. 1A to Senior Administrative Officer (hereafter SAO), 23 November 1960, *ibid.* (quotation).

⁴⁴ SAO to Indian Commissioner, 23 November 1960, RG 10, reel C9738, *ibid.*; "Memorandum for File," 19 December 1960, *ibid.*; *Daily News*, 3 November 1960, 1; 25 November 1960, 1.

⁴⁵ Acland to Anfield, 15 December 1960, RG 10, reel C9738, vol. 8852, file 901/18-6-1, pt. 1; Howard to Williams, 30 December 1960, (1st quotation) *ibid.*; Anfield to Senior Administrative Assistant, 30 December 1960 (2nd quotation), *ibid.*

“the discriminatory aspects of the liquor situation in British Columbia.” Moreover, trying to distinguish between those Aboriginals who had liquor rights and those who did not would create “almost an intolerable law-enforcement problem.” Yet he also noted that the problem would be the responsibility of the provincial attorney general. It could be easily solved if the province relented and granted all First Nations peoples the right to possess alcohol under the laws of British Columbia. The minister signed the letter that same day. By then six bands had requested liquor votes.⁴⁶

Bonner replied in mid-March and stated that, of the 2217 Indian reserves in Canada, 1,619 were in British Columbia and that the province also had 195 registered Indian bands. To make matters worse, band members did not necessarily live on reserves, which would further complicate both voting and its consequences. The result, he claimed, would be “an administrative nightmare for the Liquor Control Board of the Province.” His solution was a proposed amendment to British Columbia’s Liquor Act. It provided for the federal government to request that the province exempt Aboriginal residents of particular liquor licensing areas from the restrictions of the Indian Act. The exemptions would be linked to where First Nations people lived rather than to which bands they belonged. While he did not say so, with regard to initiating any changes, the provincial suggestion would pass the buck back to the federal government.⁴⁷

In the provincial legislature, though, Bonner expanded upon his criticism of the Indian Act and the federal government. According to the *Vancouver Province*, he said that British Columbia believed in the equality of all residents and did not distinguish “between different sorts of residents.” The liquor provisions of the Indian Act created a “fantastic rigmarole,” which masked Ottawa’s failure to “face its responsibilities, and [enabled the federal government to seek] a way to foist them on the provinces.” The amendment to the provincial Liquor Act was approved in late March 1961.⁴⁸

British Columbia’s action provoked much discussion among Indian affairs officials. The branch’s legal adviser quickly got to the heart of the matter: the province wanted “no responsibility for the grant of liquor privileges to the Indians but rather wishe[d] to be able to direct any possible adverse criticism arising from the consequences of such action against [the] Branch and the Minister.” In the end the deputy minister

⁴⁶ “Memorandum to the Minister,” 16 February 1961, RG 10, reel C9738, vol. 8852, file 901/18-6-1, pt. 1; Fairclough to Bonner, 16 February 1961, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Bonner to Fairclough, 13 March 1961, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Province*, 16 March 1961, 5; “The Legal Adviser,” 4 April 1961, RG 10, reel C9738, vol. 8852, file 901/18-6-1, pt. 1.

concluded that, since the province had not technically objected to the votes, the referenda should proceed after the sixty-day waiting period had passed. On 2 May 1961 the minister informed the BC attorney general that the band votes would take place. According to Frank Calder the four Nass River communities voted overwhelmingly in favour of liquor: Kincolith (79 per cent), Greenville (79 per cent), Canyon City (80 per cent), and Aiyanish (82 per cent).⁴⁹

By November 1961 the federal government had approved liquor rights for seven BC bands that had voted in favour of liquor on reserves. The Indian Affairs Branch was concerned about the impact of those votes in British Columbia and the attention they were getting in the local press. The director ordered local agents to meet with the affected chiefs and band councils "to ensure that no undue incidents [would] occur at the onset of this extension of liquor privileges." Bands were warned to "act with propriety and dignity in making use of this privilege," and they were reminded that "all eyes will be upon them and any untoward incident might well be magnified, possibly out of proportion." Finally, the director bluntly stated that "any unseemly conduct" could result in the withdrawal of liquor privileges.⁵⁰

In May 1962 Robert Bonner began to relent, and he ordered law enforcement officers to take a "very generous attitude" with regard to drinking and liquor possession on reserves, whether votes had been held or not. Finally, effective 1 July 1962, he announced that the province would no longer enforce the liquor provisions of the Indian Act. Aboriginal peoples were free to buy, possess, and consume liquor consistent with the laws of the province. In theory at least, they would be treated in the same manner as were non-Aboriginal people.⁵¹

The attorney general's announcement warranted front-page treatment in the *Prince Rupert Daily News* ("Full Liquor Privileges Extended to All Indians in British Columbia"). Mayor Lester congratulated the provincial government, and he later expressed his pleasure in a letter to the editor of the *Native Voice*. He hoped that liquor equality would "be another step toward close and friendly co-operation among all of the races who make up the people of British Columbia."⁵²

⁴⁹ Legal Adviser to Director, 4 April 1961, *ibid.*; Special Assistant to SAO, 13 April 1961 (Deputy Minister), *ibid.*; Fairclough to Bonner, 2 May 1961, *ibid.*; *Daily News*, 9 January 1962, 1 (Calder).

⁵⁰ Ackland to Director, 6 November 1961, RG 10, reel C9738, vol. 8852, file 901/18-6-1, pt. 1; Jones to Boys, 7 November 1961, *ibid.* (quotations); Jones to Ewen, 31 January 1962, *ibid.* (warnings).

⁵¹ *Province*, 4 July 1962, 1.

⁵² *Daily News*, 3 July 1962, 1; *Native Voice*, July 1962, 3. While the news story also ran on the front page of the *Province*, the headline ("Pubs Open Until Midnight under New BC Regulations") gave no priority to the change in policy for Aboriginal peoples.

Despite the attorney general's announcement, and to the irritation of some Indian bands, the Indian Affairs Branch still demanded that BC bands vote on whether they wanted wet or dry reserves. By the end of April 1963 ninety BC bands had requested votes for on-reserve liquor privileges, and of the forty-seven votes taken, only three had negative results.⁵³

This phase of the story ends with a twist. In February 1966 Frank Calder, who had pushed so hard for equal liquor rights, publicly raised the issue of alcohol abuse among Aboriginal peoples. Invoking Cold War imagery, he said in the provincial legislature, "We won our point at the time, but now I have to say it [alcohol] is an iron curtain against our progress." In April 1973 Calder himself was detained by Victoria police for being drunk in a public place. The NDP was in power then, and while Calder was not charged, Premier Dave Barrett removed from his Cabinet the first Aboriginal person in Canadian history to be a Cabinet minister. Nearly twenty years later Matthew Coon Come echoed Calder's concerns. Most likely, however, both would have agreed that the solution to alcohol abuse did not lie in legal discrimination.⁵⁴

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In response to pressure from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples after the Second World War, federal officials began to make liquor legally available to the First Nations of Canada. This initial, somewhat tentative, step involved allowing the Aboriginal population to drink in licensed public places, which was an unfortunate turn of phrase. By the mid-1950s the federal direction was much clearer. If the affected province agreed, then Aboriginal peoples could have full liquor rights off reserves, but – and it was a potent "but" – they had to decide themselves if they wanted legal possession on reserves. This policy was not supported by the BC government, which did not want to accept any responsibility for the consequences of giving First Nations peoples the right to drink.

To more fully understand the deregulation of Aboriginal drinking, however, we need to move beyond formal state regulation and more actively engage First Nations peoples themselves. For them alcohol was a fluid symbol. For many young war veterans it represented equality, ca-

⁵³ Homan to Indian Commissioner, 26 October 1962, RG 10, reel C9738, vol. 8852, file 901/18-6-1, pt. 1; "Jones to Minister," 30 April 1963, *ibid.*, vol. 8853, file 901/18-6-1, pt. 4. The only negative vote that I have been able to find was that of the Fraser Lake Band.

⁵⁴ *Victoria Times*, 17 February 1966, 17. Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples*, 170. The *Encyclopedia of British Columbia* referred to Calder as the first Aboriginal Cabinet minister. It also said that Calder lost his Cabinet position over policy differences. See p. 104.

maraderie, and acceptance by the community of non-Aboriginal veterans. To be denied entrance to a BC veterans' club was thus a multiple insult. While Andrew Paull worked tirelessly to get Aboriginal people into these clubs, so did veterans' organizations. From a veterans' perspective – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – First Nations veterans had earned the right to drink.

Equal access to alcohol was a potent political symbol to some Aboriginal men and women, but alcohol represented something much worse to others. It was yet another sign of dependence, both on alcohol and on the dominant non-Aboriginal community. The debate among First Nations peoples was nicely captured at a meeting of BC Interior tribes in October 1959. Charlie Draney, chief of the Deadman's Creek Reserve, was direct. He said that his "people [were] going downhill" because of alcohol abuse. He was supported by Mrs. Ed Bonneau of Vernon, who claimed, "no good can come from making liquor easier to get." At the other end of the spectrum was Chief Charlie Walkem of Spences Bridge. He resented the fact that Aboriginal peoples were lumped with minors, that they might never get to grow up: "My dear people, are we going [to be] under age for all our lives?"⁵⁵

Despite the debate among Aboriginal peoples, the majority appeared to support liquor equality. To the Nisga'a people and the *Native Voice*, alcohol restrictions were one of the many forms of discrimination that they sought to eliminate. As the newspaper stated in 1959: "Natives feel this discrimination keenly, as they do every other form of discrimination that affects their daily lives. Quite properly they resent it." Other Aboriginals felt the same way. In 1958, for example, Len Marchand, a member of the Skilwh (Okanagan) Nation, walked into a liquor store in Vancouver, which was an illegal act at the time. He was torn between his resentment of the injustice of the liquor laws and his reluctance to break laws in general. Yet Marchand persevered and resolved to tell the clerk that, if questioned, he was Chinese. He was not questioned, and ten years later he became the first elected Aboriginal member of Parliament.⁵⁶

Supporters of liquor equality, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, made much use of the rhetoric of citizenship. To a certain extent this discourse was a product of the times. The campaign for liquor rights occurred within the context of status Indians achieving the right vote – that is, becoming full citizens – and of Canada's first attempt at protecting individual rights with the Bill of Rights (1960). Yet "citizenship" was

⁵⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 14 October 1959, 14.

⁵⁶ *Native Voice*, November 1959, 2; Len Marchand and Matt Hughes, *Breaking Trail* (Prince George: Catlin, 2000), 24.

an elastic term. On the one hand, for Aboriginal peoples who believed in equality without assimilation, the term was akin to “Citizens Plus,” a phrase coined in the mid-1960s. H.B. Hawthorn defined the concept as “in addition to normal rights and duties of citizenship, Indians possess certain additional rights as charter members of the Canadian community.” As Alan Cairns reminds us, Aboriginal leaders invoked Citizens Plus in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it was eventually eclipsed by the concept “First Nation.” On the other hand, as many Aboriginal peoples had long feared, “citizenship” could also mean fully integrated, or assimilated, within the Canadian polity. Once complete citizens, “Indians” would no longer exist.⁵⁷

The ambiguity about citizenship may partially explain the support the metropolitan press gave to equal drinking rights. The Vancouver papers did not hesitate to take advantage of the sensational opportunities of the “Centennial Riot,” but a few days after that event, the *Vancouver Sun* claimed that the “stupidity of BC’s liquor restrictions against Indians got frightening proof in Prince Rupert on Saturday night.” The paper said that the real problem was an unjust law, not “the myth that, by race, Indians are problem drinkers.” As I have noted elsewhere, the metropolitan press had long been an advocate of looser liquor laws, particularly after the Second World War. The press was also consistently “liberal” in the sense of championing individual rights. So a certain consistency existed in support of Aboriginal peoples having equal access to alcohol. Yet one can also speculate, and it is a speculation, that the editors may have shared the assumptions of those federally funded academics of the 1950s. Equal access to alcohol for Aboriginal peoples would facilitate their cultural adjustment to the dominant culture. In a 1962 editorial calling for equal drinking rights, the *Province* stated: “the Indian must ultimately grow to accept all the responsibilities of citizenship.”⁵⁸

Things *may* have been a little different in Prince Rupert. Like the Vancouver press, the *Daily News* championed equal drinking rights for Aboriginal peoples. In 1961 and 1962 it reprinted editorials from the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province* (notably the one cited above) calling for equal access to alcohol. Yet the paper also ran other editorials. In 1961, under the title of “Integration of Our Indians,” it reprinted a portion of a speech given by a seventeen-year-old Aboriginal student to the Rotary Club. The young woman said, “Integration does not mean assimilation, rather it means becoming part of a whole without loss of identity.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Cairns, *Citizens Plus*, 161 (quotation)–168.

⁵⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 5 August 1958, 4; Campbell, *Sit Down*, 112–3, 118–9; *Province*, 26 May 1962, 4.

⁵⁹ *Daily News*, 21 March 1961, 2; *Vancouver Sun*, 1 June 1962, 2; *Province*, 27 February 1961, 2 (speech).

In January 1962 the *Daily News* offered a churlish assessment of Canada's new immigration regulations, which were moving towards skills rather than national origins. The paper described the new regulations as a "poor commentary on the Canadian way of life" because "New Canadians and people who have just gained their citizenship, have more rights than the Canadian-born Native." The next month the paper praised the All Native Basketball Tournament held in the city. While the editorial contained the paternalistic phrase, "the Indian is growing up," it stressed that "the Natives are good for Prince Rupert and Rupert is good for them." It concluded with the comment that "we are proud of our Native athletes." Mayor Peter Lester and his council seemed to share similar views about Aboriginal people in Prince Rupert. They welcomed the Native Brotherhood to the city, and in return, as we have seen, the mayor was made an honorary member of the Brotherhood.⁶⁰

We do not want to push this argument too far. The official discourse did not always play out on the street; to a certain extent the "Centennial Riot" was an interracial conflict. Moreover, bad blood existed between the police and the Aboriginal population of the Prince Rupert area long before the affray. As well, the newspaper and local government were in part motivated by economic self-interest. Aboriginal peoples had a presence that could not be ignored, and to a certain extent that presence had to be cultivated. Material conditions helped to shape the rhetoric of tolerance and acceptance of Aboriginal peoples as Aboriginal peoples. How wide and deep that respect actually went is an open question.⁶¹

For Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia who sought equal access to alcohol in the 1950s, the timing was a bit off. W.A.C. Bennett had become premier in 1952, remained in office for twenty years, and preferred that no one drank. If Aboriginal peoples were going to be given the right to drink, he wanted the federal government to assume all of the responsibility and as much of the burden as possible. That said, Attorney General Robert Bonner did have a point. The large Aboriginal population and the number of bands and reserves in British Columbia did make liquor regulation difficult in this province. Still, Ontario managed to implement the 1956 liquor provisions, and its total Aboriginal population was larger than that of British Columbia.⁶²

⁶⁰ *Daily News*, 22 January 1962, 2; 27 February 1962, 2. Lester remained mayor of Prince Rupert for thirty-five years, and in 1994 he received the Order of British Columbia. See Government of British Columbia, "Order of British Columbia" <http://www.protocol.gov.bc.ca/protocol/prgs/obc/1994/1994_PLester.htm> (consulted 25 August 2003).

⁶¹ Campbell, *Sit Down*, 102-3.

⁶² Canada, *Ninth Census of Canada* (1951), vol. 1, table 32. The census claimed 37,700 First Nations peoples for Ontario and 28,478 for British Columbia.

In his debate with the federal government Bonner made it clear that he really did not like distinguishing between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. He would have preferred that those distinctions disappear. The way the province backed off in 1962 underscores that point. Whether intentional or not, the attorney general undermined the federal policy that Aboriginal peoples, as *Aboriginal peoples*, had to decide whether or not they wanted liquor on their reserves. The province had no jurisdiction over legal Indians, but the attorney general could order his enforcement officials to cease making distinctions between Indians and non-Indians. From a provincial point of view, then, "Indians" had indeed ceased to exist.