

Chap. 6.

John Basque on Centralization

John

Lil - Can you tell me anything you know on centralization. People were promised a lot of things - the things that would be done to them if they move to Eskasoni.

- When centralization started I was in the service. The movement was going on - a lot of the people were moving away. The people were promised houses, jobs, and all kinds of industries would be started there. When I came home - when I was discharged from the service an Indian agent by the name of Mackinnon came to see me at my house. He was with Peter Prosper and a senator from Ottawa by the name of Johnson. Well, they told me, I had to move to Eskasoni, whether I liked to or not. If I didn't move I had to pay tax, I had to pay for my doctor, I had to pay school tax - I had to pay for everything even hospitalization because the reserve would eventually be extinguished. I addressed the senator., I told him, I wasn't moving, no matter what happens because there is no way that the Indian would pay tax on his own land (reserve) because it is his own. I also told him that I had fought for freedom that I was in the service to fight for freedom. This is what I wanted that's what I am asking freedom and choice. I told him and the others that were with him I said, why didn't you guys get in the service and fight for your freedom. I told them, this is what we are getting today because of the service and today I am basing my stand on it the freedom I have fought for and I am not moving anywheres.

They offered me a job in Eskasoni. The wages they offered me was \$20.00 a day. I would be working in a garage as a mechanic. I learned that trade while I was in the service. I went to Mechanic school in Ontario. I told them that I would take the job on one condition that the Dept. supply me with a car in order for me to travel back and forth to Eskasoni. This is the way things happened at the time. I advised a lot of the people not to be ^{intimidated} not to move because I had an idea how things would turn out in Eskasoni. I was thinking what will happen if all the people moved over there and when all the available jobs were filled up - these were mostly temporary jobs - what will happen when these jobs terminated. There would be no more jobs - there would be nothing to do. Because the jobs that they promised me at that time that job doesn't exist today. After I refused the

job that the Dept. offered me they hired a white mechanic. They could have hired an Indian-but they didn't. That man is retired today and getting government pension.

Lil - So there was a garage in Eskasoni.

- Yes, it was a big garage. I couldn't ~~see it~~ ^{SEE} the idea at that time and I had a lot of advise from the other Indians I met in the service. They gave me a lot of ideas of what I should do. Of course, I explained our situation to them.

Lil - So you knew what was going on while you were away in the service.

- Yes. I did and I knew how things would turn out.

Lil - What year were you discharged.

- 1946.

Lil - centralization started in 1942.

- Yes. A lot of the people didn't move. I advised a lot of them not to move because I knew from the advise I got from the other Indians I met who came from all over Canada. They told me that there was no way that the Indians would pay tax, for school, hospitals, unless you become enfranchised. If you're become enfranchised - you are finished. This is what I told the people.

Lil - You don't know of anybody on this reserve who was refused hospitalization or doctor care.

- I don't remember. I don't know. One thing I know school was going to be ~~stopped~~ closed down but this never happened.

Later on I was fighting for the school to be moved here, closer to the highway because all the people that didn't move to Eskasoni they all moved over here by the highway.

I fought for this and I succeeded. The school was moved.

I also asked and got clothing for the children - school children but gradually they started cutting this off and finally I didn't have a say in the matter because I was no longer a Chief.

Tom Marshall took over as Chief and everything he was asked by the Dept. his answer was always yes. Everything was alright for him. As I told you before when I talked with you when I was a chief, the agents called me to come to the agency office in Eskasoni. The indians used to ask for a lot of help at the time and I used to help them out. It was hard to get help even if ^{1 2 3 4 5} wrote to Ottawa
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you wouldn't get an answer yourself, your answer would be sent to the agency office. So anyway, the agents asked me to come down to the agency. I went the agents were all sitting around, MacKinnon was one of them. MacKinnon said: "We have been waiting for you, I'll tell you what we want. If you keep your mouth shut for the others we will give you whatever you want." I answered him by saying, you can keep whatever you have because I couldn't do it because the people elected me to help them and those people who helped me to get elected I have to turn around and help those people.

I remember one incident when I was Chief. I was in the school-house when some kid came to tell me that a woman was throwing ^{3+6/11/25} rocks at my car. I went and sure enough the woman was throwing rocks at my car. I told her to get away if she didn't want to find herself in jail. Anyway the husband of that woman came along and he took his wife home. Next morning that same woman came crying to my house. She said that they didn't have any food in the house. You know I had to turn around and help this woman out. Not too many people would do this today.

Another time when I was chief John (Piper) MacDonald came to ask for help. He wanted a line fence to be put up on his land. His land bordered the reserve land. I met him down the road. He was going to Richard Johnson's to have a saw sharpened. I too was going to Richard's at that time. We got to talking and when we got to Tom Battiste's house, he said I want to see Tom about something why don't you come in with me. He said, "I have something to ask Tom. I have been arguing with him about something concerning Indians. He showed the letter to Stephen, Tom's son.

Evidentially he had ^{written} to the Dept. about the line fence that he wanted to be put up on his land. This letter said that he didn't have to worry about the line fence anymore because soon there wouldn't be a reservation. When Steve finished reading the letter he said it's true what Mr. MacDonald said. Mr. MacDonald this is the answer I got from Ottawa. I said to Steve who's signature is on that letter. When he looked at it the signature was F.B. MacKinnon. and Mackinnon was at the Eskasoni agency. So Steve told him this. Mr. MacDonald was surprised. I told him MacKinnon is working in Eskasoni. He said, " I must have been tricked or something. He's

the one that received your answer that you sent to Ottawa. I told him why don't you find out what kind of an answer he got from Ottawa . At that time when you wrote to the Dept. in Ottawa you didn't get an answer yourself your letter would be sent to the local agency. The agents would make the final decision. If they wanted to help you they would if not that was too bad.

Lil - In some cases they didn't follow their orders through. Well anyway, Mr. MacDonald said, "I'll get what I want one way or another. We will meet this reserve. I told him, I don't think you will because we are not getting out. I am not, and I don't think Mr. Battiste is getting out. Tom B. said, I am not getting out, I don't care what anybody says. I was still Chief at the time. I wrote to Ottawa. Old man Michael Nicholas and a lot of Indians told me that our land on the reserve was been stolen. I wrote to Ottawa to ask to have our reserve resurveyed It was surveyed (1959) Two men and I worked with the surveyors for two summers. One time while I was working with the surveyors Mr. John Piper McDonald came to see me. He still wanted a line fence to be put up on his land. I told him we couldn't do that because I found out about the old line I mean the agreement that was made when the last survey was made. Mr. John (Piper) MacDonald grandfather made with the Dept. The line fence was paid by the Dept. and Mr. John (Piper) MacDonald 's grandfather signed an agreement that when this fence was needed he would be the one to pay for the cost of this fence. and the labor besides.

I told John, as long as I am head of this reserve you won't use our money to have a line fence put up on your land and we will abide by the agreement your grandfather signed. I told him I know why you want that wire so your cows won't wander into the Indian reserve. He was very angry, he said, alright, if that's the way things stand at the moment , all the cows and horse all kinds of animals that cross over my property will be shot.

I told him that will be your hard luck, because if we do put up up a fence it will be a pound fence and if any of your animals wander inside the reserve you will have to bail them out 10.00 an animal. He went away mad. I told him if you doubt me or if anybody doesn't believe me they could write to Ottawa and find out.

Lil - Was that the land that was leased to him for a certain number of years and that the lease expired long time ago.

- I don't know. While I was chief, I sent for maps from Ottawa. All the Indian reservation was marked in red. The inside of this red line is the Indian reserve. I found out that the boundary line is accurate. Maybe it would be off 2, 3 inches in some places but almost always it was laid out according to the corner posts that are on the reserve. As far as I know the map is accurate but of course I don't know the original survey. If one found the old survey this is where it could be known for sure. This reserve was given to us and surveyed in the 1800"s.

Lil - Does it include Johnny Piper MacDonald's property the map that you got from Ottawa.

- No. I have another map the reserve is also marked on this and it's got the same dimensions as the Indian Affairs map. The only difference between the Indian Affairs map and the other one was that the Indian Affairs map didn't include Chapel Island and the other islands to be Indian reserves. but the other map it included the islands along with the reserve. Chapel Island was granted to the Indians to be used by them by Kavanaugh. He was a member. He granted Chapel Island to the Indians. There were a lot of land that was owned by Kavanaugh.

Lil - He was responsible for us getting Chapel Island.

- Yes.

Lil - There are 2 other islands besides Chapel Island that were granted to us.

- Yes, 3 three islands.

Lil - One of them is Ambrose Island Chapel Island and I don't remember the name of the other one.

- It's called in Indian (a place where silver is. or. Silvers Island ~~but~~ but in English it's called Lennox Island.

Lil - Lennox Island doesn't sound familiar to me but I know there are three islands that belong to us.

- The other island is called Lennox Island. One time I heard this story from my father. An Indian by the name of Andrew Alex cleared the island he made pasture land there for his animals. Anyway when he was finished the MacDonald family claimed it. John MacDonald father or grandfather. He put his sheep on that island. The

Indians had a meeting on the reserve at that time and my father was picked to be the one to help the Indians. He didn't have an education but he could speak good English. He went to Lardoise and a letter was written for him and this letter was sent to Ottawa. A schoolteacher by the name of Vinney wrote the letter for my father. In that letter my father specified that he didn't want the answer to go to anybody else but to be sent to him directly. I remember the answer to that letter myself. My father used to have it. I should have saved that letter. I don't know what happened to that letter. The letter said, "I don't see why John MacDonald or whatever his name was could claim that (island) because he doesn't own it. It belongs to the Indians of the Chapel Island Reserve. and that letter also said, Inform Mr. MacDonald to take his animals off the Island. My father took the letter to Mr. MacDonald. Mr. MacDonald was so mad he ordered my father out of his house. My father told me one time, that if your land ~~bordered~~ ^{EXTENDS to} an Island by means of a sandbar by rights you had a right to ~~claim~~ that land ~~as your property~~ I mean that island. I don't know how true that is but Mr. MacDonald's property was in this category. A sandbar started from his land and extended to Lennox Island. But still the Indians got Lennox Island.

I have a map which includes the white people's land around this area. Indians used to tell me that there was a parcel of land in St. Peter's which belonged to the Indians. I sent a letter to Ottawa and I received maps. We studied the maps for about three days looking for an Indian Reserve. Anthanasius Sylliboy and some White people told me that the reserve land started where Georgie's Samson's house is now located and it extended to the place the Indians call (Buk-dok-ko-way- dek) (A Place where the Echo could be heard) that coast line along there. I looked at the maps and I told one of the surveyor's I want to know for sure if this is true - if we own land in St. Peter's. We studied the maps very carefully but no, there is no Indian land in this area. If there was an Indian reserve in St. Peter's it would have been marked by a red line. I found out who the owner of that supposedly Indian Reserve land is. His name is Gillis. He let the Indians use it when they were passing through to use it as a port but it didn't belong to the Indians. After a while I figured it out

You know the Indians, wherever he made port and stayed for a few days, he thinks that land belongs to him still in a way it is his because he's an Indian but everytime they would claim it. I don't doubt the Indian's thinking because this is all our land but according to the white man, the people making the maps - all the land is marked off whoever owns this piece of land and another one's land etc.

Lil - There is another place in ARichat where the Indians used to camp while they were passing through.

Yes, In Indian it's call kundo- wabag) White Rock and Discousse was another stopping place for the Indians. These were just temporary places - it's just like you were travelling and stopping and making camp for a few days. Sometimes the Indians camped all summer in one place - another Indian arrives and so on and so forth. The Indians were given permission by the owners to make camp just the same it belongs to them but they couldn't claim it.

Lil - I heard that there is an Indian land in Canso. It's called Indian Point. I don't know if you are familiar with Canso but this place is near Tiddle.

- I've never been to Canso myself. I've often asked my father if we owned any land in Canso and he would say yes. we own land in Canso. I've often heard him mention this. I don't know if it was the truth but he wasn't old enough to know for sure. I don't think so.

Lil - He must have heard a story from someone.

- Indians tell a lot of stories concerning Indian ownership of some land. and when you check out their stories by sending maps from Ottawa. This is the way to find out for sure.

Lil - And land deeds.

- Yes, old deeds - this is the means of making sure. I have an old map of Richmond County.

Lil - We have them at the office too.

- But in this one I have it doesn't include the Indian res. alright it's marked down as an Indian reserve but it's different than the Indian Affairs's map from Ottawa. Ottawa's map are marked by a red circle.

Lil -

Lil - I am interested in the way the people made a living at one time e.g. the Barra Head Indians they used to plant all their own vegetables and going out to fish in Canso. The time they used to fish for swordfish.

Did you ever stories from your father. of this sort. I wonder if this was profitable ~~and~~ you think this was a good way to make a living.

- From what I heard from my father - it was good and profitable for the people who owned their own boats. But not too good for the people working for them. They didn't make too much themselves. The boatowner got all the profit. e.g. like HIred somebody to work for me in the woods - cutting pulp for me. Let's say pulp is worth 50.00 so I only give this man working for me 5.00. That's the way with the fisherman working for the boatowners. That's the way I understand it to be but if everybody had a boat at that time it would have been a good way to make a living but I don't know for sure how swordfishing was worked out. I don't if they had shares but anyway it was a good way to make a living just the same.

Lil - They made a good living because they didn't have to depend on welfare.

- Yes. they didn't know what welfare was at that time.

Lil - And if they got welfare it was only during the winter months. Do you know how much they got.

- One time I answered an ad in the paper. It was for a course in heavy equipment operating. I didn't get an answer for a long time. I was working the woods - it was in January - one evening when I came home from work my wife told me that a man was to the house to see me that day. I asked her what the man wanted and she said it was about a letter you sent to someone in Toronto. Well, she said that man is visiting the Cape Breton area and he'll be back to see you tonight. That man came to see me that evening. He showed me the letter that I had sent. He asked me if I wanted to take a test. I told I will try. He gave me a questionnaire. I answered the questions. When I finished he looked over my paper and he told me that I had passed the test. He said, you can get into the school in Truro. (Normal College) This was the place where the course was being taught in heavy equipment operating. He said, the only thing that is required is 150.00

in cash. This is the tuition. I don't know how long that course was 2 or 6 months. I don't remember.

He asked me if I had the money. I told him no. He said, "do you know of anybody who will back you. I said, no, and I don't know who will back me. He gave me his telephone number. He said if you do get the money call me collect.

Lil - Did you go to the IAB office.

- I did. MacKinnon was the agent then. I took my letter and I showed it to him. I told him of my problem. He told me he couldn't help me. He said, I can't do nothing for you, now if you were living here in Eskasoni maybe I could lend you the money. But since you are living there (B.H.) I couldn't do anything for you. So I couldn't do anything. I guess I wasn't the only one that was treated like that by the agency. I can only say, that God only knows where MacKinnon is today. I don't want to say which place he deserved but I was so mad at that time that if I was the Judge I wouldn't have sent him to heaven. They didn't want us to (IAB) get ahead at that time. There were a lot of stumbling blocks.

Lil - I guess it wasn't really the agents fault in some cases - they had to follow the IAB regulations. But centralization was just a test case for us Maritime Indians. If it was successful I guess it would have been carried out for the rest of Canada. I guess we were the guinea pigs.

- One time I found a rock here on the reserve. I found it at the Johnson's Cliff. I took it to the agency. They sent it to Halifax to be tested. They found out that it contained 93% of lime. I don't know if the rest was copper or if it did it wasn't much. Lime was wanted by the Coal Mines. A quarry was going to be started somewhere in Richmond County. Later I found out that they started a quarry in Johnstown. and the rock specimen that they had tested only contained 83% of lime. Ours was better but they started the mine in Johnstown. I was hoping that they would get it here, so that Indians could be employed but that's not the way it worked out. Because if the mine was started here it would have only employed the Indians not the White people. If the mine was started here maybe the Indians would have been better off today.

Lil - I am not sure about this - I don't remember where I read - that if any mineral was found on the reserve we wouldn't have any rights to it all. I don't know if it's in the Indian Act or where.

- How come the Indians in the West have oil wells and etc. on their reserves.

~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ LII - I may be wrong but I'll ask my boss about it.

- It would be nice if the mine was started here and we could all have shares in it and this money not to go into the band fund. I don't see just two or three people profiting from it. That wouldn't work out. Let this go to individuals or families all of them having shares ~~in the process.~~

LII - I wanted to ask you since you were in the army did you get a DVA house.

- Yes. The house where my son is living in now. It's a DVA house.

LII - Did you also get a lot.

- Yes. I did but that didn't interest me at all. And I think a lot of Indians feel the same way as I do. They are ^{not} interested in houses they get from the government. Who knows what will happen if I die ^{today} maybe tomorrow my children would be kicked out of the house. Somebody would be moved in.

If a person given the houses be given 5 - 10 years - after that length of time that house would be given to them. This is the way it works in DVA housing. You are given a deed to that house after living in it a certain number of years. I have a deed to the house and also for the lot. Indian Affairs housing should be like that. Because ~~nowadays~~ the Indians are not interested in their IAB houses because they know those houses don't really belong to them. It is just like living in a rented home. If you die or something didn't work out you could be kicked out of that house. Even if you fixed up that house yourself you have no right to that home it's a government house. I can't see this at all. You should be given a limit and then you are given that homestead. I think the people would have more interest in their houses. Another thing, Lillian, I see a lot of people not just here, but in Eskasoni I've seen a lot of good houses being destroyed. Some of these houses are only 5 years old or so. The people want a new house so they try to destroy the house they're living in. They destroy the house on the outside or inside deliberately. I think persons doing this should be punished

or given a certain time to repair the damage that they have done to that house or else lay charges on that person. So they don't do that again. I've seen good houses in Eskasoni where the gyproc had holes in it -

Lil - I've heard a lot of people telling me the same stories. These people who take care of their homes - they don't think this is fair for some people to have 2 -3 houses within 25 years or so. I've talked to people who have had the same houses since centralization. You know the first houses built in Eskasoni were just shells. They tell me if you had to depend on the government to finish your house you had to wait 5 - 10 years or longer. So if you were in a hurry to get your home finished you had to do it yourself.

- This is what interests me, and I hope this happens someday - you get a deed for your house then maybe people will take better care of their homes.

Lil - That is true.

- Another thing people wouldn't be afraid to fix up their homes keep them in repair. I think more of them would even pay from their own pockets to keep these homes in condition.

Lil - I've often thought about that too. In my case, when my parents die I won't be able to live in that house all the time because I have to make my living somewhere else. I will probably lose that house.

- It would be nice if your father could get a deed to that house so you'll be able to get that house.

Lil - But how long is it - if you don't live in that house for 6 months or is it 1 year you lose that house.

- Yes. but that's not good. If you paid a lot of money towards that house and you were away for 6 mo. or 1 year and some other people were moved in by the Council. By the time you came back your home could be damaged. Maybe they will be moved in for two or three months but that's all you need if for instance the new tenants were drunks.

Lil - But now they are in the process of changing the Indian Act. The Research staff will be involved. They want to come around to all the reserves and discuss the changings with the grassroots people. Listen to their suggestions and etc.

- Look at me today I put my son, Norman in my DVA house and he's starting to repair it. I can't say I will tear that house down today or tomorrow because I don't own this house I am living in now. If I move in my other house nobody could kick me out because I have a deed to it. It is my own but this house it's just like a rented home. Who knows what will happen after I die maybe my children will be kicked out and somebody else would be moved in.

Lil - I think that is why some Indians depend on the government so much, they wouldn't even lift a finger to do work on the house or pay for the repairing themselves.

Yes that is true. I say we should have deeds to our homes.

- But those deeds given out by the IAB they're no good. I don't know how much weight that piece of paper has but I still say it's no good. The Council could still ~~move~~ claim your house if you were not living in it for so many years.

My father has one. I don't what you call it - certificate of possession. I think it's for the ~~same~~ parcel of land and our house.

Where did you father get his deed from Ottawa?

- I don't know but I know a lot of people have them.

- I got mine from Ottawa. It's got a stamp on it - a government stamp.

The enclosed correspondence of T. A. Crerar, Minister of Mines and Resources (Liberal government) to Hon. Clarence Gillis, M. P. (C.C.F.) bears some pause for remembrance of the reigning government's attitude towards Indians.

I It would appear that to sustain an argument for "bureaucratic efficiency", immoral, unsightly, drunken and promiscuous Indians had to be removed as far away from the Whites as possible.

Of course, Centralization had to be gradual so as not to disturb "any Indian who has demonstrated his capacity to maintain himself and live in decency...." I wonder whose ideas were "ill conceived and largely imaginary?"