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The Politics of Indian Residential Schooling in Northern Saskatchewan

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INTRODUCTION

Some years ago during a visit to Australia I spent a most congenial and instructive afternoon conversing with a fellow anthropologist about our shared interest in aboriginal peoples and their relations with national governments. In the course of our discussion my colleague mentioned a life history of an aboriginal political leader that he had recorded during fieldwork in the Northern Territory. Anticipating that complex and contentious dealings with Australian authorities might well feature significantly in the life story of such a leader, I sought confirmation of this expectation from my colleague. To my surprise, he noted that during the many hours spent tape-recording the aboriginal leader's account, the matter of dealings with Australian institutions and bureaucrats arose not once, even though this leader regularly intervened on behalf of aboriginal people who were obliged to engage for one or another purpose with a range of government agencies. Instead the man's story began with his kinship relations and proceeded to enumerate the aboriginal persons, languages and events that in his view comprised the essential elements of his life. This experience of apprehended misprediction left me with not only a taste for the richness of biographical detail provided in the portion of the tape recordings that my colleague played for me that afternoon but also a sharply renewed appreciation of the manner in which the analytical purposes and presuppositions of anthropologists and subjects may differ in many respects. Clearly, empirical revision (or corroboration) of anthropological enthusiasms and expectations by means of ethnographic inquiry remains a necessary and salutary disciplinary practice.

This lesson returned to mind when I was approached in the early 1990s by an Indian tribal council in northern Saskatchewan that requested my assistance in examining certain aspects of Indian residential schooling. At the time of this request the long overlooked history of Indian residential schooling had become an explosive legal and political issue in Canada. Stories of past physical and emotional mistreatment suffered by Indian children in residential schools were being widely publicized; criminal charges of sexual abuse had been laid against several former religious personnel who had once held positions of authority and trust in one or another residential school. Although most Indian residential schools in Canada had been closed by the mid-1970s, the subsequent revelation of the assimilationist purposes and sometimes criminally abusive operations of these institutions had effectively rendered them notorious in contemporary public discourse. Accordingly, I anticipated that the tribal council's request for research assistance might well focus upon an investigation of past residential school abuses suffered by band members of that tribal council. Nevertheless, as I quickly discovered, what the tribal council sought was not a search for evidence of past

abuse but rather a systematic analysis of the administration of Indian residential schooling in Prince Albert from its beginnings in 1867 to the present day. Indian residential schooling had continued in Prince Albert, the largest city in north central Saskatchewan, after the 1960s at the insistence of Indian band leaders. Indeed, in 1985 the tribal council wrested operational control of residential education for Indian children in that part of northern Saskatchewan out of the hands of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. In short, a tribal council was working with determination to redesign and renew a residential educational institution for Indian children at a time when the very term "residential school" had become widely demonized within Canadian society.

How did this unusual situation arise, and what broader analytical implications might an understanding of it have for the ways in which anthropologists generally think about residential schooling and relations between aboriginal peoples and governments? These questions are addressed in this paper through an examination of certain aspects of the operation of Indian residential schooling in Prince Albert by the Church of England, later the federal government and finally the tribal council (i.e., Prince Albert Grand Council). Since a comprehensive account of this administrative history can be found in my published report for the tribal council (Dyck 1997a), this paper focuses upon the long-standing aboriginal interest and involvement in the politics of Indian residential schooling in northern Saskatchewan.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLING AND INDIAN ADMINISTRATION IN CANADA

The administration of Indian affairs is one of the oldest and most continuous functions of government in Canada, reaching from colonial times to the present day. Although British imperial policies towards aboriginal peoples were initially continued by the new Dominion of Canada, the passage of the Indian Act in 1876 equipped the federal government with broad powers and a centralized administrative structure with which to pursue Indian administration in conjunction with ambitious objectives of nation-building. What the federal government sought was the opening of new territories, particularly in the prairie west, to large-scale Euro-Canadian agricultural settlement. To facilitate this outcome some form of accommodation needed to be made with Indians and other aboriginal peoples. The signing of treaties during the 1870s provided a means for not only transferring Indian lands to the federal government but also creating a formal administrative and political relationship between the crown and Indian peoples. This arrangement was intended to forestall the disorder and costly armed conflict that had characterized Indian-state relations in the United States. Under the terms of the treaties the Canadian government agreed, among other things, to permit Indian peoples to continue their traditional ways of life as long as they wished and were able to do so and, further, to assist them to take up agricultural pursuits on lands reserved for Indian bands in the event of the depletion of game sources.

The disappearance of the buffalo from the Canadian plains by 1879 triggered the implementation of an unprecedented development program aimed at transforming prairie Indians into self-supporting agriculturists (Dyck 1986; Carter 1990). Yet despite the considerable progress initially registered by Indian farmers, federal authorities opted in the early 1880s to make untimely cutbacks to the funding of the reserve agricultural program, a

move which triggered protests by many Indian bands. Although Indian involvement in the Métis rebellion of 1885 was quite limited, it served to frighten federal representatives in the west and, thereby, prompted the implementation of a far more coercive form of Indian administration in subsequent years.

After 1885 Indians in the prairie region were largely confined to their reserves and placed beneath the jurisdiction of a strict form of control under which federal officials monitored and regulated virtually all aspects of political, economic and social life. The stated objective of federal Indian administration was to teach Indians the "lessons of civilization" so they could be led from "lives of savagery" to become civilized and Christian members of Canadian society. Members of Indian bands were to be individually assimilated into Canadian society, and, as each adult Indian achieved this ideal of "enfranchisement", a portion of band lands would be converted into private property for their use. Thus, it was hoped that over a period of years Indians would cease to exist as aboriginal people and their reserve lands would be parcelled into small, transferable lots of private property that could be sold and bought freely. This "solution" to the Indian "problem" was proclaimed by its architects to be a beneficent and generous policy that, nonetheless, needed to be applied firmly since Indians were viewed as being incapable of knowing what was in their best interests. This self-declared form of paternalistic philanthropy, which can be identified analytically as "coercive tutelage" (Dyck 1991), served to legitimate the government's overall program to open Indian lands to Euro-Canadian settlement.

Under this system Indian reserves served as sites of training where Indians were charged with acquiring the inclinations and habits of civilization. Yet to succeed in this endeavour, Indians would have to submit themselves unconditionally to the direction of federal bureaucrats and express their acceptance of the moral dictum of the inferiority of aboriginality. Not surprisingly, neither of these requirements proved particularly attractive, and there was both principled and incidental resistance to larger and smaller aspects of the Department of Indian Affairs' exercise of federal wardship over Indian communities. Accordingly, federal authorities pinned their hopes upon the education of Indian children, assuming that, if reached at a sufficiently early age, Indian boys and girls could be more readily shaped than their parents or grandparents to adopt the trappings and essentials of "civilization."

Although day schools were established on some Indian reserves, these poorly financed institutions reported only modest results and generally indifferent attendance by pupils who returned to their homes at the end of each school day. A proposal arose for a more powerful means of advancing assimilation through the creation of residential schools to which many Indian children could be consigned and kept apart from their families and communities for all but a few weeks of each year.¹ In these residential schools Indian students would be systematically stripped of their aboriginal cultures and refitted as brown "white men". Ideally, the residential schools would produce graduates who would be ready and willing to be "enfranchised" and, thereby, freed of their legally inferior status as Indians.

Federal officials actively sought the assistance of religious denominations to establish and operate residential schools for Indian children. The provision of federal funding readily attracted various denominations that were keen to pursue the evangelical opportunities

afforded by this arrangement as well as to position themselves strategically in the Euro-Canadian communities sprouting up across the west. In consequence, the different underlying interests of church and state were materially advanced by the operation of Indian residential schools, even though both rhetorically celebrated their involvement in this undertaking as an act of Christian charity. Squabbling between federal officials and church representatives over the financing of Indian residential schools began with their appearance in the latter part of the nineteenth century and continued until their general closure in the 1970s.

Within these broadly sketched parameters of Canadian Indian administration, there was, of course, some regional variation. The implementation of tightly controlled forms of reserve administration occurred primarily in the prairie region. In northern areas where there were limited or no possibilities for agricultural pursuits, members of Indian communities tended to lead their lives largely as before. Nevertheless, Indian children from boreal and subarctic regions were eventually among those sent to residential schools in cities such as Prince Albert. It is also important to note that individual residential schools sometimes varied significantly in the ways in which their principals interpreted and implemented the guidelines attached to federal funding of these institutions. Moreover, the operations of a particular residential school could shift over time, reflecting differences in the priorities and practices of successive school principals.

Yet to study the detailed and particular operations of a given Indian residential school when the general character of this type of institution has been roundly condemned by intellectuals and aboriginal spokespersons is to take on some challenging questions. Is the appropriate purpose of such inquiry limited to locating additional corroborative illustration of the commonly cited faults of residential schooling? Or is an account of a particular residential school worthwhile in its own right? Should the Indian boys and girls who attended any given residential school or, for that matter, their parents, be viewed axiomatically as victims of a monolithic institutional power? Or should they be treated as individuals possessed of some degree of agency, albeit either as juvenile agents who were taken away from their homes and placed under the guardianship of residential school staff or as parents who might have allowed their children to attend a residential school or who were unable to keep their children at home? Would the elicitation of evidence that some of the Indian children and parents who became involved with given residential schools might have hoped that given institutions would function to their benefit serve only to mitigate the larger critique of federal residential schooling? Or does evidence that some residential school authorities did sometimes endeavour to take into account the wishes of Indian children, parents and leaders suggest, rather, that a better informed understanding and assessment of Indian residential schooling as a whole is likely to be advanced rather than compromised by addressing the specificities—as well as the commonalities—of these geographically, denominationally and temporally particular institutions?

The approach preferred by the tribal council was one that deemed the particular history of residential schooling in Prince Albert to be intrinsically significant to the Indian people of that area, including not only those who attended one or another facility in Prince Albert as pupils at some point between 1890 and 1995 but also their parents, siblings who may

have stayed at home, children and grandchildren. Accounts and critiques of residential schooling based on the experience of Indians in other provinces and in institutions operated by denominations other than the Anglican Church were not dismissed. But neither were these taken as readily transferable representations of what had happened in Prince Albert. The tribal council also distinguished carefully between its project—the preparation of a delimited administrative or operational history of residential schooling in Prince Albert—and any larger or more comprehensive account that might ostensibly seek to summarize the individual experiences of all those who had attended residential school in the city. This distinction intentionally left individuals figuratively and literally in possession of their own stories about their specific experiences with residential schooling in Prince Albert. The tribal council's commissioned account would not, therefore, presume to represent the range of individual experiences and memories within the confines of a simplified master narrative. Instead, its approach served to keep the story of residential schooling in this city as an open topic of discourse which could and would be enlarged and deepened as individuals deemed it appropriate to share their experiences with others. It was, in short, a stance well suited to take into account and accommodate the subtle and, perhaps, not so subtle variations in action and perspective that might be expected to figure in a field as dispersed and complex as that of Indian residential schooling in Canada.

INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLING IN PRINCE ALBERT

The schooling of Indian children began in Prince Albert at the inception of that settlement and from the outset attracted sustained and serious interest on the part of Indian parents and leaders. The founding of a Presbyterian mission on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River in July 1866 marked the beginning of the future city of Prince Albert. This development was by no means unilaterally imposed: only after two days of consultations with representatives of the local Cree community was the Reverend Nisbet granted permission to establish a mission. When he constructed a school the following year, the arrangements made with parents of Indian and Métis children who were to be left under his tutelage were mutually arrived at, setting a precedent for future developments in this field. By the mid-1870s, however, the demand for schooling by recently arrived, fee-paying settlers served to redirect the attention of the Presbyterians away from mission work and the schooling of Indian children.

The consecration of the first Anglican Bishop of Saskatchewan in 1874 signalled the commencement of a major initiative by the Church of England to make mission work with Indians a central part of its strategy to establish itself as one of the leading denominations in north central Saskatchewan.² The centrepiece of the new bishop's plan was to establish a theological college in Prince Albert which would train aboriginal and non-aboriginal catechists, lay readers, missionaries and priests who could be sent forth to seek converts and to build Anglican congregations. The opening of Emmanuel College in 1879 represented a significant investment of funds donated to the new diocese. Under the guidelines of a Church of England evangelical strategy known as the "Native Church Policy," Anglican missionaries working with aboriginal peoples were expected to make the development of an

aboriginal clergy one of their first priorities. This approach anticipated that aboriginal people could, through the timely provision of appropriate assistance, construct self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating congregations, thereby freeing non-aboriginal missionaries and funding to pursue new evangelical endeavours in other fields.

This policy, unlike others adopted by churches and governments in later years, placed as much or more emphasis upon working with aboriginal adults and communities as with aboriginal children. What this meant was that adults were not considered to be members of a “lost generation” who could not profitably be worked with or who were beyond redemption. Because aboriginal adults were seen as being capable persons, there was little impetus to focus exclusively upon children or to insist upon removing or “rescuing” them from the supposedly deleterious influence of their families and communities. While the Native Church Policy certainly aimed to convert aboriginal people to Christianity, promote education and encourage Indians to change their ways of life, this policy did not doubt the ability of aboriginal peoples to regain their independence and become self-supporting in the wake of the disappearance of the buffalo. In consequence, while the provision of formal schooling was seen as being beneficial to Indian children and their communities, it was not deemed essential to keep Indian boys and girls apart from their parents or to insulate them from their communities.

Located several miles west of the Presbyterian mission, Emmanuel College did train a number of aboriginal and non-aboriginal adults for positions in the church and subsequently added a high school for the fee-paying sons of settlers. In 1883 Bishop McLean’s dreams for the institution reached a high point when he obtained a charter to create the University of Saskatchewan, of which Emmanuel College was to be a key element. But McLean’s lofty aspirations for the college were not to be realized. As noted previously, the 1885 Rebellion prompted a fundamental realignment of the administration of Indian affairs in western Canada that produced authoritarian policies and practices designed to strip Indians of their autonomy and subject them to programs of forced assimilation. Also, the funding support that the young Diocese of Saskatchewan had initially received from various church bodies was to be withdrawn. What was more, the city of Prince Albert ended up developing around the original Presbyterian mission, leaving the site of Emmanuel College several miles out of town. When the Presbyterian school added a collegiate or high school class in 1885, enrollment in the Emmanuel College Collegiate School declined sharply, notwithstanding the significant investment that had been put into college buildings and facilities. Finally, the accidental death of Bishop McLean in the fall of 1885 left the college without his able and determined leadership.

The next bishop viewed Emmanuel College as being ahead of its time in terms of the requirements of the country and beyond the financial capacities of the diocese, even though the college had been debt-free at the time of McLean’s death. To finance the continuing operation and upkeep of the campus facility, application was made to the Department of Indian Affairs to have it funded as a boarding school³ for Indian children. Approval and initial funding was received in 1890, the same year in which a petition was submitted by several chiefs in the Prince Albert area to have not merely a boarding school but a full industrial school located in Prince Albert so that their children would not be obliged to attend

the Battleford Industrial School. The support of Chiefs James Smith, John Smith, Mistawasis and Starblanket reflected their active involvement in the synod deliberations of the Diocese of Saskatchewan and a powerful desire to have their children attend school closer to home and so be readily visited by parents. The history of Emmanuel College's dealings with Indians up to that point had been relatively positive and co-operative in nature compared to those then emerging between reserve residents and employees of the Department of Indian Affairs. Indeed, throughout its eighteen years of operation as an Indian boarding school, Emmanuel College seemed to enjoy a measure of support from and respect for Indian leaders that permitted this institution to avoid some, though by no means all, of the serious problems that plagued the operation of other residential schools in western Canada.

The fact that this residential school did not employ corporal punishment to discipline its pupils was commented upon over the years by inspectors and visitors. That the first principal of this school, Archdeacon John Mackay, could speak Cree fluently and, just as important, was willing to converse with pupils in their own language were distinctive features of Emmanuel College. Although the school was obliged to take note of the policies and instructions of the Department of Indian Affairs as a condition of receiving government funding, its operations never readily corresponded with the strident tone of federal policy that envisioned Indian children as passive recipients of residential schooling and their parents as entirely out of the picture. Indeed, in petitioning federal authorities to increase the woefully inadequate level of government funding of the school, a later principal invoked a set of arguments that had been articulated by Cree leaders since the 1880s concerning the nature and extent of Indian rights guaranteed through the treaties. This stance enraged federal officials and galvanized their determination to close this particular school when circumstances permitted, as they did in 1908. Thus, Emmanuel College reverted to a theological college that was relocated and attached to the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. The former campus and buildings were sold, and the proceeds were reinvested to construct St. Alban's College, a residential high school for fee-paying non-aboriginal girls in Prince Albert. Indian residential schooling was discontinued in Prince Albert until the Second World War.

Nevertheless, the Church of England's involvement in Indian residential schooling continued at Onion Lake in western Saskatchewan and Lac la Ronge in the northern part of the province. Church officials even sketched out a plan to re-establish Indian residential schooling in Prince Albert, particularly after St. Alban's was forced to close its doors due to a lack of fee-paying students. Situated across the street from the Prince Albert Collegiate Institute (hereafter PACI), the building was briefly used as a hostel for male students attending PACI and then stood empty during the depths of the depression of the 1930s. But there was little interest on the part of federal officials in using St. Alban's for Indian schooling until December 1943 when the Anglican residential school at Onion Lake was destroyed by fire. Within a matter of weeks the Department of Indian Affairs had agreed to repair and maintain the St. Alban's building in return for its use as a replacement facility for the school at Onion Lake. Some three years later the Anglican residential school in Lac la Ronge was also destroyed by fire, and its pupils were temporarily moved to St. Alban's and another Anglican institution in southern Saskatchewan. By 1948 serious overcrowding at

St. Alban's prompted the expansion of residential schooling to the grounds and barracks of a wartime army training camp situated a few blocks west of St. Alban's. By 1951 all Indian residential schooling in Prince Albert had been amalgamated and relocated to the former army camp, and the St. Alban's building was vacated.

During the 1950s the Prince Albert Indian Residential School (hereafter PAIRS), which was owned by the federal government and operated by the Anglican Church, became the second largest Indian residential school in Canada. In the fall of 1951 there were some 436 children in attendance, even though the school's authorized pupilage had been set at 300. Serious problems arose due to this level of over-enrolment, and during the post-war years Indian parents and leaders attempted on several occasions to express their concerns about the state of school facilities in Prince Albert and the treatment of their children. But the relative responsiveness to Indian concerns that had once distinguished the operations of Emmanuel College was now generally absent. The traditional credo of Canadian Indian administration, that Indians didn't know what was in their best interests and, thus, needed to be strictly administered, had become an accepted tenet of residential schooling, not least within PAIRS. Although several former students have mentioned that some of the men and women who served as staff members at PAIRS demonstrated respect and kindness in their treatment of Indian children, Indian parents and leaders were generally not encouraged to visit the school nor to express their views about its operations.

During the 1950s a fundamental rethinking of Canadian Indian administration led not only to extensive revision of the Indian Act but also to proposals for integrating Indian students into provincially controlled local schools. This measure, which was part of a larger scheme to extricate the federal government from the administration of Indian affairs, was intended to effect the closure of residential schools as well as most on-reserve day schools. The federal government opted to seek gradual implementation of integrated schooling, reasoning that initially generous federal tuition payments made on behalf of Indian pupils to local non-Indian school boards would induce non-aboriginal communities to open their facilities to Indian boys and girls. In this way, separate federal services for and administration of Indians were to be stripped back so that Indians could in due course be legally reclassified as "ordinary" Canadians and subjected to the forces of the market and the social and political institutions that had shaped the society which had grown up beyond Indian reserves. In short, the federal government was intending to "solve" the Indian "problem" that it had presided over for the previous century by the simple measure of defining it out of existence.

The year 1969 marked a watershed in Canadian Indian administration and in the history of Indian residential schooling in Prince Albert. In June 1969 the federal government unveiled a set of policy proposals in a White Paper designed to eliminate within a period of five years the special legal and constitutional status of Canada's Indians and facilitate the abolition of both the Indian Act and the Department of Indian Affairs (Weaver 1981). Indians were to be granted title and control of reserve lands and would thereafter receive services from and pay taxes to provincial and municipal governments. Federal funding previously allocated to Indian administration would initially be shifted to the provinces, although this subsidy would in time be phased out. Having systematically restricted aboriginal peoples' ability to develop and pursue their own livelihoods and control their lands and resources as

they saw fit, the federal government would suddenly expect Indians to resolve or endure the growing political, social and economic inequalities that separated them from non-aboriginal Canadians after a century of federal Indian administration. Once again, federal officials had determined what was "in the best interests of Indians" without even bothering to engage in meaningful consultation with the people whose lives were to be so fundamentally affected.

The officials who drafted the White Paper seriously misjudged the sentiments of reserve communities and the capability of Indian representatives. Indian associations across Canada denounced the White Paper, likening its proposals to a form of cultural genocide. In June 1970 the prime minister backed down from the position outlined in the White Paper and promised that his government would not implement proposals unacceptable to Indian people, but would instead work with Indian associations to address the many problems confronting reserve communities.

By the late 1960s integrated schooling arrangements negotiated with school boards in Prince Albert had already largely transformed PAIRS from a residential school into a residential facility that housed Indian children who attended local schools. In 1969 the Anglican Church's enduring involvement in operating Indian residential schooling in Prince Albert was formally ended, and the remaining federally operated institution was renamed the Prince Albert Student Residence (hereafter PASR). But these measures did not halt the transportation of Indian children to Prince Albert for educational and social purposes. Indeed, since the 1940s residential schooling in Prince Albert had provided not only educational services for many Indian children from northern Saskatchewan communities where there were limited or inadequate school facilities⁴ but also an informal social care facility into which orphans and children from troubled families could be admitted.

With the advent of integrated schooling Indian children were bused each day from the student residence to one of the many public or Roman Catholic Separate Schools in Prince Albert that had contracted with the federal government to provide schooling for Indian students. Care was taken to ensure that in no school did Indian children represent any more than 50 percent of the student body. Indian children were viewed as portable individuals who could be distributed to any one of a number of schools at the pleasure of local school board officials. Nor could Indian children assume that they would continue and complete their elementary schooling in any one school. In consequence, decisions concerning which schools Indian children would be assigned to were made not on the basis of student-centred objectives such as keeping brothers and sisters together in the same school, but according to bureaucratic guidelines and contractual agreements.

Individuals employed at the student residence during these years indicate that one of the most difficult aspects of their work was to witness Indian children breaking into tears on many mornings when they were dropped off in front of their designated schools. Within city schools a substantial proportion of Indian children were assigned to special education classes, an arrangement that some observers viewed as being tantamount to establishing informal educational ghettos in spite of the so-called "integrated" schooling agreements. Although Indian children constituted a minority within each school, they frequently represented a majority of the students enrolled in special education classes. The suspicion was that an unduly large proportion of Indian children were being labelled as lacking the academic ability

to perform satisfactorily and, thus, were frequently placed in groups where less was expected of them and less time and attention was given to them by teachers.

The growing anger felt by Indian parents towards the schooling arrangements made in Prince Albert for their children coincided with a nation-wide campaign during the early 1970s to facilitate "Indian control of Indian education." Accordingly, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, the provincial Indian association, and band leaders in the Prince Albert district insisted in 1973 that Indian representatives should be involved with federal officials in directing the schooling of their children. An Indian board of directors appointed by the band chiefs and councils of the Prince Albert district undertook to work with federal officials to improve the operations of PASR. The agreements federal officials had signed with local school authorities initially left little room for change, but members of the new board of directors were determined to take every opportunity to pursue the overall task of reshaping the objectives and structure of educational services for Indian children in Prince Albert. As well as registering dissatisfaction with many previously unquestioned aspects of the integrated schooling arrangements, the board insisted upon the resumption of on-site schooling for elementary students at the residence. Federal officials reluctantly accepted this demand and authorized the construction of a temporary school block in the form of a number of portable trailers in 1974. This new school, which initially offered grades one to three, was to operate as an Indian-directed institution within the larger PASR facility. Steps were also taken to feature aboriginal cultural components in the elementary school curriculum.

During the 1970s and early 1980s the proportion of children sent to Prince Albert due to a lack of educational facilities in their home communities steadily decreased while the proportion assigned for social or behavioural reasons rose. The changing nature of the student population made the work of child care workers at the student residence highly demanding. Requests to lower the ratio of child residents to child care workers by hiring more staff were typically refused by federal officials. There was also a perception among those who were actively involved in the running of PASR during this period that federal officials were inclined to be more responsive to the interests of the Prince Albert school boards than to those of the Indian-directed elementary school operating at the residence. Not until 1984 was the school at the residence allowed to expand beyond the confines of what was then a ten-year-old "temporary" school block by renting part of a city school located close to PASR. These and other concessions were granted only after years of petitioning by the Indian board of directors who, despite the frustrations of working within an ambiguous structural arrangement with federal officials, recognized the importance of PASR's officially unacknowledged but important task of acting as an institutional safety net. In effect, the availability of a residential schooling facility in Prince Albert served to prevent troubled Indian boys and girls from being permanently removed from their home communities, placed in care and assigned to foster homes or provincial group home facilities, or even put up for adoption out of the province or out of the country.

THE POLITICS OF INDIAN-CONTROLLED RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLING

The determination of Indian leaders in the Prince Albert district to retain a residential

schooling facility in that city and to transform it into an institution that would cater to the particular needs of a special set of Indian children led in May 1985 to the transfer of the PASR to the district chiefs (subsequently reincorporated as a tribal council). The new institutional entity was to be known as the Prince Albert Indian Student Education Centre (hereafter PAISEC). Formidable challenges confronted tribal council leaders in charting a new direction for PAISEC. They had to demonstrate that PAISEC would not be merely a new name for what amounted to another version of an archaic and discredited institutional form, the Indian residential school. As well as making PAISEC fully accepting of aboriginal cultures and accountable to parents, band leaders and the tribal council's education board, it was important to demonstrate that it would not be organized primarily to suit the convenience of the personnel who worked within it but rather to be responsive to the needs of the children whom it served.

Since the federal government's past experience of managing residential schools and student residences offered little in the way of a model for enhancing PAISEC's operations, a good deal of initiative, sensitivity and courage would be required to discover appropriate ways of realizing the ambitious objectives set for the new centre. High standards of professionalism would have to be established and maintained by PAISEC staff. Moreover, given that PAISEC was not simply an Indian-controlled school but one that also cared for its children twenty-four hours a day, it could not simply compare itself to other band schools. PAISEC would, in many respects, become a unique facility that offered highly specialized and much needed services to Indian children who would otherwise be forced to leave their communities and enter into care under the jurisdiction of the provincial government. Children such as these were frequently lost to their families and communities on a permanent basis, and it was this pattern that PAISEC was instructed to bring to an end.

The tribal council took control of an institution that had been systematically underfunded by federal officials for many years in anticipation of its closure or transfer to Indian control. From the bureaucratic perspective, the transfer offered an opportunity to off-load upon Indians a maximum of responsibilities and a minimum of budgetary resources. What was more, as soon as they had passed over to PAISEC the task of providing institutional care for rising numbers of children who required much more than classroom instruction, federal officials began to define and treat PAISEC as though it was after all simply an ordinary school providing routine educational services and residential accommodation.

What this amounted to was an instrumental denial by federal officials of the manner in which residential schooling in Prince Albert had long been used informally by government to address the need for child and family services upon Indian reserves. Sending orphans and children with social and behavioural problems to residential schools had been an inexpensive way of covering the relative lack of reserve social services provided by the department. Providing appropriate care for these children tended to require more of the staff's time and expertise than was the case for other students, but additional resources were not granted for this purpose. Instead, residential school employees were left to get on with jobs that became more demanding and less attractive year by year. Federal officials continued to hold this stance when the institution was handed over to the tribal council, thereby making the work of PAISEC far more difficult than it ought to have been.

By the early 1990s the tribal council and PAISEC staff had invested substantial energy and care into developing a specialized residential educational centre that provided not only elementary and secondary education and residential care but also a highly effective counselling unit. The preventative guidance program mounted by PAISEC staff offered classroom, small group and individual counselling on topics ranging from drug, alcohol and substance abuse to anger management, family life and family violence prevention. The program also initiated routine discussions of issues of social, emotional and spiritual development as well as those involving child and adolescent development and human sexuality.

These and other program developments, which clearly identified PAISEC's evolution as a social development and educational facility, were not, however, welcomed by federal officials. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs' (hereafter INAC) long-term objective of phasing out residential institutions such as PAISEC through the implementation of band and tribal council-controlled Indian child and family service agreements was pursued relentlessly by regional INAC officials from 1993 onwards. Although PAISEC had time and again declared the provision of social development services to Indian children to be an essential and definitive part of its mission, INAC officials resurrected the old argument that there was no mandate for the centre to be involved in these types of activities. Although the tribal council's commissioned administrative history of Indian residential schooling in Prince Albert clearly established the long-standing evolution of social development services for Indian children through residential facilities in the city, federal authorities were determined to force the closure of PAISEC. Finally, in the summer of 1995 INAC officials extracted an agreement-in-principle from a meeting of some tribal council representatives to close PAISEC within two years.⁵ No provision was made to replicate within band communities the specialized and co-ordinated child care, counselling and schooling services provided at PAISEC.

CONCLUSIONS

Ironically, the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs employed a piece of contemporary anti-residential school rhetoric to warrant the closure of PAISEC. In a letter communicating the department's position (see Dyck 1997a: 118-9), he referred to the controversial history of Indian residential schooling in Canada to justify the bureaucratically-desired closure of PAISEC and several other student residences in Saskatchewan that had only recently been taken over by tribal councils. In other words, innovative Indian-controlled institutions like PAISEC that had been in existence for less than a decade were tarred with the brush of more than a century of state and denominational tutelage. Moreover, the particular history of more than a century of Indian residential schooling in Prince Albert that demonstrates the abiding interest of Indian parents and leaders in their children's education and well-being was dismissed by federal authorities as being irrelevant, as were the formal and informal achievements that had been registered at PAISEC.⁶ Once again departmental personnel presumed to know better than Indian parents and leaders what was in the best interests of Indian people.

Anthropologists would do well to consider the broader implications of this case and the intellectual and political practices that it highlights. Marginalization or neglect of ethnographic and historical particularity in academic discourse comprises not only an analytical preference but also an exercise of definitional power that will certainly have intellectual and practical consequences. Thus, to overlook the history of Indian involvement in residential schooling in Prince Albert that led eventually to the creation of PAISEC simply because it doesn't readily accord with currently popular but clichéd thinking about residential schools is to efface the historical and contemporary interests, efforts and achievements of Indian people in this region. Instead, the distinctive nature of their efforts and successes need to be remembered and taken into account if we are to achieve a more complete and hopeful understanding of the complex nature of relations between aboriginal peoples and the state.

NOTES

- 1) An extensive literature on Canadian Indian residential schooling has appeared in recent years. See, for example, Chrisjohn 1997, Furniss 1995, Miller 1996 and Milloy 1999.
- 2) What was termed the "Indian work" was seen as providing a viable basis for attracting financial contributions to the diocese from church members in eastern Canada and Britain.
- 3) Initially the federal government funded two types of residential educational facilities for Indian children: boarding schools, which were to offer primarily an academic education, and industrial schools, which offered a broader range of manual and vocational training. The industrial schools were the more expensive of the two types of institutions. During the early part of the twentieth century the distinction between the two types of institutions became less prominent and the term "residential school" was generally adopted.
- 4) Children whose families spent the winter on traplines, away from any settled community or school, were also often sent to residential schools.
- 5) See Dyck (1997b) for an account and analysis of the circumstances of PAISEC's closure.
- 6) Indeed, in tending each year to the needs of more than 300 children, the vast majority of whom were referred to PAISEC because of special social and behavioural needs that could not be met in their home communities, this Indian-controlled institution recorded not a single case of suicide among its enrolled students over a period of ten years. Given the disturbingly high rates of suicide among aboriginal youth in general (Narcisse 1998), not to mention the enhanced vulnerability of the types of students admitted to PAISEC, this spoke eloquently of the accomplishments realized in this institution.

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