



Give us a chance to be equals

'It's an enormous jump from snowshoes to satellite communications'

By David Porter

Colonial governments. Pipelines, natural resource exploitation, racism, loss of rights, culture and land. Northern native peoples, the Inuit of the Arctic, Déné of the Mackenzie Valley and the Yukon Indians face relentless erosion of their aboriginal rights by a dominant society. We spend our lives defending our culture from the ravages of so-called progress. It's a mighty struggle, and more often than not we lose. But on this one occasion, we might just turn the tide. The Council for Yukon Indians (CYI) and the Déné Nation have jointly applied to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) for a licence to operate a radio broadcasting network and to produce television programming in the Far North. It's the first step in a comprehensive communications initiative leading, ultimately, to what we hope will be a television channel devoted exclusively to native programming.

In this historic collaboration, the CYI and the Déné Nation represent all Indians, status and non-status, north of the 60th parallel. Our application calls for technology, facilities and programming that will originate in the North, as well as provide unprecedented communication from one northern community to another. We have applied for a graduated program of communications development. The first phase would involve a complete radio service, with native-language commentary, local control and community-to-community radio linkups. Every issue important to our people could be discussed through these radio conferences. What the South takes for granted, the North would finally obtain.

In the second phase, we hope to introduce several hours of original prime-time TV programming and, in the third phase, our own television channel. As things now stand, the CBC has indicated that it cannot provide the required services. Nor did the 11 commercial applicants who appeared before the CRTC propose a plan sufficiently comprehensive to include such service. Yet it is surely obvious that any proposal that lacks northern origination—which lacks a specifically northern focus—is simply a proposal to further extend the dominion of southern television over the North.

So at last month's CRTC hearings in Ottawa we sought additional guarantees. We demanded certain conditions of any commercial operators who would be bringing services to our communities. And the conditions are pretty explicit. They include our control over which programming and communications services will be brought into the North, guarantees of training courses for our people, some prime time on commercial channels devoted to native programming and some of the technical facilities to make it all possible. In other words, it will take partnership if the

grandly ambitious scheme of servicing the North is to work. The role of ensuring that the individual communities will actually receive programs, any programs, can only be filled by the mutual co-operation of government, commercial applicants and the Council for Yukon Indians/Déné Nation.

Admittedly, the more than 40,000 northern native people in the Yukon and Northwest Territories represent only a small section of the population of six million or so that will benefit from the extension of service. But our people must be seen as a primary beneficiary—a communications infrastructure is critical to our social and economic development. Without the ability to receive radio and television programming, or to communicate among the communities themselves, entire areas remain isolated, discriminated against, underdeveloped and under-served.

But above all, such technological development can never succeed unless it is adapted to the culture and needs of the people to be served. Our people are at a crossroads. On one hand, we are the product of a rich and ancient culture. On the other, we are forcibly determined by a modern society. The struggle is visceral; the direction taken is crucial.

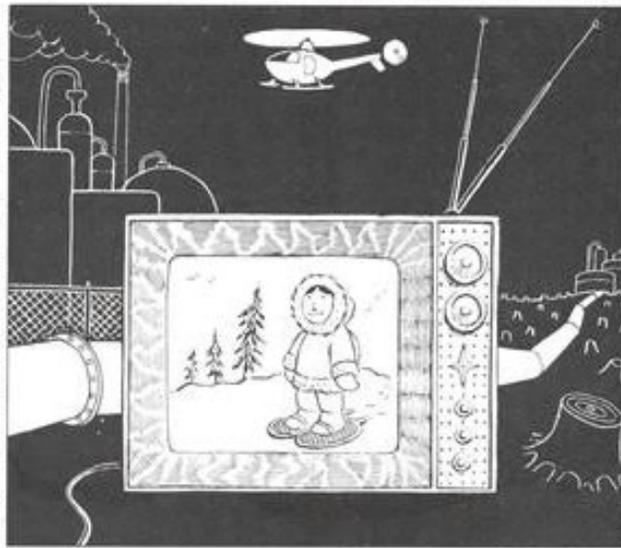
The CRTC issued a challenge to native people to get involved and we answered that challenge. We want to learn and to develop with this new communications technology, but we must also safeguard our culture. There can be no sacrifice of one for the other. We know

that it's an enormous jump to go from snowshoes to satellite communications. Chief Dan George said it well: "If you have travelled far, I have travelled further. To go from the age of bows and arrows to people walking on the moon is a very, very long way."

We have never said that we're not willing to make changes. We seek to make things better for our people, but the acceptance of modern ways shouldn't mean emasculating our identity. We are more than willing to welcome this new communications technology, and we will make a thoughtful contribution to its development. We're neither dogmatic nor inflexible, but the needs and strengths and wishes of our people must be central. In today's highly competitive world, no one can afford the penalties of silence—we need to build bridges of understanding.

So far we have survived by adapting to our surroundings, and we will continue to survive. In the past we applied our creativity and skills to surviving in the harsh North. We are masters of living by balancing the demand of our environment with our need to survive. But the core of this adaptation is to seek equality with the world around us. We must not be denied this opportunity.

David Porter of Whitehorse is vice-chairman of the Council for Yukon Indians.



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