

BOOK REVIEW

The Indian Association of Alberta: A History of Political Action

Laurie Meijer Drees

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The emergence of Native political organizations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a movement that has to date resulted in little academic study. The existing literature about Aboriginal organizations focuses primarily upon the development of Indian political organizing in Canada's west coast region, focussing most specifically on the creation and evolution of the British Columbia-bred Union of Allied Indian Tribes. Available investigations are at best limited inquiries that are chronological rather than critiques of the philosophies that drove young Native leaders to organize. Among the available studies that provide a glimpse into the emergence of Canadian Native political organizations' include those by Peter Kulchyski, Norma Sluman and Jean Goodwill, and E. Palmer Patterson. E. Brian Titley also provides us insight into the life of Duncan Campbell Scott, the director of Indian Affairs during the period in which Native political organizations began to proliferate and who resisted vociferously the propagation of said organizations.

The exception this commentary is Paul Tennant's *Aboriginal People and Politics*, a regionally specific study chronicling the evolution of a variety of B.C. Indian organizations responding to the 'land question'. Notwithstanding Tennant's work, available studies do little to explicate the political ideas and philosophies that influenced Indian leaders to create political organizations. To wit, this field of study has to date been inadequately investigated, which is why Laurie Meijer Drees' *The Indian Association of Alberta: A History of Political Action* is such a welcome contribution. An extension of Meijer Drees doctoral dissertation that will no doubt generate studies similar in scope, *The Indian Association of Alberta* chronicles the development of the IAA, founded in 1939 to represent the interests of Alberta's reserve communities while simultaneously granting Indian peoples access to politics at the grassroots level. This work endeavours to reveal the Native perspective regarding 'Indians' social placement' in Canada during this seminal period of organizing.

Meijer Drees begins by immediately attacking the idea that the IAA's leaders were bent on separating from Canadian society, arguing that the goal of men such as John Callihoo and Joe Dion, both of whom were assisted by prominent Metis leaders Malcolm Norris and James Brady, was to work within the Canadian political superstructure. The IAA leaders also incorporated traditional political and organizing precepts that had guided Blackfoot culture through the post-contact phase of European-Native interaction. The author presents to the reader an IAA established by southern Alberta Native leaders that integrated Canadian political ideas into a traditional governing process to facilitate cross-cultural political interaction.

In addition to establishing a general timeline concerning the evolution of the IAA, the author takes the time to investigate decisive events that at times led to internal dissention and at other times led to advancing a sense of collective identity among its members. Meijer Drees claims four major points centring this study. First, the IAA led an entire generation of Indian leaders to emerge beyond the Indian Act sanctioned band council format; second, IAA leaders generated a shared understanding of what was possible working within the Canadian political system; third, the study challenges the notion that Native prairie organizing is a contemporary phenomenon; and lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the IAA's "history indicates the extent to which Indian peoples were connected to the social history of non-Indians" (191).

As one reads through this work it is telling how closely connected IAA Indian leaders of the 1930s and 1940s believed they were to the federal government. Meijer Drees portrays the IAA leadership as willing to work with federal politicians, which resulted in those same leaders forming an organization that was identifiable to Canadian politicians. Utilizing a hierarchical and centralized governing process guided by its constituent communities reminiscent of that of a labour union's utilization of locals for support, the IAA of the mid-1940s peppered the Canadian government with briefs, engaged supporters such as John Laurie to pen correspondence and garner non-Native support, and confronted the Canadian government's policy decisions as they related to prairie Native populations.

In all, the IAA early on promoted equality without assimilation while at the same time

drawing the public's attention to social issues rather than treaty rights in order to promote community desires that would lead to cross-cultural political interaction designed to benefit all involved parties. It wasn't until the 1960s and Harold Cardinal's ascension to IAA leader that the Association was transformed from "a grassroots reserve-based association to a modern urban First Nations political group" by accepting "federal funds," (163). The IAA of the late 1960s became enthusiastically and more specifically concerned with treaty rights, although the IAA always implicitly sought protection of these rights. This is demonstrative of the IAA's various permutations resulting from changes in the federal political and community social, economic and political environments transcending the study's 30-year period.

The author's use of supporting documentation to substantiate the aforementioned claims is impressive. To coin a phrase, Meijer Drees left no stone unturned in her investigation. In addition to employing the expected texts and academic articles, the Special Joint Committee proceedings from 1948 and 1961 were included, as were both Canadian and U.S. government archives related to the IAA. The Glenbow Museum archives housing the papers of Joe Dion, John Laurie, James Gladstone, in addition to the IAA papers were also tapped, as were the private papers of Hugh Dempsey, Murray Dobbin and Cynthia Downe. Personal interviews with a number of the IAA's major players or influential associates including Harold Cardinal, Stan Cuthand, Hugh Dempsey, and Downe give life to a narrative replete with colourful characters and political machinations, whether at the grassroots, provincial or federal level. The participants' personal insight provides context to events that while important to the telling of the story may have not been fully understood without an insider's view to guide the reading.

This volume's intended audience is primarily academic, and while it would make an excellent addition to most graduate courses concerned with First Nations political history, the book is written in an accessible style that would appeal also to lower division students. In sum, Meijer Drees has produced a significant work that will act to guide authors investigating the emergence of Native political organizations throughout Canada.