

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: IS IT A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM
OF NATIVE UNEMPLOYMENT?

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According to 1981 Statistics Canada figures, the Native population aged fifteen years and over was 299,735 strong. Of this number, 24,770 were unemployed. An additional 146,690 were defined as "inactive."¹ The unemployment figures for Natives vary from province to province and from season to season. One factor, however, remains constant: "In every province and territory, there exists a substantial gap between the place of the Native people in the labour market and that of other ethnic groups."²

The Federal government is aware of the desperate need to address the problems of Native unemployment. It has responded with a number of affirmative action programs in both the public and private sector. Affirmative action, in its broadest sense, represents an attempt to correct imbalances created in the labour market because of discrimination. R.D. Phillips defines the primary objective of affirmative action programs as ensuring that "the Canadian work force is an accurate reflection of the composition of the Canadian population given the availability of required skills. This objective, therefore, is essentially an ethical goal based on the value of ensuring equity."³ Based on Phillips's definition, affirmative action seems to hold the key to the problems of Native unemployment. A closer look, however, reveals that these programs are not a panacea for the ills of Native unemployment.

Affirmative action for Natives was introduced into the Public Service on November 15, 1978. Often referred to as the Native Participation Policy, its goals were threefold. First, it sought to increase participation of the Native population (defined to include Indian, non-status Indian, Metis, and Inuit) in the Public Service, giving special emphasis to managerial and advisory positions. This, in turn, would involve indigenous people in all stages of development of programs affecting Native people. A third goal was to increase the sensitivity and receptiveness of the various departments to the concerns and needs of the Native people. These intents, while noble, should be viewed with admiration only if they achieve concrete results.

The November 15 policy statement had been preceded in the summer of that year by an announcement of government intentions "to reduce its payroll by five thousand person years."⁴ To many people these two policies, one designed to decrease staff the other to increase staff, seemed to be contradictory. Set amidst an environment of reduced government spending and layoffs it soon became apparent that affirmative action programs could nurture resentment rather than understanding between Natives and non-Natives. Authors J.R. Ponting and R. Gibbins observed that "where a new Native employee is not self-evidently meritorious, and fails to convey the impression of self-confidence and competence, he can easily be defined by these non-Native employees as having been parachuted in as a token gesture.

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The result is often a reaction of resentment and condescension on the part of non-Natives."⁵ Feelings of resentment between Natives and non-Natives within the department make it impossible to argue that the department, as a whole, will be more receptive to Native needs.

The move to involve indigenous people in the steps going from the planning to the administration and follow-up stages of departmental programs was not an unqualified success. For many Native people an invitation to participate in white "solutions" to Native problems was not altogether appealing. In a report from the Special Committee on Employment Opportunities for the eighties, the Honourable chairman, Warren Allmand, made the following observations: "I know when I was minister of Indian Affairs, we tried to recruit more Indians within the department. I soon learned that many Indians did not want to work with the department, or with the government, because they believe so strongly in Indian government and their principal thrust was for us to give them the powers and the responsibilities so they could run their own affairs."⁶ For many Native people the framework dictated by a somewhat paternal federal government would prove to be far too narrow.

Not all Native people found the constraints of Federal policy to be too narrow. To some, changing the political system from within could work to the advantage of Canada's indigenous population. Many of these people, however, quickly became frustrated. Perhaps worse than the hostility which could develop between non-Native and Native employees within the department was an atmosphere of indifference. A 1980 Joint Council studying the Native Participation Policy expressed its concern "with the fact that in a few departments some indigenous employees involved in promoting this policy have felt their work to be unproductive due to the seeming indifference at senior management levels."⁷ An article in The Native People, describing members of the Participation Policy as "Uncle Tomahawks,"⁸ supports the belief of many that Native bureaucrats are not in a position to implement change. Natives find a government which is concerned with token gestures rather than with making "real" changes.

Perhaps the most telling commentary on the success or the failures of the program can be made by examining the number of indigenous employees recruited by the government's various development programs. The list is far from impressive. The Administrative Trainee Program leads the way with five indigenous employees. In place for ten years, the Career Assignment Program follows with four. The Financial Officer Recruitment and Development Program and the Career-Orientated Program employ two and one indigenous people respectively. As of 1980, the Senior Management Developmental Program did not have a single indigenous employee.⁹ In view of these figures, the Joint Council's observation that "the overall effectiveness and implementation of the policy to increase representation of indigenous people leaves much to be desired" seems to be an understatement at best.¹⁰ The program has proved unable to reach even its first objective of increasing the Native representation in the public service.

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In the private sector government policy has one main objective: the creation of jobs for Native people. Programs such as Canada Works and Careers Access provide wage subsidies to employers with the stipulation that "special consideration" be given to various target groups, Native people being one. Under the Federal Contracts Program government contracts awarded to private operations contain anti-discrimination clauses. Noel Kinsella has described this program as a "result oriented business-like approach to create an employment climate and structure wherein barriers that exclude persons are removed and avenues opened to increase direct participation of minorities and women."¹¹ Using either grants or contracts the Canadian government is encouraging the private sector to adopt an affirmative action policy in its hiring practices.

When creating jobs for the Native population, timing is an important element to be taken into consideration. A large percentage of Native employment is seasonal. In the northern communities, for example, trapping and fishing activities in the winter help to alleviate problems of Native unemployment. It logically follows, therefore, that the employment needs for these Natives would be greatest in the summer months. As co-chair of the Special Committee on Employment Opportunities for the eighties, Jim Hawkes became aware of problems of timing with employment creation projects. "One of the things we were told in Western Canada," noted Mr. Hawkes, "in the northern parts again, was that the employment creation projects of manpower were occurring at the wrong time of the year, the heaviest employment opportunities for Indian and Native people were in the winter time. . . . Where they needed employment creation was in the summer time."¹² Failure to consider factors of timing in job creation programs could result in a "feast or famine" syndrome. Under such circumstances it could be asked if job creation programs accomplished anything more than making the contrast between times of feast and famine more apparent.

Creation of more jobs at the right time is a necessary step to solving the problem of "feast or famine" in Native employment opportunities. Care must be taken, however, that the search for quantity does not obscure the need for quality in jobs. Too often affirmative action programs create job opportunities for Natives which are at the manual and unskilled level. A report published by the Department of Employment and Immigration noted that "overrepresentation at the bottom rungs leads to a feeling of being treated as second-class citizens."¹³ Much of the Native population is being asked to believe that the "open avenues" lead to jobs which are low paying and offer little hope for advancement. Under such circumstances the Native people will make marginal gains at best by trading one dead-end situation for another.

We have seen the problems and short-comings which are unique to affirmative action programs in first the public sector and then the private sector. Common problems, however, are often shared between the two sectors. This is made apparent by looking at the administrative process of affirmative action programs. Perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects of affirmative action programs in either the public or private sector is in the programs' administration. Government red tape, lengthy contracts, rules, and regulations place great demands on the patience of all those concerned with the programs. Energy which should be spent on implementing and following

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up the various projects is often spent in simply applying for the program. Executive Director of the Native Outreach program, Ms. Stanley-Venne, expressed her exasperation: "Well, you guys [the Federal government] always change the rules. You change the rules in midstream, and then we have to prepare another presentation, and if that one does not come out right, we are busy doing another one; it is always continuous."¹⁴ An atmosphere of frustration and futility begins to develop even before the projects begin to get underway. For anyone concerned with the problem of Native unemployment their stores of frustration do not need to be increased.

While some people grapple with the problem of Native unemployment a large segment of the community develops the impression that the Native problem is being "looked after." The optimistic reports released to the press focus on how much money is being spent and how many jobs are being created for Native people. "The non-Native society has the attitude," says Maureen McMillan of the Indian and Metis Friendship Centre, "that Native People's organizations and so forth can just hold out their hand and the government is going to drop some money in, and when you spend all that, hold it out again."¹⁵ Such false assumptions will not ease tension existing between Native and non-Native people. More importantly, however, it will create the impression that the serious problems facing unemployed Natives is on its way to being resolved by the Federal government. Such an impression makes it much easier to sweep the problem of Native unemployment under the rug with a clear conscience telling us vaguely that "something" is being done.

Available statistics do not support the impression that the Native unemployment problem is being resolved. "Despite substantial expenditures on programs to increase Native employment," notes a 1979 report, "unemployment remains at an unacceptably high level."¹⁶ The government may continue to point to the funds and jobs being made available to aid Natives but the fact of Native unemployment remains. Why? The highest level of unemployment is found among the most poorly educated of the Native population. Affirmative action jobs often lack challenge for more highly educated individuals. For those lacking in formal education, however, these challenges are too great. Thus, for the groups suffering the greatest from unemployment affirmative action programs offer little hope. All too often government programs seem to be focused on those who need aid least while failing to address the needs of those who are most desperate.

Affirmative action programs will be limited with respect to their influence over employees as well as to their ability to aid Natives. Government grants, contracts, and hiring plans "all operate with the realization that the long-term solution to Native unemployment must come in the form of jobs in the private sector operating in national and international markets that are open and competitive."¹⁷ Government intervention may prompt a substantial number of employers to disregard personal prejudices against Natives for a specified period of time. No government policy, however, will have the power to change individual attitudes. Without this change of attitude affirmative action programs can offer only short-term "solutions" at best.

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Affirmative action programs can be defined as a step in the right direction but not as a solution to the problem of Native unemployment. Phrases such as "open avenues," "equality of opportunity," and "breaking down barriers" are liberally used in affirmative action policy statements. Perhaps because of the high expectations created by such rhetoric, confronting limits of affirmative action is a very bitter and frustrating experience. Promises of exciting new job opportunities often materialize as merely token gestures or unskilled labour positions. Viewing affirmative action as a solution to employment ills would mean asking the Native population to endure the prospect of a lifetime of low skilled jobs if not unemployment. Affirmative action is one in a series of stages which may lead to a solution to the Native employment problem. Perhaps we have neared the point where we are ready to move on to the next stage of "problem solving." A solution, however, has not yet been reached.

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NOTES

- ¹ Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 1981 (Ottawa: n.p., 1981), p. 1.
- ² Employment and Immigration Canada, The Development of an Employment Policy for Indian, Inuit and Metis People (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1979), p. 2.
- ³ Rhys D. Phillips, Affirmative Action as an Effective Labour Market Planning Tool of the 1980's, Labour Market Development Task Force Technical Studies Series #29 (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1981), p. 2.
- ⁴ Employment and Immigration Canada, First Annual Report on the Policy of Increased Participation of Indian, Metis, Non-Status Indian and Inuit People in the Federal Public Service, June 1980 Joint Council (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1981), p. 3. Subsequent references will be made by citing June 1980 Joint Council.
- ⁵ J.R. Ponting and R. Gibbins, Out of Irrelevance. (Toronto: Butterworth and Company, 1980), p. 145.
- ⁶ Employment and Immigration Canada, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of Sub-Committee A of the Special Committees on Employment Opportunities for the Eighties, Issue #6, 32nd Parliament, 31st Session (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1981), pp. 25-26. Subsequent references will be made by citing issue number.
- ⁷ June 1980 Joint Council, p. 17.
- ⁸ Brian Maracle, "Brown Bureaucrats Mere Tokens," The Native People 28 May 1982, Section 1, p. 2, Column I.
- ⁹ June 1980 Joint Council, pp. 15-16.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 17.
- ¹¹ Noel Kinsella, A Research Federal Contracts Program: An Instrument for Progressive Affirmative Action, Employment and Immigration Canada (Ottawa: n.p., 1979), pp. 4-5.
- ¹² Employment and Immigration Canada, Issue #10, p. 66.
- ¹³ Employment and Immigration Canada, The Development of an Employment Policy for Indian, Inuit and Metis People, p. 12.
- ¹⁴ Employment and Immigration Canada, Issue #8, p. 48.
- ¹⁵ Employment and Immigration Canada, Issue #6, p. 20.

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¹⁶ Employment and Immigration Canada, The Development of an Employment Policy for Indian, Inuit and Metis People, p. 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 10.