

NSR Comment, by Noel Dyck

Sally Weaver's two part account of "Indian Policy in the New Conservative Government" makes a valuable and timely contribution to the literature on Indian-government relations in Canada. The Native Studies Review is to be congratulated for ensuring its rapid publication and facilitating discussion of the issues raised in it.

Weaver's documentation of the circumstances under which the new government established a task force to undertake a cost-cutting review of all government programs and of how this exercise generated proposals for an about-face in federal Indian policy shares many of the virtues of her well-known analysis of the evolution of the 1969 White Paper on Indian policy.¹ Through a careful reading of materials in the public domain, Weaver provides the first relatively comprehensive account of the workings of the Nielsen Task Force. Aided by her considerable experience in conducting research at this level, she affords those of us who work at some distance from Ottawa with perceptive insights into the workings of the upper echelons of the federal political-bureaucratic apparatus. While her analysis might have been extended had she interviewed the principals involved in this undertaking, it may simply have been impractical to do so, especially in the wake of the government's persecution of Richard Price.

But as well as offering a detailed descriptive account of the Nielsen Task Force, Weaver traces the articulation of two fundamentally conflicting views within federal circles concerning Indian-government relations, views that came to be personified by the then Deputy Minister, Erik Nielsen and the then Minister of Indian Affairs, David Crombie. Weaver characterizes Crombie's approach to Indian administration as one of "engagement" in that he sought to address the potential embodied in the 1982 Constitution Act's recognition of the existence of aboriginal rights and in the Penner Report's endorsement of the principle of Indian self-government as a

basis for reshaping the federal government's relations with Indians. The approach adopted by the Nielsen Task Force, on the other hand, she labels "retrogressive," although I would suggest that an equally apt descriptor might be "escapist."

As Weaver demonstrates, the Nielsen Task Force proceeded on the basis of a marked ideological hostility to the notion of Aboriginal special status, a determination to reduce government expenditures, and a set of pre-existing inter-departmental interests in carving up the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Given Nielsen's personal style, the veil of secrecy draped over the Task Force's operations was predictable, although the near total exclusion of the Minister of Indian Affairs, David Crombie, from the deliberations of the group was, to say the least, peculiar. Even more astonishing was the manner in which the members of the Task Force effectively turned their backs on the major developments of the past decade in the field of Indian-government relations. Ignoring even the Conservative Party's endorsement of the concept of Indian self-government as enunciated in the Penner Report and nationally televised statements by the Prime Minister, the Task Force in effect re-embraced the infamous 1969 White Paper proposals, albeit this time armed with a "media plan" to prosecute the implementation of measures to which Indians across Canada were expected to be opposed.

The ability of provincial and national Indian associations to mobilize both reserve residents and significant sectors of the Canadian public to oppose government initiatives--as demonstrated most recently in the period leading up to the repatriation of the Canadian Constitution in 1981--must have been obvious to even the dimmest political operative in Ottawa. How then does one explain the Task Force's adoption of a set of proposals that were certain to encounter such resistance? Weaver observes that members of the Task Force were "remote from the political realities of the day." But this is to understate the case. Not only did the Task Force misjudge the new government's political attitude, typified by the Prime Minister's nervous reliance on public opinion polls, but also it

exemplified the traditional inability of federal governments to face up to the complex and difficult questions that plague the field of relations between Native peoples and Canadian society.

In submitting a set of proposals which, in the current political climate, stood little chance of being adopted, the Nielsen Task Force chose the well-worn path of pretending that the Gordian knot of tutelage and resistance, special status and dependency could be simply dissolved by handing the Indian "problem" over to the provinces and, to a lesser extent, to band councils. Premising its proposals upon the prospect of "capping" future federal expenditures on Indians at current levels and of possibly even reducing these in the future by slashing all "discretionary" spending on Indian programs, the Task Force eagerly adopted a long discredited assimilationist posture that purports to rescue federal authorities from the responsibility of attending to recognized needs and rights of Indian communities. In short, the Nielsen Task Force stuck its collective head in the sand and promised that this action, if applied with determination, would make all of the government's problems with Indians go away.

And what have been the implications of yet another application of this time-honoured approach to Indian affairs? Although the status of the Task Force report within government is not entirely clear, it would seem to have provided the impetus for serious reductions in programs such as post-secondary education. The announcement that some 1500 positions are to be stripped from the Department of Indian Affairs, without any guarantee that these positions will be transferred to tribal or band councils, does not bode well for the future. But the more serious impact of the Task Force report rests in the uncertainty which it has created within the overall field of Indian affairs. Crombie's much vaunted initiative to implement self-government agreements with bands across the country has been seriously undermined by the report's restatement of doubts about the advisability or necessity of federal authorities committing themselves to the sort of long-term negotiations and funding that such arrangements will require.

The report has also served to stoke up the fierce resistance and confrontational stance that Indian associations at both the provincial and national levels have been forced to assume, lest impatient and short-sighted federal policy-makers succeed in their recurring temptation to abandon Indians to the tender mercies of provincial governments and the marketplace. This is the real pity, for in forcing Indian associations once more onto the defensive, the report severely jeopardizes the ability of Indian associations and reserve communities to concentrate their efforts on the demanding task of discovering workable approaches to self-government. The self-indulgence and stunning lack of responsibility or intelligence shown by the Nielsen Task Force have demonstrably retarded the resolution of Indians' continuing status as dependent peoples whose situation remains a national disgrace.

Taken at face value, Crombie's initiatives represented a sincere--if not entirely unproblematic--attempt to engage and continue the hopeful developments of the 1970s and early 1980s. How long will it take for this process to be resumed? How long will it take for yet another generation of federal authorities to be shown that the Indian "problem" cannot be dismissed by simplistic proposals that function only to compound difficulties that will not of themselves go away?

The final question raised implicitly by Weaver's account concerns the role that analysts of this field might usefully play. Although there is no certainty that a body such as the Nielsen Task Force could ever be prevented from arbitrarily adopting an escapist approach by willfully ignoring the past and present course of Indian-government relations, the responsibility for attempting to make this less possible rests squarely on the shoulders of academics and other analysts of this field. I am by no means suggesting that we ought to devote our efforts to designing "solutions" for Indians and government. That stage of scholastic paternalism has, thankfully, long since passed. Instead, we must relentlessly continue to engage the complex and challenging questions and processes that have historically comprised this field of relations. What is needed

is not so much advocacy as thorough and tough-minded analyses of how things came to be as they are and why various past efforts to resolve these difficulties have not worked. By now both Crombie and Nielsen have departed this arena. Hopefully, analyses such as the one offered here by Sally Weaver will offer future incumbents to their posts some indication of why these efforts did not suffice to permit Indians to take control over their lives and to rid themselves of the dependency and poverty that all Canadians, including members of the ill-fated Task Force, deplore.

NOTES

¹ Sally M. Weaver, Making Canadian Indian Policy: The Hidden Agenda 1968-70 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

