

Merge & Conquer

Military Base Closure Ignores Stoney Point Native Land Claim

Kathleen Rashid

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A recent decision by the Canadian Department of National Defense (DND) to close down its military training camp at Ipperwash in southwest Ontario, built on land confiscated from the Stoney Point Ojibwe in W.W.II, and return it to “the Kettle and Stony Point Band” looks good in the headlines: the government’s giving the land back to the Indians!

Never mind that the move is portrayed not as a response to decades of petitions from the Stoney Point band (which have been consistently ignored) or to the band members’ re-occupation of Stoney Point which began nearly a year ago [see “Ojibwa Take Back Canadian Army Base,” FE #343, Fall-Winter, 1993], but as merely one in a series of base closings aimed at cutting the military budget. Surely the result should be the restoration of aboriginal land rights, right?

In fact, the DND’s decision is a strategic move in an ongoing “divide and conquer” policy (rather, in this case, “merge and conquer,” a bureaucratic variation) which effectively pits the dominant financial interests of the Kettle Point council against the Stoney Point people who are asserting their land claim. A brief history of the relationship between the Kettle and Stoney Point Bands, as manipulated by government agendas, is needed to understand the present situation.

“A Wonderful Opportunity”

Both the Kettle Point and the Stoney Point reserves on the southeast shores of Lake Huron were established by the Treaty of 1825 (in which the Ojibwe of Southwest Ontario lost their claim to over two million acres of land). In 1942 the neighboring bands lived peacefully and cooperatively, but as distinct communities with separate band councils, each on its own reserve.

Then Canadian military officials eyeballed the Stoney Point land for a wartime training camp. The Indian Affairs officials responded positively, saying the removal of Stoney Point families and their homes to Kettle Point “appears to be a minor matter and one that can be effected within a most reasonable cost.” The Indian agent at Sarnia saw the proposal as “a wonderful opportunity to gather a few straggling Indians and locate them permanently with the main body of the band at Kettle Point.”

The families living for generations on Stoney Point obviously saw things differently. As chief Robert George explained in 1991 to the Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, “For hundreds of years, Stoney Point was the only home that my family and the other Stoney Point families knew.”

According to his son, Ronald George, legal advisor for the reclamation movement, “In 1942, the residents of Stoney Point lived off their land...planted gardens and raised produce to feed themselves throughout the year. The common reserve lands provided necessary grazing, hunting and wood for cooking and winter stoves.” Indeed, to

visit the Stoney Point land today is to experience a remnant of the lush woodland diversity that once covered the rest of lower Ontario, long since scarred and cut-over by logging, mining and agribusiness.

When the Stoney Point people responded to the DND's offer of a cash settlement with a refusal to surrender their ancestral homeland, the DND invoked the War Measures Act to remove the people by force. The Stoney Point council and residents immediately objected, demanding to know why land better suited for an army camp which was for sale between the Kettle Point and Stoney Point reserves was not taken instead.

The only reply came in the form of a go-ahead for the relocation, accompanied by assurances that the land would be returned when no longer needed for military purposes after the war. Stoney Point vets returned from fighting that war, stunned to find their families gone and their homes and sacred ancestral burial grounds bulldozed.

The sites available on the already populated Kettle Point reserve were swampy and only a few acres in size, too meager to support the Stoney Point residents' traditional land-based livelihood. Moreover, the relocatees received no compensation for the loss of their land. Ronald George outlines the familiar sequence of cultural dispersal and dissolution in the uprooting of boom made conditions so crowded that Kettle Point natives were also being forced off the reserve.

During this time, as it became obvious the Canadian government was determined to keep its hold on the Stoney Point land by maintaining a spurious military presence, official language was meanwhile further submerging the autonomous identity of the Stoney Point people by consistently referring to "The Kettle and Stoney Point Band" as one entity.

The stage was set for a 1951 legislative order which officially abolished the Stoney Point people's right to elect their own council. In its place another system was imposed in which the Stoney Point natives became a minority among the Kettle Point natives. As a result, the Kettle Point council was mandated to represent itself as the "Kettle and Stoney Point Council" in negotiations with the DND for cash settlements legally due the Stoney Point relocatees.

Corruptible "Representatives"

In 1981, nearly 2.5 million dollars was paid to the Kettle Point band, even though the Kettle Point council never sought authority from the Stoney Point relocatees to pursue a settlement, and the relocatees never approved it or accepted any money. Evidently the colonial practice of grooming and empowering the most corruptible of native "representatives" in the state's own image and interests has worked well here. The Canadian government's cunning tactics are modelled on a historic policy which employs a surrogate bureaucracy to expropriate tribal lands. The strategy continues today all over the continent.

The DND's move to return the land to native people, that is, to "the Kettle and Stony Point Band" (notice they dropped the "e" in "Stoney") is actually designed to terminate the Stoney Point band as a separate and autonomous people by leaving them subject to the will and appetite of the Kettle Point power structure. This would extinguish the band's claim to Stoney Point once and for all. In fact, that plan already seems to be taking shape. According to Stoney Point chief Carl George, even though the military has officially surrendered the land, "the DND is hiring for the summer, and it appears that officials for Kettle Point may have made another arrangement that allows the DND to stay on."

So, the resistance that began in the form of an encampment and re-occupation of Stoney Point in May 1993 continues. The Stoney Point people are calling for recognition of their status as a separate first nation. They are wary of the pitfalls of following a strategy which would define them within a system and by a definition not of their choosing. As Ronald George puts it, "Because of our conviction about who we are—and I think it is a sound conviction for aboriginal people—we have been hesitant to take those bureaucratic steps to prove something that doesn't need to be proven."

Understanding the historic context of their struggle, the Stoney Point people expressly do not bear animosity toward the Kettle Point people as a whole, especially since many of them are life-long friends and relatives by marriage. A poster at a recent demonstration voiced the general sentiment with the words, "Kettle Point: Our Brother, Not Our Keeper."

A New Fabric

The threads that connect the Stoney Point people and their descendants to their ancestral culture are being reinforced and woven into a new fabric by the re-occupation. The inner strength of that movement grows in the practice of mutual cooperation—building homes, sharing and growing food, gathering wood—bolstered by the increasing awareness of the forces their aspirations are up against.

To counteract those forces, it is crucial that outside supporters, native and non-native alike, do not withdraw their support due to confusion conjured by the state's bureaucratic tactics of disempowerment. To do so is to cooperate by default in the ongoing project to terminate native peoples and their cultures.

The Stoney Point people need travelling funds to educate others about their situation. For information about donations and speakers, call: Marcia Simon, (519) 786-6052 or Robert George, (519) 786-6009.

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