Economic Realities and Political Development : The George River Case

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George River, Quebec, is a small Eskimo community of 166 people, located on the southeast side of Ungava Bay, 12 miles up the George River from the coast itself. This population includes two *qalluuna* (white) transient families, one of which represents the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) of the Government of Canada, which is responsible for the administration of Eskimo affairs in Northern Quebec.[1] The other is that of the Federal Day School principal. For brief periods other DIAND personnel are resident in the village. Beginning in 1959 the people of George River went through an intensive period of social change, the results of which the author studied, first in the summer of 1964, then in the winter of 1966, which will be considered as the ethnographic present. The impetus for change came from the Government of Canada's program of social and economic development and had two main objectives; first, to gather the scattered Eskimo people together in settlements for administrative efficiency and to implement social and welfare services already existing in the rest of Canada, and second to reorganize and improve the economy based upon the formation of Eskimo co-operatives. George River, in 1959, became the first of these co-operative-based communities.

The first of these objectives has been realized with the building of the settlement of George River and the provision of permanent, wood-frame houses for all of the people, a school, a power-house and a Co-operative Development Officer of DIAND, who, despite his title, acts as government representative in all administrative capacities. The second goal has not been achieved. Several co-

[1] At the present time, jurisdiction over the Eskimo people of Northern Quebec is being petitioned for by the Province of Quebec. As yet, George River has not been affected by this event, unlike the larger population centres of Nouveau Québec.

operative projects have been undertaken, the most important of which is the commercial production of arctic char. Others, in order of their importance in the economy are: logging, arts and crafts, and boat-building. In 1963, a co-operative store was established with a loan from the Eskimo Loan Fund. No single project has succeeded in providing any kind of firm economic base for George River, nor have the combined projects. The village is kept afloat only by all kinds of welfare and relief measures as well as massive direct and hidden subsidies which give a surface impression of economic health. Therefore, while the people are able to support themselves largely off the land on the staples of caribou, seal and fish, there is a chronic shortage of cash to make all kinds of necessary purchases from flour, lard, tea and salt, to ammunition, outboard motors and ski-doos. Of course, in order to live off the land, one needs good gear with which to hunt the game, so cash is a necessary pre-requisite for the successful hunter.

It is against this background that we must view the political development of the George River Eskimo. I intend to show how the Eskimo leadership, responding to economic and political realities has evolved a political ideology which could be characterized as "welfare-statism" and a political strategy to realize the goals of this ideology. The major event has been the formation of a vocal and organized pressure group, whose major purpose is to gain increasingly large welfare, relief and other social benefits from the Canadian government as represented by DIAND acting through its local representative, and his superiors who have contact with the George River people. Thus, what I had viewed in 1964 as an incipient independence movement is not so at all in terms of political and economic autonomy. Rather, political activity is directed towards giving the Eskimo the major voice in determining government action in terms of policy and expenditures. The crucial point is that this political activity is not directed towards Eskimo economic viability in which the government is asked to provide financial and technical assistance until such time as the Eskimo people could re-assert their autonomy. DIAND is viewed as the underwriter of George River and the guarantor of Eskimo society. Therefore, even though jobs and training in various skills are positively valued, they are not considered any kind of a permanent

substitute for welfare, relief and government subsidy of all descriptions. The DIAND's role is considered to be a permanent one.

Therefore, it is seen that the political values of the contemporary Eskimo of George River depart dramatically from the aboriginal ones. Yet, all the available evidence indicates that, aboriginally, the Eskimo were among the most independent peoples known. Men co-operated with their kin to the limits permitted by the ecological setting, but, ultimately, no able-bodied man earned the esteem of his fellows if he could not provide for his own nuclear family and his other dependents. In this paper, I will view this phenomenon of a radical shift from independence to dependence, from autonomy to subordination as a rational political stance in response to the existing economic and political situation.

This ideology has been brought about by the convergence in time of three major sets of factors :

1. The application by DIAND of a combination welfare and community development approach to contemporary problems in which the welfare aspects were stressed much more than the development ones, and, in which relief and welfare payments were the most secure and reliable source of income in comparison to the capricious availability of jobs and training in the development program;

2. The existence of a caste-like social and occupational structure in which the Eskimo perceives certain occupations and lifestyles as belonging to white culture, e.g. teacher, nurse, administrator, and others as belonging to him, e.g. hunter, trapper, fisherman, maintenance work. The two occupational spheres have few points of correspondence and it is a rare event when occupational ethnic lines are crossed;

3. Eskimo socialization which produces an individual profoundly identified and integrated into both his primary and secondary groups in such a way that ambition, viewed here as a striving to be better than the members of one's own group, is de-emphasized and devalued.

1. Both the welfare and community development approach began together in 1959, but the welfare program was always pre-

eminent in providing the economic base of the community as something to fall back on. Besides the outright issue of relief, the widespread use of direct and hidden subsidy transformed a program, ostensibly of the self-help variety, into a disguised welfare program. Through the use of outright grants for house construction, the free provision of expensive equipment and payment of the labour which operates it, e.g. the diesel-powered boat and its crew of two, the saw-mill, a tractor and operator, the DIAND maintains the standard of living at an artificially buoyant level, and gives the illusion of economic viability.

The Eskimo Loan Fund provided the original $25,000 necessary to purchase the inventory for the co-operatively organized store. Of course, the goal was to pay back this low-interest loan as soon as possible out of the purchases by the co-operative membership. However, what actually happened was that the membership, applying pressure on a young manager and brother of the co-operative president, obtained extraordinary credit which permitted them to buy capital and luxury equipment through the store, with no prospect of paying it back in the forseeable future. In this manner, the government, in effect, made available to the people of George River, almost unlimited funds — interest-free and with unlimited terms. Finally, in January of 1966 a $100 ceiling was arbitrarily placed on every member of the co-op., regardless of credit rating. When a man reached this ceiling, he was instructed to go to the DIAND Development Officer and apply for relief. Thus, what appeared to be development on the basis of the economic strength of the community was little more than a massive subsidy.

2. There are two exceptions to the statement that occupational caste lines are never crossed. These are equipment operators, i.e. bulldozer, tractor, freezer and saw-mill operators, and mechanics. There are two mechanics at George River who can do fairly elaborate repairs to complex equipment, and equipment operators mentioned above are able to maintain and make minor repairs to their equipment. The important point here is that there is no formally operating caste system, but rather a cognitive view by the Eskimo that certain jobs are the prerogative and obligation of the *qalluuna* world, and are outside of Eskimo culture. People expect certain services to be performed by the *qalluuna* world such as clerical and

administrative work, liaison with the outside world, teaching and nursing. They do not perceive these occupational spheres are those which Eskimo can take over and function successfully in.

On the other hand, they take fierce pride in being able to function successfully on the land in the most trying conditions and will point up their superiority to the *qalluuna* here. They relish being in the position of helping *qualluuna* when they get into difficulty in activities involved in travelling on the land and subsistence pursuits in general. Hunting, fishing and trapping are Eskimo occupations which they perform best, and better than their *qalluuna* counterparts.

3. This third point is related closely to the second one. I can recount virtually no instances of Eskimo children expressing the desire to have a job or to receive the training necessary to occupy a job that is perceived of as a *qalluuna* one. One exception is the desire of males to become pilots, but no practical steps are taken to achieve this ambition. Objectively, the amount of training necessary is prohibitive, but the point is that no one enquires as to how he could go about becoming a pilot.

To grow up as an Eskimo is to grow up in a highly permissive, loving and supportive milieu, which produces a profound identification and immersion in one's social groups, radiating out from the nuclear family to embrace, in the case of George River, virtually the entire village. In this kind of setting, there is very little striving to get ahead in the sense of being better than one's fellows, to have more, materially than they do, or to be a personal success. Repeatedly, the response to a question asking whether or not the people of George River would be better off in the future than their mothers and fathers was that Eskimos do not want to be better than their parents. An alternative response, which had one of the figures in a story say he thought he would be better off in the future, was considered presumptuous and arrogant; in one case, a young man said that if he did have more than his parents, he would share his good fortune, thereby making everyone a little better off, but essentially equal once more.

Before continuing, it is necessary to discuss the nature of educational and vocational services available to the Eskimo and official en-

couragement in this regard. At the present time, the Federal Day School conducts two classes, both at the elementary school level, the highest grade being 5. This is in part due to the fact that formal education only began at George River in 1962. However, secondary education is available at Residential Schools, George River children going to Churchill, Manitoba. For the 1965-66 session, two George River boys attended this school. At the present time, these two, and the co-operative manager, are the only moderately fluent English speakers.

One George River man had gone to a mechanic's training school at Yellowknife, N.W.T. In the winter of 1966, the co-operative store manager attended a special course in co-operative management and fur trading at Churchill, Manitoba. This was the first course of its kind offered in the Eastern Artic.

Despite these sporadic attempts, there exists no systematic vocational program to train people to become clerks, accountants, mechanics or nurses, or any consistent encouragement of Eskimo youth to consider careers where this training would be obligatory. Therefore, one factor which forces a modification of the three points made above is the Eskimo perception of the inaccessibility of *qalluuna* occupations. Yet there is no agitation, no expression of interest on the Eskimo part. When, during my stay, there was an epidemic of flu, and medicines ran dangerously short, the co-operative president criticized the government, saying that the people should at least have adequate medicines, and have them when needed, particularly since they had no hospitals and not even a full-time resident male nurse. But he did not suggest, nor did anyone else, that the Eskimo people should receive the training necessary to become medical personnel, particularly nurses, and thus end their dependence upon DIAND. Further, when the motor of the freezer, used to preserve fish, broke down, threatening the entire fish catch for a summer season, the DIAND officer was summoned with great haste, but there was a delay in locating him. Finally, the motors were repaired in time, but no one suggested that an Eskimo mechanic be trained to service them.

The area of greatest stress in Eskimo-white relations is the issuance of relief. Here the DIAND personnel are supreme and are

forced to make decisions in a somewhat arbitrary manner. Yet no one has suggested that Eskimo clerical staff be trained to take over the administration of relief. Presumably, this would end one of the Eskimo's most serious complaints — *qalluuna* insensitivity to Eskimo needs. It would also make them aware of budgetary limits.

It can be seen from the above that lack of ambition can still be said to characterize the Eskimo personality, and is a vital factor influencing the direction of political development. For, given the validity of points two and three above, it is easy to see how the DIAND program which emphasized relief and welfare, and the provision of free services, was eagerly accepted by the Eskimo, and came to be regarded as absolutely essential to maintain what had become a new standard of living below which no man was expected to live.

This new level had been artificially created, but has come to be viewed as essential to human well-being. Tending to strengthen this view was the capriciousness of the DIAND development programs as opposed to the welfare program. Projects were late in starting, compared to the welfare scheme. Once begun, they were often inexplicably (in Eskimo eyes) dropped, only to be started again and no real industry was developed, this being only partially the fault of DIAND. The people did not know from year to year whether or not a given project would continue. Nor were there more than sporadic attemps to train Eskimo in purchasing and marketing with reference to the outside world, which accounts for their almost total lack of knowledge of these processes.

Therefore, not only did Eskimo socialization and the lack of training and education pre-condition the people to a welfare type of approach, but the absence or faltering progress of the socio-economic development program, and their lack of training, led them to rely on this program more and more. It can be seen, then, that this kind of adaption and the political strategy for being successful at it, is a rational adaption to existing political conditions, and has very little to do with a welfare type program where people "on the dole" supposedly become shiftless and dependent.

I will now give some examples showing how the Eskimos employ a strategy to realize political objectives. This material comes from

several cooperative meetings held during 1966, and, in all but one case, attended by me. Elaborate minutes were recorded.

In January, a DIAND senior official came to George River to inspect the cooperative store, and to make recommendations for its improvement. It became clear to him that credit in the store had been given in a highly indiscriminate fashion by the Eskimo store manager. Members with no steady income and little prospect of it were up to $1000 in debt from the purchase of capital and luxury equipment. Therefore, the store's finances were in extreme jeopardy, the possibility of repaying the initial $25,000 loan was remote, and there was no capital with which to purchase new stock. He then called a meeting to discuss the situation.

The cooperative president, Hilak, spoke up on behalf of the membership to explain the genesis of the store's economic difficulties. The reason for the high debts was that the people had received little or no relief for the previous year, and there was little income from other sources. So, if a man had an account at the store, his debt would rise steadily. Hilak also said that one man was refused relief outright (actually, because he did not qualify) so the others also thought they would be refused and did not request it. Hilak was doing two things here. He was placing the blame for the situation on the Development Officer's shoulders, since he had failed to inject enough cash into the economy in the form of relief, but more important is the fact that Hilak was applying pressure directly upon the Development officer's superior over the Development officer's head, to increase the size and frequency of relief issues. The problem was not seen to be one which could be solved by a viable economy, by jobs and by training and organization.

As a result of this meeting, there was a large-scale increase in the issuance of relief, and at a subsequent meeting held in March, attended only by Eskimos, the DIAND official who had been responsible for this was referred to as a "saviour" of the George River people.

At another point in the same meeting, the visiting official commended the Development Officer for the way he was handling an on-going flu epidemic. Hilak reacted to this by stating that there had not been enough medicines, and, if there had been,

everyone would have been well. At a subsequent meeting, when asked by the Development Officer what he had meant by this remark, Hilak elaborated by saying that, since the people have no nurse and no hospital, they should at least have adequate medicines. Yet, no one suggested that Eskimos be trained as nurses and no one encourages their children to seek such a career.

In another incident, there was a discussion concerning the availability of a boat for use in the summer fishing. The government official was instructed by an Eskimo, with the agreement of others, not to send the boat to the regional center for repairs since they would ruin it. This remark was a reaction to an earlier experience with boat repairs. But, again, nobody requested that George River Eskimos be trained as mechanics in order to service the boat.

These examples really only appear remarkable in historical perspective. If we look at minutes of meetings held prior to 1965, we see the DIAND personnel taking the initiative constantly, with the Eskimo leadership acting in compliance. Very few grievances were aired and the people maintained a strong suppression of their feelings. Criticism of the *qalluuna* world and the government was almost unheard of.

Several factors were involved in the rise of Eskimo power: 1. Conflict of interest with the Development Officer; 2. Direct face to face interaction between the people and the Development Officer's superiors; 3. The solidarity of the village as a body politic, and, 4. The role of the Province of Quebec.

As long as all activity was concentrated on the building of the village, the establishment of George River as a physical entity, there was a complete unanimity of interest between the Development Officer and the people, and the building program provided jobs for everyone; but as this considerable achievement was successfully completed, the issue of the economy and the standard of living became primary. The major conflict arose over the role of the government and the Development Officer and the extent of relief and other welfare payments.

Since the terms of reference of the Development Officer were to develop a viable and self-supporting economy at George River,

while at the same time he was charged with the dispensation of relief, it is very understandable that he viewed large scale relief as diametrically opposed to the goals he was to secure. Consequently, he issued as little relief as possible, so as to keep his major goals and efforts intact. The people, on the other hand, considered the maximization of relief payments to be their major goal, particularly after the building program, which had provided jobs and income, had been largely completed. Ultimately, this whole conflict could have been averted had, in fact, a viable economy been developed, but the problems here were insuperable.

Now, whereas it is certainly true that the Development Officer did create a favourable climate in which native leadership could emerge, this development was only encouraged up to a certain point — the point at which native leadership began to challenge his pre-eminence directly. When Eskimo community leaders began to develop a political strategy and a strong pressure group, and furthermore, were willing to apply the pressure over the head of the Development Officer to his superiors, so that they directly challenged his ultimate authority and became a voice in policy and decision-making, then the emergence of the native leadership was no longer encouraged. Two examples of the hostility that had been generated between the people and the Development Officer are the radically reduced frequency of informal visiting at his house between 1964 and 1966, and his attempt at rigid control of the Eskimo's use of the garage workshop, ostensibly a public building, which was under his jurisdiction. This is a building that people had used both to make repairs on equipment and to socialize in. It should be stated here that the Eskimos continued to use it whenever possible, even though they were "unauthorized personnel".

The interest of the Development Officer's superiors, as shown in meetings and in face to face contact with the membership, has encouraged the Eskimo leadership in its demands. Since there have been results achieved by bypassing the Development Officer, this technique has become a predominant one in the Eskimo strategy.

Central to any consideration of Eskimo politics is the remarkable solidarity of the whole village in its dealings with the government. There are no important factions with conflicting demands, and the

voice of the co-operative president is the voice of the people as a corporate group. This development is all the more remarkable when we contemplate the extreme atomization of Eskimo society in the recent past. An insult to the co-operative president is an insult to the whole village and when one man in the village is rightly or wrongly refused relief, then the whole village feels that it will be and has been deprived.

Since 1964, the Province of Quebec, in its bid to take over the administration of Nouveau Québec and proclaim its sovereignty there, has introduced a new political force onto the scene. In a series of annual meetings held since 1964, to which delegates from every Eskimo village in Nouveau Québec were invited, the Province has attempted to win over the Eskimo's confidence by outlining a program for their region, and indicating what results had already been achieved. The practice was to have the delegates report back to their villages. Although Quebec has constructed two buildings at George River, there is, as yet, no representative of the province in residence there, and only a few visits have taken place. But through the annual meetings, it has become apparent to the Eskimo leadership that Quebec is vying with Ottawa for the allegiance and support of the Eskimo, and doing so through the promise of both increased welfare benefits and more and better job-training and jobs themselves. I attended a meeting at George River in April, 1966 where the delegates reported back to the people. This meeting was attended by Eskimos only; I was the only other person in attendance. At the end of the meeting, the people were asked to vote their approval or disapproval of the Quebec program. Out of 35 men, 32 approved.

It was made clear by the discussion and the questions asked before the vote was taken that the resounding affirmative vote given to Quebec was based upon the welfare aspects of the proposals, and the fact that benefits would be larger, particularly for families of many children, and old people. In addition, the proposal to have a permanent male nurse at George River for twelve months each year, and a hospital at the regional centre (Fort Chimo) was met with an enthusiastic response, stimulated, no doubt, by the recent epidemics at George River. The proposals for mining development were glossed over with a minimum of comment. The essential political interest of the George River Eskimo is revealed in yet another context.

This, then, was the political situation at George River when the writer left in May, 1966.

By way of summary, the main points made in this paper were :

1. The George River Eskimo have made a radical shift in political ideology and kind of political activity from absolute autonomy within the framework of atomistic organization to absolute dependence upon the Canadian Government, within a framework of community solidarity.

2. This shift is seen as a rational adaptation to the economic and political situation as perceived by the George River Eskimo.

3. To further their political interests, the George River people have forged a close-knit pressure group which presents a coherent and consistent strategy in its relations with the government.