

STATEMENT OF THE
CONCERNED ABORIGINAL WOMEN

For many years, we the aboriginal people of this land have taken physical and mental abuse from the Department of Indian Affairs through their paternalistic policies and restrictive regulations. We have experienced countless frustrations in dealing with this bureaucracy and as a result we live in houses that are poorly constructed and overcrowded; our people are unemployed; our young women are being sterilized unnecessarily; our babies are dying in high numbers; many suicides occur; frequent incarcerations; our young people are dropping out of school; increased alcoholism; the loss of our traditional hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering rights; sicknesses resulting from poor water and sewage facilities; interferences in our Indian Governments decision making authority; child apprehensions and adoptions; and the list goes on endlessly. One example of our endless frustrations comes to us from our concerned sisters from the Blueberry and Cowichan Bands. These people have had hydro installed and a water system connected to their homes, but for many years they have had to live with no electricity and no water.

We can no longer stand for this oppression and for this reason we, the aboriginal women, occupied the Department of Indian Affairs offices here in Vancouver. For eight days we attempted to negotiate and lobby to have our three demands met; 1) a meeting with John Munro in Vancouver, 2) the immediate dismissal of Fred Walchli as Director General of DIA in B.C., 3) and a full and independent public inquiry into the activities of the DIA. As of today, Honourable John Munro has not yet responded to our demands.

Many aboriginal women and non-Indian supporters became aware of our stand through the media, support then began to pour in. On the first day of the occupation there were 50 women, two days later there were 120 women. We were and still are a solidified group physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally because our concerns have affected every part of our lives. Strength to carry out the position of our aboriginal women stemmed from our traditional decision making body which was our older women. Their advice, direction and renewed strength bonded the aboriginal people together. The struggle for our demands will be our responsibility to pursue because we organized and made the decision to expose the problems, hurts and sufferings caused by the Department of Indian Affairs. It is a grave insult to our aboriginal women's integrity to say that the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs subverted the occupation, as Fred Walchli has insinuated to the press. The UBCIC has given their full support to our stand and have provided many of their facilities for our aboriginal women's use. We are proud to say we initiated this movement for our people, and we give the utmost respect to our leaders and men who stood by us with courage to show their support and receive our direction.

Countless supporters continue to phone, telexes and letters arrive to rally support for our aboriginal women. To name a few:

- Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs
- United Native Nations
- World Council of Indigenous People
- Professional Women's Assoc. of B.C.
- International Committee Against Racism
- Native Women's Assoc, Saskatchewan
- National Indian Brotherhood
- Nelson Small Legs Sr.
- Indian Women's Council of Manitoba

On the eighth day of our occupation, the Vancouver City Police forcefully removed the aboriginal women and men. 53 of our people were charged with public mischief

and were dragged off to jail where we were held overnight and subjected to verbal harrassment by the city police. We were treated as hardened criminals to court the following day, all handcuffed two by two. For your information we have become aware that the federal government spent \$60,000.00 removing our bodies from the DIA offices.

In court the judge demanded that we stay away from the Department of Indian Affairs and certain conditions were given to everyone. He also made a statement in court that clearly indicates a very paternalistic attitude. He stated, "Strength in numbers is frankly something I don't want you to have again." It became apparent that the judge and the system were working against us to breakdown our strength as the DIA had shown by the arrest and by the many attempts over the last 114 years. It seems that the federal government is playing political games with the courts and our lives to try and divert from the issue of our demands. The department has to quit meddling with our Indian politics. Despite all these attempts to break our strength we continue to press for our demands, our spirit cannot be locked up or killed. Our tenacious spirit has survived for centuries and will never die!

Our action is not a criminal one, it is political. Our concerns are legitimate, our demands are justified and no authority can deny us these demands. We are a people who have existed on this land since time immemorial and derive our authority to govern from that premise. We will only begin to be peoples unto ourselves when our governing bodies are instituted by and for our own people on our own land.

We want the real truth told to the general public in Canada, because we feel that you deserve to hear the real truth of the Department of Indian Affairs mismanagement and corruption. Our people have neither protection nor security at the community level, the occupation of the

DIA offices was necessary because we have no recourse within the system, the simple fact is we cannot strike for better living conditions. In recognition of this, we the aboriginal women, are demanding that all 53 charges be dropped, we do not want the courts to make political decisions on our behalf. Our lawyers have indicated to us good reasons for not going to court,

"There is a legitimate distinction to be drawn between willful criminal intention and the exercise of political freedoms."

" Criminal courts should not be used as a forum for having the discussion between the DIA and the Indian people."

We are also demanding a full and independent public inquiry be held into the Department of Indian Affairs in B.C. now. We are fully prepared to undertake the responsibility of conducting our own public inquiry into the administration of DIA in B.C. because we do not want our concerns to be swept aside by the insensitivity and self-interest of one man, namely Fred Walchli. We feel that DIA must become accountable to our people and our communities and with your support we can begin the inquiry now!

We held our first session of our own inquiry with Senator Ray Perrault, Sgt. Campbell of the Vancouver City Police and various press peoples on the seventh day of our occupation. For seven hours our aboriginal women and men provided evidence of the deplorable living conditions of our communities. We were fed up before we sat with Perrault, but after listening to him give his support for an inquiry, we became even more fed up. As a Senator, Mr Perrault has no real power or authority to push for our demands, in fact he was there on a voluntary basis.

We, as aboriginal people have so much to offer

society, but with the despair our people are in, it is no wonder we are looked down upon. We are fighting for our very survival and the DIA is not assuming any responsibility for its negligence, but is making the situation much worse. The occupation would not have taken place if the Department of Indian Affairs had assumed its responsibilities and been sensitive to our issues at the Band level, for their job is to have a good sense of all the issues and must therefore make recommendations to the Minister for parliament to consider.

The truth must come out into the open for our people want to again grab hold of their dignity, honour, respect and honesty by bringing truth and justice out which our people so well deserve.

Once again our position as concerned aboriginal women has been voiced and unchanged. The stand we take must be heard by all if our demands are going to be activated. Again we demand that we have a meeting with Honourable John Munro in Vancouver, we demand the dismissal of Fred Walchli, we demand a full and independent public inquiry into the DIA in B.C. and we demand the 53 criminal charges against our aboriginal people be dropped.

We will not be ignored because we will not quit until our demands are fully met. We will keep pressing, because we have seen our people suffer in pain for too long.

We hope all aboriginal women here today can see and understand precisely what we are talking about in our stand because I am sure that we have gone through many of same frustrations.