

Changes are needed to

Indian Act

OHSWEKEN — I recently received a very thought-provoking letter from Margaret E. Davis of Burford. In it, she asked many useful questions which may also be on the minds of other non-native people. Her letter was not short so I will get started at some answers and perhaps cover the others in a later column.

One of the questions, and this obviously bothered her, was "Why was Canada compared to South Africa?" Especially when secondary schools and colleges are, as she put it, "as open to Indian young people as to others." And especially since Indian people have been able to vote for 30 years?

I must confess I have never said that Canada is as bad as South Africa because it obviously isn't. However, there are some disturbing similarities.

Looking at Canada as a whole, not just at Six Nations, some Indian reserves were carefully placed where they are now situated by white federal, provincial and local governments to provide a pool of cheap unskilled labor. This is how the locations of "native homelands" in South Africa were arrived at too.

It is true that, in theory, secondary schools and colleges are quite accessible to native young people, especially for Six Nations students. However, we should not judge less fortunate reserves by the Six Nations Reserve. We only have an unemployment rate of 25 per cent whereas the general average for Indian reserves is between 80 and 90 per cent.

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Our Town

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I would not have been able to attend high school or teachers' college if my parents had not been willing to support me far past my sixteenth birthday. The federal Department of Indian Affairs paid my tuition and for that I am thankful but that was all the department did. I wish I had been provided with living expenses but I wasn't. That would have made it much easier for my parents and myself.

I still remember my embarrassment when I turned up for a Grade 9 function and all the other boys were wearing suits. My parents couldn't afford to buy me a suit. We had a large family and we were poor. Suits were way down on our list of priorities.

Why were we poor?

Both of my parents worked hard. We didn't realize it at the time but the reason was quite simple. We were poor because we lived on an Indian reserve. The laws devised for Indian reserves, some of which are still in the law books, seem to have

been designed to keep natives dependent on hand-outs from Indian Affairs. Perhaps this was not done on purpose but the effect was the same.

Obviously this aspect of the Indian Act must be changed.

It is also obvious that other Canadians must help us to do so. Native people have been trying to change this for well over 100 years. The government has not listened to us.

As for the questions about taxes, residents of Indian reserves who work off the reserve must pay income tax the same as anyone else. For the last few years, the Ontario provincial government has not required registered Indians to pay the provincial sales tax. This applies in Ontario only and is not general across Canada. Also many stores and businesses which are not located near Indian reserves do not honor this policy.

In reference to the question of "free border crossing," it only means we are free to cross the border. It does not mean we can bring TVs or microwave ovens across the border without paying duty.

In other words, we do not enjoy all the tax breaks some non-natives think we do.