

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Ahab Spence

Ahab Spence, 59, a Cree, was born in Split Lake, Manitoba, 300 miles northeast of The Pas. At 10 years of age he began his education in a residential school. Finishing high school in Prince Albert, he went on to receive a degree from the University of Saskatchewan. Mr. Spence has been an ordained Anglican minister since 1937. He was also the principal of a residential school. Today he is the chief of the cultural affairs division of the Department of Indian Affairs. Ahab Spence is married and has six children.

The INDIAN NEWS in its interviews has sought reaction from contemporary Indian leaders on the influence of the church, residential schools, and the subsequent loss of culture prevalent in our generation. That reaction is exemplified in Harold Cardinal's book *The Unjust Society*. I personally have heard very few Indians speak well of the



residential school of the past. Let us now look at Mr. Spence's comments on this issue.

David Monture

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Q. What are your comments on the Red Paper, or "Citizens Plus", which was presented to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet last June by the Indian Chiefs of Alberta?

A. I've glanced over it and I am quite impressed with it. I don't think it was as controversial as people imagined it would be. I thought it was quite reasonable. It wasn't my good fortune to attend the actual presentation, but I understand that it had a good reception from the Prime Minister.

Q. The Indian News has run a series of interviews with contemporary Indian leaders and in these interviews, there has often been discussion of the influence of the Church on the native people and consequently, the results of the residential school system. Most of these people's reactions were negative — as in the case of Harold Cardinal. What then are your comments on this as an Indian and as a churchman?

A. I went to a residential school in 1921, leaving in 1928 to go to an outside school. I think there are positive aspects. Mr. Cardinal is about 35 years younger than I am and I lived in a different period altogether, and yet I can see some good having come out of it all. Yes, there were some bitter experiences, but let us also remember the good ones. I think the fact that a lot of our Indian leaders are taking their place today might be attributed to the positive influence of the Christian Church in some way.

I was principal of a residential school in Sioux Lookout, Ontario from 1963 to 1965 and I can appreciate what it must have been like before the church received any money for running these institutions. I think they tried their best with the materials they had at their disposal. In 1958 the government started financing this particular school and by 1964 total support was being given. Consequently I don't think it is fair to compare what it used to be like in these schools in the 20's with, say, the 50's and 60's.

Regarding the types of teachers that we had — I can remember my first teacher, a young lady whose pay was \$35 a month. I'm not saying that money should be a sole criteria in this respect, but what I am saying is that for what the church had in the 1920's, they did at least a fair job at the time.

They tell me that the children are still punished for speaking their own language in some residential schools. The attitude of the people, the teachers, the supervisors, must have changed for the better by now.

Q. Could you recall some of the bad experiences you remember from residential school?

A. I'd rather recall the good ones, but since you insist — I remember the first day I went to school. I ran away. I'll always thank the white man for barbed wire because my pants got caught in the fence and that is how the principal got me back in school. I was 10 years old but a pretty fair runner in those days.

I also recall being punished for the first meal I had in residential school. Now this was nearly 50 years ago, and the meal was cold, watery porridge which I refused to eat. The supervisor sent for the principal and the principal made me eat it. As a result I vomited. I think of all of this as a lot of fun now. We vomit for absorbing other things now. We have found more sophisticated ways of getting sick.

Also the bigger kids used to make us do things we didn't want to. I remember things like having to take the blame for breaking a window — being made to go to the office to tell the principal I had done it.

Of course there were good things which came out of it all. I had been brought up in the Anglican Church and I had to adjust to the services in English at the school. I found a lot of these people to be very kind. I remember preaching in Ottawa this winter and seeing my first supervisor in the congregation. She is 83 now. I thought that she was tough at the time, but now I realize why she had to be tough. Also we learned how to get along with kids from other reserves — something we've all had to learn since we've come to Ottawa. And I recall the Christmas parties the staff used to sponsor, and so on.

Q. What role do you see the modern church playing in aid of native people?

A. I think the church still has a place, but it is going to have to play a different role in the Indian situation. The church has to be big enough to phase out directly but, of course, people still having spiritual difficulties, want the church around in case they need it. I think the church will have to be patient. When the church is wanted, then it must be there.

Q. Can you see a generation gap developing within Indian families, almost a sign of the times for the larger society?

A. I wish I could say no. Mrs. Spence and I have tried very hard to do the best by our kids, but even with my own kids this gap exists. It seems that sometimes we just cannot talk to them and they, in turn, cannot talk with us. They criticize us now for not teaching them the native language, for example. We didn't think it was necessary at the time because we've been away from the reserve since they were born — though they have lived there at times, and visited, and they still have their treaty rights.

I can see our own native university students trying to resolve this gap though. They recently

had a conference here in Ottawa and they can see what has been wrong with the Indian organizations and the National Indian Brotherhood to date and likewise with government. I think it is something which has to be solved without too much interference. Yes, there is a generation gap, but when I talk about 40 years, how can you even know what I am talking about? The older people lived in a different world situation and lived different lives altogether. In my time we almost all lived on the reserve. Off the reserve we were in a residential school situation, and this is a big factor in the Indian situation today, I think.

Q. You are the chief of the Indian Affairs Department's Cultural Affairs Division. Last spring was held the first ever national meeting on cultural development. Is government in fact spending enough money on promoting Indian culture? How much of this responsibility lies with Indian people themselves? Can you sum up a formula for preserving and promoting the Indian cultures?

A. The first national conference on culture which you mentioned was definitely a good undertaking, because the Indians came from across the country for the first time to discuss their ways of life and the programs for enriching the culture, selling Indians to themselves as well as to the larger society. The Minister and the Director of Community Affairs have shown enthusiasm as a result of this meeting and have given us access to more money to work with. As for Indian responsibility in this matter I would say that most of the initiative must be taken by Indian people themselves. I'm not saying that it is not the government's responsibility but I think if the Indian people themselves put on enough pressure and show enough accomplishment, you'll see more and more money being spent in this vital area. I think government now realizes that not enough money and effort has been spent. I can see the cultural affairs division growing in staff and effectiveness. It has been my privilege to have worked in this division for a couple of years, and I hope I have contributed in some small measure to its effectiveness.

Q. Do you honestly believe Indian people will receive fair compensation regarding the question of aboriginal rights?

A. Well I hope we do. This is an area I do not know too much

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about. I am sure the Canadian people, generally speaking, are uninformed about the concept of the aboriginal right. The fact that several of the churches have backed the Red Paper could have an influence.

Q. Do you feel that native people have a message to present to the rest of society regarding the environmental crisis and the so called "quality of life" which governments are seemingly only talking about?

A. I heard one man say that the need for pollution control has now become a matter of life or death, and it is just as simple as that. Before I was even 10 years old (and I lived 300 miles from nowhere) the outboard motors were just being developed. I can still remember my father saying to a friend, "You know the fish are not what they used to be on this lake, and I think it is because of these new motors." He had realized even at that time what was about to happen. Yes, this is an area where native people can certainly contribute. We're looking in our division for native writers and we would like to publicize the old stories which show us that hunting and fishing was no sport, that game was a gift from God providing for human needs and that no one overkilled or wasted in those days. The whole attitude and mentality nowadays seems to be "if I don't get it now it might be gone tomorrow. Well, we are about to lose tomorrow."

Q. Would you say that native people are presently riding on a crest of favourable public opinion? Do you see the larger society eventually losing interest?

A. I think the 70's, the next ten years, are going to be crucial for us. I think if Indian people and other ethnic groups do not take full advantage of this period to recreate their image and make it more positive, it will be most unfortunate. There is a lot of work to be done by the National Indian Brotherhood and I hope the government will have the wisdom to provide the necessary funds.

Q. Would you say that lack of communication is one of the biggest problems for native people today? For the average Indian person living on an isolated reserve it must seem like a very great distance to Ottawa, and the forces and legislation which control a great part of his life. Parallel to this, we have the gap between that same reserve Indian and the organization which represents his interests through the N.I.B.

A. Well, again, we have this situation existing across society. How many citizens of Ottawa know and keep themselves informed about what their municipal government is doing? But yet, effective communications is a must and we have yet to explore all the ways and means of getting to our people.

We must also employ films and radio and every medium, and I would like to see more native newspapers. I am afraid a great gap also exists between the reserve people and the urban Indians. We have to do something about this situation.

I know our leaders have to be able to talk with government and spend a great deal of time away, which they are doing with some success. But let us not forget the little guy back on the reserve — what fate do we leave him to? Let's tell him what is happening, it is going to take a lot of time. I understand that the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians and the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood are already employing communications workers to disseminate information to the local reserves.

Q. What are your comments on the problem of the Indian in the city? Do you feel that enough is being done in aid of these people through the friendship centres? What does it take to adjust a man to the urban situation? Does it take a generation of experience, do we retain whole family units? It has been said that nearly half the status Indian population is already off reserve seasonally.

A. First of all, remember that it is not only the Indian who has to adjust to the urban situation. Take the rural farmer and other non-Indian families who relocate. The children have to adjust to city schools, the parents have to adjust. When we talk about being on time for things in the city — well, the rural farmer is often in the same position as the Indian. Talking about the friendship centres — I think they are doing a good job, again, with what facilities are available.

I have always maintained that for adjusting Indian people to the city, the ground work should be started right at the home base: on the reserve, say in the day school. The younger generation also has a responsibility in explaining to their elders what is to be expected. There are young people away from the reserve in city schools who could be utilized for programs of this nature. You young people should be telling us what to expect and how we must change, and you do — at least my kids do.

from the U.S. —

A new wholly Indian owned planning and architectural firm, Numkena and Lee, has been established in Phoenix, Arizona for the purpose of providing programming, planning and architectural services to the Indian world. The business is located at 7 West Adams Street, Phoenix, Arizona, 85003.

Dennis C. Numkena, a Hopi, who completed his architectural studies at Arizona State University, is president, and Hemsley Lee, a Navajo, who earned his degree in building construction at the same university, is vice president.

Mr. Numkena adds that the firm would like to hear from Indians in planning or architecture, who might be interested in employment.

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Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce recently announced that creation of Indian-owned small business enterprises on and near reservation communities will receive "significant encouragement" as the result of a newly created Indian Development Fund. The Fund will provide financial grants for Indian small businesses.

Mr. Bruce said further: "I am sure that many Indian businessmen and women, and many who wish to start businesses of their own, will find this new source of aid an important part of their bootstrap efforts. It will also provide indirect help to Indian communities that presently are suffering from lack of sufficient business enterprises to generate a good economic base."

The Indian Development Fund is administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and is operating under a \$3.4 million appropriation for fiscal year 1971. It is designed to provide "seed money" grants to Indian tribal members in need of a financial boost to open or expand business enterprises serving their local areas.

The grants will provide cash equity for Indians having less than

sufficient equity to qualify them for small business loans from either public or private sources. They may also be used to supplement business grants-in-aid from government agencies or foundations, and to supplement business loans to arrive at 100% financing for the business venture. Most Indians have found it difficult to take advantage of even the 90% loan guarantee programs of the Small Business Administration, because most private lenders have required 100% guarantee for Indian loans. The Indian Development Fund grant may now be used to make up the difference for this and similar types of financing.

The Fund will be used only when all other customary sources of adequate funding are unavailable to the Indian or Indian group seeking financing, according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Orme Lewis, Jr., who helped engineer the plan.

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A Land Settlement Of At Least 10 Million Acres

The Natives of Alaska are entitled to retain a minimum of 10 million acres of the lands they claim, for the following reasons:

They hold historic Native title to the vast bulk of a truly vast State. The State of Alaska has more than 380 million acres. The Natives have substantial claims to virtually all of this land. A settlement allowing them to retain ownership of 10 million acres would thus represent less than 3% of the lands they have historically used and occupied.

Almost all of Alaska is presently unoccupied except for Native villages and will remain so in the future. A recognition of Indian title in and surrounding these vil-

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Q. Mr. Spence, you are shortly to leave the Department of Indian Affairs. Would you care to comment on your reasons for leaving?

A. I made a commitment to my church that in five years I would reassess whether I would continue in secular activities or not. Some of my bishops perhaps would not agree with me, but I feel I am still doing God's work in the role I have chosen for the last five years. When I was asked to come to headquarters I said that I would stay for 2 years. My time is up at the end of September of this year and that is when I'll leave this Department. I've worked with the church and I've worked for the government. Now I am very

interested in Indian organizations and would like to spend some time with one of the organizations and that is one of the reasons for my going to the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood. Also of significance is that I was born in Manitoba, I'm told, and I have not spent a year working for the Manitoba Indians and I find that I am beginning to lose my native language. I want to revive it again. I am a Swampy Cree. I speak the Plains Cree as well, but I find I am getting rusty. After working a while with the M.I.B. perhaps I would like to work with a provincial government, and then I'll be ready to retire — maybe to write a book on my involvement with Indians as a clergyman, as a public servant, and so on.