

THE RCMP AND INUIT RELOCATION

A FOREWORD TO THE

PRESENTATION ON COMMUNITY AND ABORIGINAL POLICING

TO

THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

BY

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Before moving to the major part of our presentation, I would like to take a few moments to address the role of the RCMP in the Canadian Arctic. This has become contentious, in a small way at least, as a result of the controversy surrounding the relocation of Inuit from Port Harrison (Inukjuak) and Pond Inlet to Resolute Bay and Craig Harbour/Grise Fiord in the early 1950's. Presentations to the Royal Commission on this issue has certainly put it in the public eye and some clarification is necessary. It is important that the events of the early 1950's, and the part played by the RCMP, be considered in historical context. Without this, distortion and misinterpretation is possible.

Prior to the period in question, members of the RCMP had served both the government and people of Canada in the far north for over half a century. RCMP officers, often guided by aboriginal inhabitants, had traversed large tracts of northern Canada, and had established posts and a Canadian presence that was more than symbolic in many isolated areas. On their travels, and at these posts, RCMP officers acted for the government in many capacities. They acted as customs officers, wildlife officers, and welfare officers; they provided emergency medical services, made weather reports and so on. In other words, they were a tangible arm of the Canadian government in a harsh and sparsely inhabited land.

When the RCMP was asked to help implement the relocation scheme, it had no choice but to collaborate. Some officers working in the north in all likelihood saw this as one way of helping to alleviate the situation of some Inuit in northern Quebec. As a major arm of the government in the Arctic at that time, the RCMP was logically, and realistically, the most appropriate and capable body to supervise the project. From long experience in the north, Force members would have been very much aware of the difficulties in such a move. At the same time, however, they were also concerned about the deteriorating social and economic conditions in many communities.

References in RCMP reports in the years prior to the relocation give a sense of humanitarian interest in the health and welfare of Inuit communities. There are references to fluctuating food supply and in the availability of fur animals, especially fox. These are accompanied by concerns about the resulting economic and community instability as indicated by increasing dependence on various forms of "relief," family allowance payments and so on. Officers commented on the disruption of a way of life by traders and missionaries, on the inordinately high prices of outside goods, and on low fur prices. Looking to the future, they mentioned the necessity of involving Inuit in the decision-making process and stressed the need for better education to prepare for the future. All in all, officers like Larsen and Mansell reflected a realistic assessment of the circumstances and a progressive approach to the future. Larsen's comment that "The R.C.M. Police should make every effort to interest and retain suitable members for work in Eskimo Territory who would be willing to devote their entire service to the Eskimo cause." is indicative of his

overall approach. (Larsen, to Commissioner, "Problems Amongst Eskimos - Generally," September 29, 1952, File D.1512-2-4-Q 27)

As the commission has heard, there had been evidence of seriously deteriorating social and economic conditions in some parts of the Arctic for years. By the 1930's and 1940's, the quality of life in many northern communities had deteriorated considerably. A variety of contributing factors were involved, including introduced diseases, alcohol, growing concentrations of population around trading posts and missions, and pressures on game stocks, especially fur-bearing species trapped for income which, when combined with fluctuating, externally controlled prices, created serious economic hardship. In some locations, resources appeared insufficient to support existing Inuit populations. Conditions were, according to the records, especially severe in northern Quebec.

The impetus for the relocation came from a genuine desire on the part of knowledgeable and concerned people to help improve the quality of life of Inuit. As you know, the Committee on Eskimo Affairs considered the relocation idea in October, 1952 and following the decisions you have heard about, by mid-December, planning appears to have been well underway in Ottawa. The on-site supervisory role of the RCMP in the project, as expected by the government, was clearly stated.

RCMP officers in the north at that time were as carefully selected as the time and circumstances permitted. They worked and lived in a difficult and sometimes dangerous physical environment. Compared to the travel and communications that we take for granted today, conditions then were quite primitive. Sea travel was sporadic and seasonal at best, radio was sometimes unreliable, and air service was extremely limited.

When officers in Port Harrison and Pond Inlet began recruiting families for the project in April and May of 1953, they had, as you have heard, quite specific instructions both from the government and their superiors. Larsen's instructions to the Port Harrison (Inukjuak) and Pond Inlet detachments were quite detailed. Officers were instructed to seek volunteers ("ascertain whether any families are willing to go") and to provide information about conditions that could be expected in the new locations. ("Conditions on Ellesmere island should be carefully explained particularly complete dark period of two months and other short days and only annual visits by supply ship.") Larsen also told the detachment that "Families will be brought back home at end of one year if they so desire." (Larsen to Cst.-in-Charge, April 8, 1953, cited in M. Gunther, p. 170).

In recruiting families for the project, in subsequent preparations and in the move itself, officers carried out their instructions to the best of their ability. At the new sites, they continued over the years to assist the Inuit communities as much as possible, given their instructions from the government to try to make these communities as self-sufficient as possible. That life was not easy at times, especially in the first year or two, is obvious. However, RCMP officers did what they could to alleviate conditions to the extent possible.

In the course of the hearings, several allegations of wrong-doing by officers have been repeated, always against unnamed individuals. As a result, by innuendo and inference,

aspersions have been cast on the behaviour of all officers who served in the North. Public insinuations in this vein have left individuals without recourse to clear their names. The Force treats allegations of this nature very seriously. An investigation was conducted as thoroughly as possible, given peoples' memory and willingness, or unwillingness, to speak. The result of the inquiry was that all allegations of misconduct were found to be unsubstantiated or unfounded.

Unless some evidence is forthcoming that will provide the necessary grounds for further investigation, it is time that this whole issue is put to rest. These public accusations have caused considerable stress for the many members who have served with distinction in the Arctic over the years and who have contributed so much to the communities in which they worked. We look forward to continuing to work with Inuit communities in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration for the benefit of all citizens.