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# Navigating Neoliberalism



*Gabrielle Slowey*

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Navigating Neoliberalism:  
Self-Determination and the  
Mikisew Cree First Nation



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*To the people of Fort Chipewyan*



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# Acknowledgments

When I was headed into my fourth year of undergraduate study, I searched for an elective course that was outside the Department of Political Science. I was looking for something different to take in my final year, and my transcript was already saturated with political science courses. So I signed up for a course on Aboriginal politics offered at University College, University of Toronto, but the course was cancelled before it even began.

Disheartened, I approached the chair of the Department of Political Science, Robert Vipond, who informed me there was another fourth-year course on a similar topic, the politics of the Northwest Territories, that looked interesting and was undersubscribed. I immediately signed up, not at all prepared for the way in which it would change my life. The professor, Graham White, was a charismatic teacher with an enthusiasm for all things northern. I found his excitement for northern politics and indigenous issues contagious. And so began my journey into the realm of Aboriginal politics, arguably the most dynamic and interesting dimension of Canadian politics today.

After completing this course and securing my first A at the fourth-year level, I decided to pursue graduate studies at the University of New Brunswick, where I met my next mentor, Andrea Bear Nicholas, a Maliseet elder from Tobique reserve who was teaching at St. Thomas University. Taking her course "Natives and the Colonial Experience," I experienced a wonderful synergy among the students, most Aboriginal, but some, like myself, not. Her class provided a unique forum for discussion and opened my eyes to many of the issues, both theoretical and practical, confronting Aboriginal peoples today.

In the spring of 1997, immediately after completing my master's degree, I moved west to work for the Mikisew Cree First Nation in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, through a program formerly titled Ooskipukwa, run by the First Nations Resource Council of Edmonton, Alberta. I would like to acknowledge the people of Fort Chipewyan in general and my friends from the Mikisew Cree First Nation in particular for their contributions to my career. I will never forget how they welcomed me into their community and into their lives.

Theirs is a friendship that endures, if not in regular communication, then in my fondest memories. They include former chief George Poitras, friend Denise Courtoreille (now Denise Kreuger), and Sally Whiteknife, along with her former partner Stan Wylie and their children, Nathan, Nicholas, and Shaleen. Matriarch Marge Glanfield and her husband, Oliver Glanfield, fed me quite often. Pat Flett and her family (Scott, Becky, and Thomas) and their extended family (Dana, Harold, and Hana and Sam) were also very good to me. The people in the band office, Bonnie Courtoreille, councillors Matthew Lepine and Steve Courtoreille, CEO Trish Mercredi, former CEO Lawrence Courtoreille, his brother Eddie, membership clerk Violet – almost everyone I met in Fort Chipewyan – were very kind and introduced me to the many dimensions of Aboriginal life and living. This is knowledge that is now part of who I am. In summary, these people did me the great honour of making me feel part of the community. They are the foundation upon which I have built my research. While I do not remain in touch with many of them, they are always close to my heart and in my mind.

Since completing this book, I have travelled in the bush with the James Bay Cree in Oujé-Bougoumou, around the world to visit the Ngai Tahu and Tainui of New Zealand, and across the country to investigate the workings of the Vuntut Gwitchin of Old Crow. Everywhere I go, I speak highly of my Mikisew experience. While some people I have met have accused me of being a cheerleader for this community, the reality is that when one is accepted or invited into a community as special as any of these, then one immediately recognizes the blessing of this experience. It is not so much about being a cheerleader as sensing the positive direction in which these communities are headed. After years of federal government intervention and mismanagement, this community is moving forward. While I am suspicious of government agendas and critical of the reasons for their support of self-determination, I also recognize the current reality of the lives of the First Nations people. Certainly, the absence of a real critique of neoliberal globalization occurring in relation to First Nations self-determination is problematic; but the world of First Nations and the politics that accompany them are constantly changing. These changes remind us of just how far First Nations have progressed in their struggle for self-determination, and they remind us of how far they have yet to go. What follows are my observations and analysis of the reality of Aboriginal self-government in Canada as it is unfolding.

This book was originally my doctoral dissertation, completed in 2003. I must therefore acknowledge the work of my examining committee: Gurston Dacks, Linda Trimble, Fred Judson, Julian Castro Rea, Frank Tough, and Frances Abele. I would like to extend a special thank you to my supervisors, Gurston Dacks and Linda Trimble, who read numerous drafts of chapters, offered insightful suggestions, and guided me throughout the course of this project. Their level of scholarship and patience is inspiring. My degree

was accomplished with the financial support of the University of Alberta Walter H. Johns Scholarship, a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship, the Federalism and Federations Doctoral Supplement, and the Northern Science Training Program Grant Award.

A thank you must be given to my dear friend Sara Maud Lydiatt, who edited the dissertation in its final stages and asked the important question, "Where is Fort Chipewyan, anyway?" Her question is the inspiration for the maps. Her time and support for this project are deeply appreciated and her contribution respectfully acknowledged. I also wish to thank the people at Syncrude and Suncor and in the federal and provincial government offices who participated in this project.

I decided to transform the thesis into a book in part based on the recommendation of the external examiner for my doctoral thesis, Frances Abele. This proved to be a fairly daunting task, eased in part by feedback from UBC reviewers and from my editor, Jean Wilson, but mainly through the strict review of the text by my friend, colleague, and former mentor/supervisor, Graham White. His time and expertise is greatly appreciated as the manuscript was significantly transformed as a result of his many suggestions.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family, which has supported and continues to support me throughout my constant travels in the name of research. To my parents, who babysat often and started me on this journey when they assured me I could do anything that I set my mind to. To my husband and my baby son, both of whom are very generous in allowing me time away to talk with many people and to conduct research that I find not only academically stimulating but also personally exciting.



# Introduction

Over the past three decades, major changes have occurred in the relationship between the Canadian government and First Nations peoples in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Government policy on the administration of First Nations people, the settlement of land claims, and the negotiation of self-government have collectively changed the path toward Aboriginal self-determination. What has precipitated this change? Arguably, recent events, including court rulings, royal commissions, and First Nations political actions, have influenced the resolution of outstanding claims, the redirection in public policy, and the negotiation of self-government agreements. But none of these events has been a match for the state's need to provide for unimpeded exploitation of resources, especially in northern Canada.

Canada's relationship with First Nations is intimately tied to its ongoing search for resources. But although resource development explains *why* change is occurring, it does not adequately explain *how* change is occurring, nor does it sufficiently describe the developing character of self-determination. It also fails to address the extent to which self-determination is influenced by other important stimuli, such as globalization. Yet just as neoliberal globalization has changed "common sense notions" of the government-market-citizen relationship, so too has it changed the government-market-First Nation relationship.

What is neoliberal globalization? It is a decisive political strategy aimed at restructuring postwar capitalism in terms of its economic, social, and political dimensions (Hirsch 1997, 41). It is not only an economic force but also a political force that is inherently neoliberal in character. In the current phase of neoliberal capitalism, political actors have taken advantage of the restructuring of production, trade, and the interstate system by pressing for the decentralization, if not the dismantling, of national institutions (Albo and Jenson 1997, 218). The result is that neoliberal globalization has profoundly changed the welfare state. However, the "new political economy" (another term for globalization) has only altered the postwar social order, not eradicated it.

During the age of the welfare state, the purpose of state spending was to offset losses in private income during periods of heavy unemployment and to effect a more equitable redistribution of wealth among citizens. The Canadian welfare state therefore functioned as a mechanism to compensate for the discrepancies of capitalism and to reduce distributional conflicts among capital, labour, and regions. It also worked to balance out the fluctuations in the market. But if social spending and state intervention characterized the postwar political economy, fiscal restraint and *laissez-faire* economics characterize the new political economy.<sup>2</sup> This new emphasis is significant, because the elements of redistribution, representation, and equity that characterized the welfare state and that dominated the postwar era have been weakened in the new political economy by a regime that prioritizes privatization and market privilege.

The rise of these neoliberal forces has ushered in a new era of political interest in Aboriginal self-determination. While a shift in government policy is encouraging, neoliberal globalization is generally assumed to be a destructive force. That is, it could ultimately threaten the well-being of First Nations communities through its restructuring of market-state-First Nation relations and its reduction of the welfare state upon which so many First Nations peoples rely.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, most First Nations peoples already live as marginalized peoples. Because of the high number living in substandard housing, suffering high suicide rates, and enduring years of contaminated water supply, there is unease and a sense of foreboding surrounding neoliberal globalization. Indeed, concern is warranted and action is necessary. Yet, paradoxically, neoliberal globalization may be a reason for hope because of its emphasis on the independence of the citizen from the state. As such, neoliberal globalization may be a remedy to First Nations dispossession, marginalization, and desperation because it opens up space for First Nations self-determination.

What is it about neoliberal globalization that could lead to Aboriginal self-determination in Canada? Neoliberal globalization creates state governments with neoliberal priorities. Since states must revise their public policy to make themselves globally more competitive, neoliberal globalization therefore provides the rationale for neoliberal policies. Globalization and neoliberalism function as twin processes at both the ideological and empirical levels. Their overlapping influences are evident in patterns of change in the role of governments and in the nature of international economic activity (Klak 1998, 19). It is this overlap that leads to the misconception that state actions reflect global imperatives, when the opposite is often true.

Since neoliberalism favours a system of policies and processes designed to assist the marketplace, First Nations self-determination becomes more attractive than First Nations dependence on the state. As in other parts of the world, neoliberalism is reshaping the political and economic relationships

of citizens and the state in Canada. Neoliberalism's ideal citizen is the individual who competes in the marketplace, is self-reliant, and does not act as a drain on the state. Thus, from a neoliberal perspective, the ideal First Nation is an independent First Nation that competes in the marketplace and is independent of the state. And from a Canadian neoliberal perspective, an ideal First Nation would be one that does not impede resource development activity.

Current Canadian support for First Nations self-determination reflects the historical and continuing need for the state to clear away political-legal obstacles for capitalist development of resources in Aboriginal-occupied regions. In general, neoliberal logic suggests that the well-being of First Nations in the new economic order is a function of their ability to compete as autonomous, self-governing, and self-sufficient entities in the global marketplace, rather than as wards of the state. Contemporary government policy toward First Nations thus focuses on (1) the settlement of land claims; (2) the transfer of programs from state to regional control; and (3) the renegotiation of the federal-First Nation governance and fiscal relationship.

An undeniable link exists between neoliberalism and contemporary forms of Canadian First Nations self-determination. Just as neoliberal globalization drives government policy, it also drives the construction of Aboriginal self-determination. This book examines the experience of one First Nations community – Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) – during a critical period of transition (pre- and post-land claim). It highlights the parallels between the MCFN's self-government objectives, those of the primary industries in the northern Alberta region, and those of the federal and provincial governments. It also makes clear how First Nation self-determination, with its focus on increasing band responsibility for health, housing, and welfare, fits comfortably in the free market philosophy of a minimal state and non-government provision of services. That is, self-determination is consistent with normative and neoliberal goals of economic, political, and cultural self-reliance.

However, more is required than just a "good fit among [the] economic system, governing institutions and cultural standards" (Kalt and Cornell 1992, 43). Self-determination also requires direction and development by First Nations leaders and members who understand the linkages among social, economic, and political development and can invent their own solutions. For First Nations self-determination to be both sustainable and meaningful in the neoliberal age requires that political and economic control be vested in the hands of the people whose lives depend on it (Klak 1998, 257). It also requires a coherent vision, an economic strategy, and a capital base. With these ingredients, a neoliberalized form of self-determination can work to a community's advantage, as long as that advantage is measured in material terms – that is, advantage defined in terms of increased political authority and overall improved economic status.

A second important link between neoliberal globalization and First Nations self-determination is revealed in the efforts of First Nations leaders to take control of and make economic decisions on behalf of their membership. Since neoliberalism benefits those First Nations able to participate in a market society, those that do not possess the same economic potential or capacity must find a way to procure a capital base, develop an economic strategy, and address issues of economic development. Even without a large resource base, a community must still develop a strategy, one that concentrates on economic growth as much as on political jurisdiction. MCFN focused its economic strategies on achieving meaningful and equitable participation in the marketplace. Its goals of economic development and self-sufficiency have led to increased political autonomy and improved socioeconomic status. These goals have also led to increases in the community's economic activity through the development of successful businesses and joint ventures with international corporations, thereby enabling the community to contribute to and benefit from Canada's economic growth and prosperity.

MCFN may be the exception rather than the norm among First Nations communities (though my travels to date suggest it is in fact increasingly the norm). All the same, its story illustrates the importance of economic development for self-determination by demonstrating that economic development is essential to contemporary First Nations governance. It exposes the dual importance of political autonomy and capitalization. As well, it shows how self-determination functions as a vehicle for First Nations community-based development in the new political economy, moving the idea of self-government beyond the simple parameters of institutional arrangements to one of market-inspired governance.

### **Organization of the Book**

The purpose of this book is twofold: first, academic, and second, practical. In general, research on First Nations people tends to focus on identifying the "Indian problem" (Wotherspoon and Satzewich 1993, i). In contrast, the present research does not seek to identify a "problem" per se. Instead, it traces the development of one First Nation's self-determination and connects periods of global political economy to phases in First Nations policy to demonstrate how state-market-MCFN relations have changed in the neoliberal era. More importantly, it seeks to highlight ways in which one First Nation (the Mikisew Cree First Nation) is navigating neoliberalism. While research generally does not affect living conditions for First Nations peoples, this book seeks to explain the struggles of other First Nations communities through this case study. While any effort to categorize First Nations is inevitably artificial, mapping self-determination is important, given its growing significance in Canada.

Although the conclusions drawn refer to the specific circumstances of one

First Nation, they are intended to provide guidance, wherever possible, to communities which may find themselves in similar circumstances, since “the sharing of resources and information may assist groups and communities to collaborate with each other” (Smith 1999, 105). Moreover, Smith suggests that the “spiritual, creative and political resources that indigenous peoples can draw on from each other provide alternatives for each other” (ibid.). Ultimately, sharing is beneficial, since the survival of one community can be celebrated by another. Hence, this book aims to share the experience of one community so that it may resonate in other parts of the country where opportunities exist to promote economic, social, and cultural sustainability through prudent and co-operative resource development. The challenge of sustainability is inseparable from the challenge of defining how First Nations construct self-determination and relate to resource development and different levels of government.

The complex dynamics of the globalization-First Nations relationship are best explored through the lens of a community engaged in the construction of their own version of self-determination. To sift through the intricacies of this inter-relationship, Chapter 1 explores the community dynamics of the Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN) at Fort Chipewyan. This chapter paints a picture of the community and the people. It explores the community’s location, organization, and composition. It also describes the methodology used in the study upon which this book is based.

Chapter 2 discusses how, given all that self-determination entails, it requires a shifting of power, authority, and responsibility to indigenous levels of government. But political restructuring is only one component of self-determination. As former Assembly of First Nations chief Ovide Mercredi once argued, “If we gain [political] power for the community but we don’t get the economy, we have power that cannot exercise itself” (Mercredi 1994, 7). Accordingly, for First Nations governments to function independently and for First Nations people to reduce their dependence on government, First Nations must similarly reduce their levels of economic dependence on the federal government. Self-determination, therefore, requires much more than transforming the current political condition of First Nations people.

Chapter 3 traces MCFN’s quest for self-determination and the events which ultimately led to its political and economic transformation. This chapter explores the origins of the Crown-MCFN relationship, which arose out of global pressures for resources, mercantilist trade, and settlement. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate the more recent political economy of First Nations self-determination, in the age of neoliberalism, by exploring the transformative experiences of MCFN in political and economic dimensions. These chapters trace the neoliberal development of the MCFN-market-state relationship to reveal connections among market demands, state policy, and self-determination.

Chapter 6 concludes that transforming First Nations governance requires the reorganization of the First Nations economic relationship to the global economy. Self-determination is not only about reforming institutions or reconfiguring First Nation-state relation, but also about developing new relationships and creating new models of self-determination through market partnerships designed to improve socioeconomic conditions. Ultimately, self-determination is about moving forward. The conclusion also identifies ways in which the experiences of MCFN exemplify a growing trend among First Nations communities. These patterns can be useful for other First Nations in drawing comparisons to the MCFN experience.

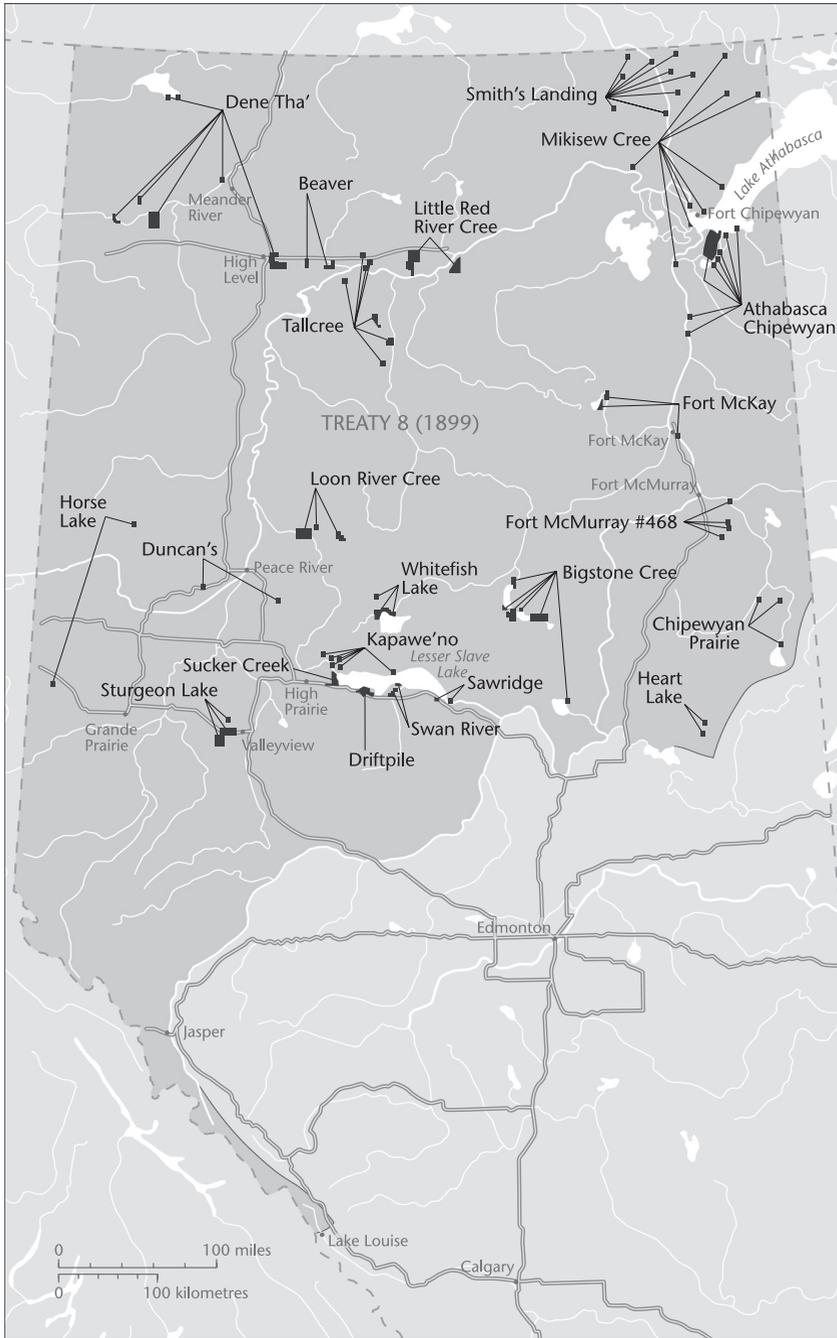
# Abbreviations

ABC	Aboriginal Business Canada
ABDI	Aboriginal Business Development Initiative
ACFN	Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation
CFA	Comprehensive Funding Agreement
C/FNFA	Canada/First Nation Funding Agreement
DIAND	Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development
HBC	Hudson's Bay Company
IEA	Indian Education Authority
INAC	Indian and Northern Affairs Canada
KFN	K'atlodeeche First Nation
MCFN	Mikisew Cree First Nation
MESG	Mikisew Energy Services Group
MSB	Medical Services Branch
NLRHC	Northern Lights Regional Health Centre
NWC	North West Company
TLE	treaty land entitlement
WBNP	Wood Buffalo National Park



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# Navigating Neoliberalism



Map 1 First Nation groups in northern Alberta

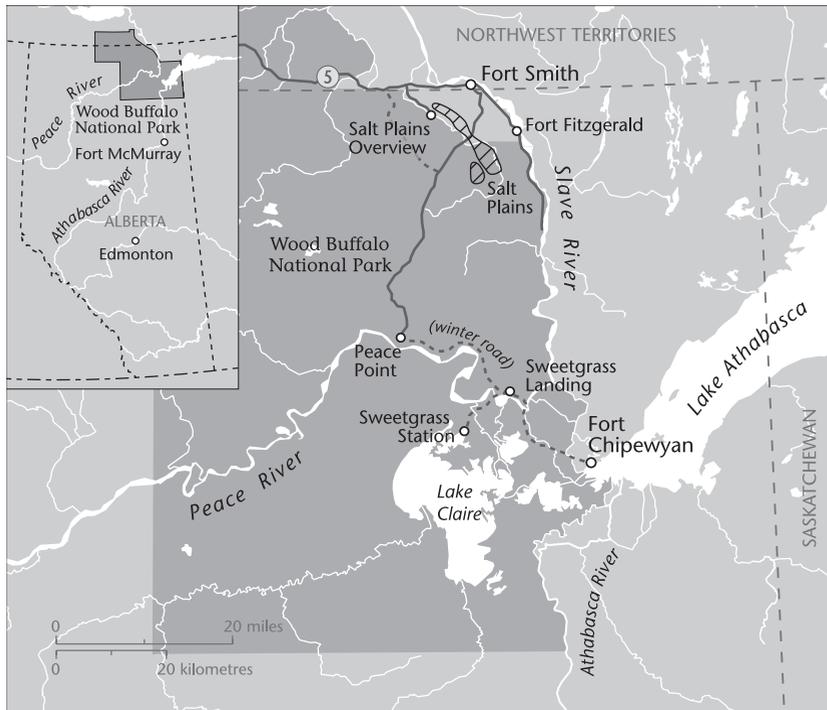
# 1

## Meeting Mikisew

This book tells the story of the Mikisew Cree First Nation (MCFN), Band Number 461, located in Fort Chipewyan, a remote village in northeastern Alberta, or – as the locals like to call it – “Fort Chip.” Only accessible by plane most of the year, boat in the summer or, when weather permits, winter road from Fort Smith (to the north) or Fort McMurray (to the south), Fort Chipewyan is a picturesque community, nestled on the north shore of Lake Athabasca, in the muskeg of the Peace Athabasca Delta, immediately outside the boundaries of Wood Buffalo National Park (Maps 1 and 2). It sits 300 kilometres north of Fort McMurray, home of the world-famous oil sands. A river barge service is used to transport goods to the community, although there is no passenger service; and regular scheduled flights on Air Mikisew arrive daily from Fort McMurray.<sup>1</sup>

On landing at the Fort Chipewyan airstrip, one travels approximately ten kilometres of paved road to town, passing small lakes and an extensive amount of bush. Because it is a small community, life in Fort Chipewyan revolves around the post office and the “Northern,” a remnant of the Hudson Bay Company general store, which are the two principal buildings on the main street. The town also boasts a beautiful wood lodge and hotel, which sits on a hill overlooking the lake and village. The town possesses a few other independently operated stores, a multiplex that houses a video-rental outlet, the Keyano College campus, and the Athabaskan Chipewyan First Nation band offices, along with a few offices for MCFN. Also within the village are a municipal building, a Wood Buffalo National Park office, a provincial government building, a lumberyard, and a fish factory. From the centre of town, it is a short walk to the beach or to the Doghead reserve, which is the primary reserve of MCFN.

The community of Fort Chipewyan comprises three groups of Aboriginal peoples: the Woodland Cree (Mikisew Cree First Nation), the Denesolene (Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, or ACFN), and the Métis (Fort Chipewyan Métis Local Number 124). Within the community of Fort Chipewyan, MCFN



Map 2 Fort Chipewyan and Wood Buffalo National Park

is the dominant demographic group (Table 1). In 1999, the Fort Chipewyan population stood at approximately 1,400 people, consisting of 800 Cree, 250 Chipewyan, 180 Métis, and 170 non-Aboriginal citizens, among them RCMP officers, Parks, Fisheries, and Forestry staff, teachers, and nurses (Mikisew Cree First Nation 1999). Today, those numbers have shifted somewhat. The 2006 census reports a total registered population of 915 people residing in Fort Chipewyan of whom 822 are identified as Aboriginal peoples (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo 2006).<sup>2</sup>

MCFN remains the dominant group, however, with a total registered population of 2,408, of whom 773 are listed as living on-reserve (residing on one of the two residential reserves known as Doghead or Allison Bay) or within the hamlet of Fort Chipewyan, and a further 1,635 members living off-reserve, mostly in the cities of Fort McMurray, Edmonton, and Calgary. In contrast, the ACFN reported a total registered population of 834, of whom 239 live in Fort Chipewyan (DIAND 2007).

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of data on MCFN, which means there is no community information about gender, income, education, or employment. To a large extent, statistical data on MCFN are absent because prior to 1986, MCFN did not classify as a study group (since they did not live on reserved

Table 1

<b>Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations registered populations, 2006</b>		
Residency	MCFN	ACFN
Registered members on MCFN reserves (or living in Fort Chipewyan)	773	239
Registered members off-reserve	1,635	595
Total registered population	2,408	834

Source: DIAND 2007.

lands). However, since 1986, no statistical data on this community have been collected or made available. In light of the lack of statistical information available at government (federal and provincial) levels, this study relies extensively on survey data retrieved from one of the few studies conducted, a community profile of Fort Chipewyan prepared for Suncor, a large oil sands producer in the region (deCardinale 1996).

I first travelled to Fort Chipewyan in the spring of 1997. Originally hired by the First Nations Resource Council (a program also known as “Ooskipukwa,” which matches graduate students with First Nations communities in need of certain expertise), I acted as the self-government officer in the MCFN organization. My duties included reviewing self-government documents, liaising with government officials, filing First Nation by-laws, and preparing reports on government agreements. Working for the band, I integrated quickly into the community, taking part in the daily routines of local life, such as picnics at Dore (pronounced “Dorey”) Lake and relaxing strolls out along the beach or to the reserve for ice cream, not to mention bush camping. I became very involved in community life and participated in special band events, including treaty days, a three-day event celebrating the past, present, and future of MCFN. There were hand games and traditional country food and, of course, dance competitions. Later that summer, I paddled down the Peace and Slave rivers in a canoeing event sponsored by Wood Buffalo National Park: a group of eight enthusiasts travelled three days in a voyageur canoe to Hay Camp at Fort Fitzgerald, on the Northwest Territories border. I also attended the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ball that was held in the community to celebrate 100 years of RCMP presence in the community.

Although my employment with MCFN finished in the fall of 1997, my connection to the community endured beyond this period. Over the past ten years, I have returned to the community on numerous occasions, as well as participated in other community-related events (e.g., personal meetings, regional conferences, and legal proceedings). My involvement in the community and my ongoing relationship with MCFN enabled me to earn a degree of trust. As

a result, I was able to gather information through interviews and observations, as well as through the practical experience of community living.

### **Band Governance**

MCFN is governed by a democratically elected chief and six councillors for a term of three years as provided under the election system of the Indian Act, specifically section 10, which provides for band elections based on the customary electoral system. As a band government, the chief and councillors provide Indian Act governance that includes the administration of membership, public finance, public works, economic development, social services, child care, and housing services. While some employment is available with the band, the Mikisew Cree family of companies is the largest source of employment for Mikisew members and others within the community of Fort Chipewyan.

MCFN receives approximately \$25.7 million in funding from the federal government every five years. In addition to the federal government's fiscal contribution to its operations, programs, and services, MCFN has a net worth of over \$35 million that is increasing at an average annual rate of 7 percent (deCardinale 1996, b-6). Collectively, its capital assets include businesses through which MCFN employs close to 200 local people, which translates into an annual impact on the community of roughly \$5 million (ibid.). In addition, MCFN sits 300 kilometres north of Fort McMurray, home of the tar sands (known more commonly as the oil sands), a multi-billion-dollar resource extraction site that forms an integral part of Alberta's oil and gas industry and a source of economic benefits for MCFN.

Although MCFN appears to be a fairly cohesive community, income levels of individuals who live in Fort Chipewyan but work in the tar sands are substantially higher than those who remain in the community and depend on seasonal employment or government assistance. For example, income in Fort Chipewyan is influenced by the attraction of the "fly-in/fly-out" program. Sponsored by oil sands corporations such as Syncrude, this program ferries workers who wish to maintain a permanent residence in Fort Chipewyan back and forth to Fort McMurray. While recognizing the great expense associated with the program, the company feels that it is assisting the community by providing job opportunities locally, protecting the integrity of the community and Aboriginal culture, and effectively redistributing income. According to company officials, "We don't want to decimate the community. And we want those skills and that sort of affluence, if you will, to go back in to the community in terms of wages" (Interview with Syncrude representative 2000b). Yet the increase of material wealth is not shared equally, dividing band members even further apart by accentuating already acute levels of financial disparity.

Even though MCFN is not actually located on oil sands lands, the oil sands operations combined with federal funding provide MCFN a significant capital

base from which to pursue and operate self-government. MCFN claims to be working toward self-government that would broaden its governance over all human and land services in the area. Self-government for MCFN means a stand-alone government with the powers to make laws, manage lands, and exercise jurisdictional authority, all under a constitution designed to guide its own activities. To facilitate the realization of its self-government ambitions, MCFN seeks increased autonomy and jurisdiction over reserve lands, traditional lands (primarily located in Wood Buffalo National Park), and commercial activities and properties in Fort Chipewyan. Their dream of self-government includes aspirations for increased powers similar to those of a province.

### **History of the Mikisew People**

Fort Chipewyan was originally a fur trade post. The North West Company (NWC) built Fort Chipewyan in 1788 as an inland post for all fur trade activity in the area.<sup>3</sup> The Mikisew Cree, descendants of the Woodland Cree, migrated to this area to trap fur when the region was the focus of the trade economy. In 1821, Fort Chipewyan became the headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company (newly merged with the NWC) for the entire Athabasca region. During this period, MCFN retained its bush culture, going to Fort Chipewyan only in the spring and fall for trade and provisions (guns, traps, and other manufactured necessities) or to attend religious ceremonies. Its economy thus combined subsistence activities and commercial trapping.

In 1899, when natural gas, oil, and gold were discovered in the Athabasca region, the federal government began to negotiate Treaty 8 with the First Nations people in the region. The treaty was significant because it established the foundation for the legal relationship between MCFN and the federal government. Comprising almost 325,000 square miles, the territory included under Treaty 8 was larger than the areas of previous treaties. It incorporated all the lands from Lesser Slave Lake in the south to Great Slave Lake in the north. It extended west to the Peace River country and east to Fond du Lac on Lake Athabasca. During the negotiations, MCFN Chief Marten worried about the loss of freedom to hunt and trap and about education for the children. He wanted to ensure that his people could remain self-supporting, in either traditional or alternative pursuits (Selin 1999, 13). In the end, Treaty 8 included annuities of \$5 per person, medals and flags, health care and education provisions, and exemptions from all forms of taxation and military service. It recognized and affirmed MCFN freedoms to hunt and trap. Despite the formalization of the legal relationship, there was little interference by the federal government in the affairs of MCFN during the post-treaty years, thus enabling MCFN to retain its independence. This non-intervention was not surprising, given the *laissez-faire* ethos that dominated the period. However, in the era following the Second World War, when the federal government

entered a new phase of interventionism, it began to build the social safety net on which MCFN members became increasingly dependent.

MCFN members lived in bush settlements well into the 1950s, at which time it became increasingly difficult to live off the land. With hunting and trapping resources dwindling and the fur trade declining, many began to move into the town of Fort Chipewyan, where there was a developing infrastructure and social assistance. In the ensuing phase of social and economic change, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND, with the Indian and Northern Affairs division also referred to as INAC) installed its own systems to support the changing economy and lifestyle in the region. During this time, the town of Fort Chipewyan essentially became a large reserve, as development typically associated with a reserve (i.e., health services, housing, educational institutions, band offices, water and sewage management, building of roads, etc.) took place within the settlement. However, the town was not a reserve, since no reserved lands had yet been set aside for or assigned to MCFN. Instead, Fort Chipewyan served as the centre of the MCFN community. Over time, RCMP barracks (1978) and roads (1978) were constructed, and a nursing station (1958) and water and sewage systems (1982) were built in and around the town site of Fort Chipewyan (deCardinale 1996, Chapter 1). For MCFN, this meant that infrastructure development did not occur on reserved lands but within the town itself.

The history of MCFN comprises a series of events that influenced, persuaded, or forced its development from the past into the present. The recent shift in the organization of the international political economy and development of the neoliberal state has greatly influenced and changed MCFN, in particular, over the past twenty-five years since the final negotiation and settlement of its outstanding Treaty Land Entitlement.

### **The Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE)**

MCFN was a signatory to Treaty 8 in 1899 (see Map 3). A component of Treaty 8 was the promise that lands would be set aside for the exclusive use of MCFN (not to exceed one square mile for each family of five or 128 acres for each person). However, the government of Canada did not keep this promise and failed to provide any land in the years immediately following the signing of Treaty 8 (Fumoleau 1976, 72-73). During this period, failure to receive land was no serious consequence to MCFN, since MCFN did not want to be “parked on reserves.”

In 1922, when the traditional economy and way of life began declining, MCFN asked for its reserve lands, but its request was denied. During the following sixty-four years, MCFN made forty more requests to Canada to “make good on its promise,” but the treaty land entitlement remained outstanding (Selin 1999, 16). MCFN efforts were blocked, for instance, by federal



Map 3 Historical Indian treaties

changes to the Indian Act in 1927 (repealed in 1951) that made it illegal for bands to raise funds for land claims without the permission of the Indian Affairs department. Eventually, the opportunity to negotiate a Treaty 8 land claim moved from dream to reality in the 1970s, when the federal government announced a new era of negotiation. At that time, in 1972, MCFN put forward its claim for a treaty land entitlement (TLE). The eventual resolution of the MCFN claim provided the catalyst for its political and economic transformation.

A TLE is a “process by which a First Nations group acquires the full amount of land to which it is entitled but never received as a result of signing a treaty” (Isaac 1999, 127). A TLE is a type of “specific claim” that results from an oversight or shortcoming by the government of Canada in the administration of land or the fulfillment of treaties.<sup>4</sup> These claims differ from “comprehensive claims,” which occur in areas where no treaties existed previously. In the case of MCFN, its grievance fell into the TLE category. In 1986, after fifteen years of negotiations with the government of Canada and the province of Alberta, MCFN signed a TLE, a historic and transformative agreement. The TLE awarded MCFN 12,280 acres of land and \$26.6 million. Alberta contributed the land and \$17.6 million, while Canada contributed \$9 million. Land allocation included nine reserve sites, including one in the west end of Fort Chipewyan, known as Doghead, one to the northeast, and one at Peace Point in Wood Buffalo National Park.

### **A Turning Point**

The 1986 TLE represented a watershed in the evolution of self-determination for MCFN. It also connected MCFN to the new political economy. If globalization requires a stable investment environment to generate economic growth, then the resolution of land claims forms an important part of the neoliberal strategy. Settled land claims create an environment conducive to investment, required for all-important resource development, by clarifying issues of land title and resource ownership. Additionally, since neoliberalism favours the decentralization of programs and services, the TLE, by virtue of providing MCFN with a land base, facilitated government off-loading of control over band-related political and economic matters, proving once and for all that neoliberalism, government control, and resolved land claims are interconnected.