

# 1

## A General Setting

During the years between its founding in 1939 and the late 1960s, the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA) functioned within a complex tapestry of events and people. Many factors influenced its actions and historical moves, and these factors formed the weft and warp within which the IAA was enmeshed. Federal policies, provincial economic development, the existence of other Aboriginal political organizations, and public sentiment are all woven into the fabric of IAA history. A central event of the period between 1939 and the 1960s affecting IAA history was Canada's involvement in the Second World War. Although the war is usually discussed in terms of minority rights and their effects on federal Indian policy,<sup>1</sup> the social and economic impact of the war on Canada strongly affected Prairie Indian peoples within their own home communities. The industrialization of the Canadian economy and the subsequent urbanization of the nation's population, for example, changed the relationship between Indian communities (which remained rural and agrarian) and the rest of Canadian society. The postwar era also saw an extension of federal government involvement in the nation's social realm. Again, these social welfare policies affected both Indian and non-Indian communities but in different ways.

The effect of the war on Canadian demographics and economics is significant to the social history of Alberta Indian people. Canadian historians have extensively described how the nation's involvement in the European war brought it out of its deep economic depression.<sup>2</sup> The massive growth of agricultural production, manufacturing, and industry associated with the war caused a dramatic increase in employment and urbanization following the depression years. As early as 1940, Canada was called upon to produce war materials not only for its own troops, but also for Britain; and, by 1941, Canadian production of munitions, small arms, chemicals, ships, and military vehicles was in full swing.<sup>3</sup> The Canadian west also benefited from the war production program. Local factories in Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Regina began working on war orders by late 1941, and

this small boom helped relieve unemployment on the Prairies, as it did elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, this war-induced industrialization encouraged large numbers of people to relocate to regional cities in order to take advantage of new jobs.

As the war affected industry, it also affected agriculture. Although wheat prices did not increase as dramatically during the war as was initially expected, government subsidies encouraged Canadian farmers to diversify their production for the export markets. Overall, between 1939 and 1944, Prairie farmers saw their total cash incomes increase by approximately 200 percent.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, much as industrial growth in Canada contributed to urbanization, so, indirectly, did changes in agricultural practice. During the war the shortage of farm labour and the rising income of farmers encouraged the mechanization of farming. The result of this trend was larger farms run with fewer people. Historians Howard and Tamara Palmer have indicated that, in the case of Alberta, small farmers soon found themselves unable to compete with the larger, more mechanized farms and were forced to sell out. By 1951 the majority of the population of Alberta had become urban.<sup>6</sup>

Indian peoples in Canada, and especially in the Prairies, were affected by this wartime industrialization and urbanization. For those who remained on the home front, the shortage of workers on rural farms and the growth of Canada's resource industries created many new jobs both on and off reserves. As Harold McGill, director of the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources, reported in 1941, "greater opportunities for employment have become available to Indians coincident with the increased demands for labour caused by the war."<sup>7</sup> McGill pointed out how wartime industries absorbed Indian peoples into the building trades, ranching, logging, and mining. Other areas where Indian peoples found temporary employment in these years of economic expansion were in road building, farming, and the sugar beet industry.<sup>8</sup> Despite this boom in wage employment, however, reserve economies based on farming faltered. Mechanization gradually decreased the need for Indian labour,<sup>9</sup> and Indian farmers, unable to expand their farms or to mechanize, soon found themselves unable to compete with their non-Indian neighbours. The urbanization and industrialization of both farm and city life in Canada after the Second World War did little to benefit Indian reserve communities.

Another significant development during this period was the expansion of the federal government's role in Canadian society. Following Canada's declaration of war on Germany, the federal government set about mobilizing its economic resources through the War Measures Act. Out of the government's expanded participation in the Canadian war economy came increased federal involvement in the area of social security. An initial

development in social security legislation, beyond the initiation of pension legislation in 1927, occurred with the Unemployment Insurance Act, 1940. Soon after, the Family Allowance Act, 1944, created universal family allowances. These two acts paved the way for increased government involvement in public welfare during the postwar years, when reconstruction of Canadian society was seen as a top priority.<sup>10</sup> By the mid-1940s, social policy theorists as well as Canadian politicians had reached a consensus on the importance of comprehensive social security; the only question that remained was how social security measures could best be financed and implemented.

Just as changes in the economy affected Indian communities, so did the government's new social welfare orientation. Strangely, despite growing government involvement in social security, initially Indian peoples did not receive the same social security benefits as did non-Indians. The original Old Age Pensions Act, 1927, which made Canadians eligible for a means-tested pension, explicitly excluded Indians from its provisions.<sup>11</sup> Only by the late 1940s did the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) begin to extend some pension benefits to the registered Indian population, paying individuals who received incomes of under \$400 per month a pension of eight dollars per month. In 1950 the amount of pension moneys to eligible Indians was increased slightly; however, over time, strict requirements and documentary procedures proved prohibitive for many Indian applicants. As a result, few of the pension benefits reached Indian peoples.<sup>12</sup> Only in 1951 was the former Old Age Pensions Act finally replaced by two new pieces of legislation: the Old Age Security Act, which officially and universally extended pensions to Indian peoples, and the Old Age Assistance Act, which maintained the older residual pattern of granting aid.<sup>13</sup>

Between 1935 and 1957, the Mackenzie King and Louis St. Laurent governments established what some historians have labelled "the age of bureaucracy" and "the age of welfare." During these decades of Liberal majority rule, Canada enjoyed growing economic prosperity based on the internal postwar "reconstruction" of the nation.<sup>14</sup> According to political scientist Reg Whitaker, the postwar years supported strong, centralized action on the part of the federal government in re-engineering postwar Canadian society.<sup>15</sup> In combination, economic prosperity and collectivist sentiments resulted in a federalist Liberal government policy focused upon national development, full employment, immigration, and improved living conditions for the general Canadian population.<sup>16</sup> Between 1939 and 1957 "bureaucracy" and "social welfare" came to characterize the Liberal federal government's priorities. During these years, Canada's Indian population was affected by the federal Liberal agenda as much as were other Canadians. Federal Indian policies of the 1940s and 1950s reveal that

Indian peoples, like non-Indian peoples, were to be recipients of Liberal attempts to smooth away regional differences and to promote national prosperity. Canadian national development was the government priority, and all segments of the population were to be drawn into this plan. In reality, however, the inclusion of status Indian peoples in a new economy and welfare state did not necessarily progress in the same manner as did the inclusion of other Canadians. This was an issue that concerned the IAA over a long period of time.

At the provincial level, Indian communities faced numerous circumstances that influenced their political activities. Within Alberta the political climate was very different from that in Ottawa; the social welfare sentiment that became part of Liberal ideology did not consistently prevail at the provincial level. Between 1939 and the late 1950s, Alberta politics was dominated by the Social Credit party. Swept to power in 1935 under the leadership of fundamentalist Christian William Aberhart, the Social Credit party presented itself as a reform-oriented party, attracting working-class support and promising radical changes to the monetary system, redistribution of income, price controls, medicare, and even some state control over industry. Much of the popularity enjoyed by the Social Credit party was rooted in the hardship suffered by Albertans during the Great Depression as well as in growing public disillusionment with the other political parties in the province, including the United Farmers of Alberta and the Labour party.<sup>17</sup> Historians Howard and Tamara Palmer suggest that Alberta experienced a phase of political radicalism between 1939 and 1949, when Albertans embraced a new politics emphasizing collective action and socialist ideals.<sup>18</sup> This collectivist intellectual climate within Alberta contributed to the founding of the IAA in 1939. Many Indian leaders supported left-wing ideals and believed that their involvement in this kind of politics would benefit their communities.

Despite its superficial socialism, however, the politics of the Social Credit party shifted to the right. After the Second World War, large-scale agriculture and mineral resource development created dramatic prosperity in Alberta. The result of this prosperity was that, where once the Social Credit provincial government championed a social welfare ideology, after the war it came to see socialists as its chief opposition.<sup>19</sup> Within a short period of time, Indian peoples found themselves devoid of support within provincial politics. In addition, they also found themselves gradually excluded from the provincial economy. The development of oil and gas resources in Alberta, beginning in 1947 with the Leduc fields, for example, played a negligible role in Indian communities, and the contrast between Indian and non-Indian economic status was amplified despite the development of mineral resources on some southern reserves.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the oil industry created demands for skilled workers, and small-scale

agriculture as practised on reserves decreased in economic significance.<sup>21</sup> The oil boom, which benefited some sectors of Alberta's population, neatly side-stepped its Indian population.<sup>22</sup> Overall, to the IAA, the post-war conservatism of the Alberta government represented a substantive hurdle to the achievement of social justice for Indian peoples. In fact, direct provincial government initiatives to assist the Aboriginal population of the province were not taken until 1964.<sup>23</sup>

The IAA also operated in a time when Native organizations, although not numerous, were certainly making their mark on Canada's political landscape. In western Canada Aboriginal communities had long been active, particularly in British Columbia, where leaders were primarily interested in having their claims to their ancestral lands recognized by the colonizing governments. Groups such as the Allied Tribes of British Columbia were founded as early as 1915, to be followed by other BC organizations, including the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia (1931) – an extension of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and one of BC's most influential Indian organizations. On the West Coast, these organizations worked for more than just land rights, and the Brotherhood did much to promote the rights of fishers and cannery workers. On the Prairies, residents of reserve communities rallied around several smaller organizations that appeared to operate successfully for a few years and then dissipate. Before the Second World War political union-style meetings were pioneered by the League of Indians of Canada (a group very successful on the Prairies in the 1920s and a forerunner of the League of Indians in Western Canada), the Association of Western Allied Tribes (1925), and even the Métis Association of Alberta. After the war, the number of small associations expanded to include the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood (1946), Saskatchewan's Queen Victoria Treaty Protective Association (1947), and the Union of Saskatchewan Indians (1946) to name the most obvious.<sup>24</sup> Not all survived or thrived; however, all contributed to the publicizing of Aboriginal claims. By the late 1960s the road pioneered by the early associations had been well trodden by the many unions that sprang up following the implementation of government funding for Aboriginal organizations.

Within this context the work of the IAA was clearly significant: it represented one of the few Prairie organizations to maintain a presence on the political scene over the long term. It was not alone in its works, and its leaders had experience with other organizations as well; however, its longevity and tenacity set it apart from other similar unions founded on the Prairies at the same time. The IAA leaders and its membership generated enough momentum to carry their group through an ever-changing political wilderness. The details of its founding and workings bear witness to its relative effectiveness.

In the most general sense, even before one considers the intricate details of the IAA, it can be seen that the history of this association played itself out within the context of multiple local and national forces. Its story is part of the demographic changes taking place in Canadian society, including the thrust towards urbanization and industrialization following the Second World War. The IAA was a product of federal Liberal government policies – both Indian policy and social welfare policy; it was an effect of and a reaction to the new prosperity of Alberta, and the way in which that prosperity was managed by the Social Credit government in the postwar years; and it was also the product of a long history of Indian political activity in Canada. The IAA represented Indian peoples' views of their place within Canadian society during a particular era, and the process of articulating those views in the face of national and provincial political and economic developments helped them to forge a distinctive collective consciousness.