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DON NIELSON

Don Nielson was one of the original organizers, with Malcolm Norris, of the Metis Association of Saskatchewan in 1964.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Problems within native organizations between north and south, status and non-status Liberal and CCF.
- Details of the meetings conducted in northern communities by Malcolm Norris when he was organizing the Metis Association of Saskatchewan.

Murray: I am talking to Don Nielson of Regina. Don, I'm wondering if you recall anything about Malcolm's involvement in other native organizations besides the Metis Association? I'm thinking for example of the National Indian Council. Do you recall that organization?

Don: I somehow recall, going back to say that time of about 1964. I can't really remember whether Malcolm ever mentioned any of the other organizations, you know, on a national level. We were more concerned with them I think, on a provincial level and in regards to the treaty Indians. He had a lot of contacts with the treaty Indians in the province and elsewhere. The National Indian Council was being formed at that time but as it turned out you know, not too many people were really involved in it. It wasn't a grass roots project.

Murray: It was a top-down sort of thing.

Don: A select few people had gotten together and...

Murray: Do you remember who initiated that? Did you ever hear?

Don: Wuttunee, I believe.

Murray: Frank Wuttunee?

Don: No, but what's his name from Calgary, eh. He's from Red Pheasant Reserve actually.

Murray: And so it was basically just leaders gathered from around the country. They weren't elected positions or anything like that?

Don: Self-appointed type of thing and well, they were on the go. They had to do something. I think it was a good move.

Murray: As a preliminary sort of thing, I suppose.

Don: Got a lot of Indians off their ass. You know, really.

Murray: That's exactly the kind of thing Malcolm wanted to do too.

Don: A catalyst, yeah. He said it was good, anything to good the conscience of the people. Not necessarily government, but the people at home.

Murray: Right. That was his main emphasis, wasn't it, to get the people themselves going?

Don: Himself, yeah. His own aim in life I think was mainly that, eh. All the way through, it was to good and to get the people involved in their own affairs.

Murray: Get them thinking and...

Don: Organized, eh, politically first of all.

Murray: I know that Malcolm was involved initially in the Union of Saskatchewan Indians to some extent. Did he ever talk about that at all?

Don: Well, I think his involvement was probably - no one knows really but as he talked about it - he had a lot of influence behind the doors, behind the scene. And that was because of his contact with Premier Douglas at that time, and, of course, Shumiatcher who chaired the first meeting in 1946 with the treaty Indians. He also chaired the first meeting of the Metis down here in Regina in 1946. I don't know if you've got a copy of that.

Murray: Yeah, I do. I found it finally.

Don: You did. You don't have it with you?

Murray: No, it's in the archives so I don't actually have a copy.

Don: We had a copy at the Metis Society office. I don't know who in the hell has got it.

Murray: I was going to have the whole thing xeroxed but it was too expensive so I xeroxed some pages. I can lend it to you if you wanted to copy it. But it cost 15 a page so I don't have that much money but it's really interesting. You'd really like reading it.

Don: Yeah, I've read it. Right.

Murray: I'd like to talk a bit about that, the general split between Indians and Metis. I know we've talked about this before. But did Malcolm sort of feel that by 1964 when you were both organizing the first association there, did he feel that it was sort of inevitable that the split wasn't going to be mended and that the two groups would have to go their own ways? How did he feel about that?

Don: I don't really know.

Murray: Did he still have some hope?

Don: I think he said he always felt politically we would always end up supporting each other. You know, it would be a long process of getting rid of the opportunists as he always said. We have so many opportunists in our group, as all movements do. And more so I think in our native group because people are reaching out for security and whichever way they can get security, recognition, or what have you, they'll sell out.

Murray: Looking out for number one.

Don: Even if they are leaders of their own band, so to speak, they'll still sell out the troop, you know, for the benefit of themselves. And he called them sellouts and it's true and he pin-pointed them and he knew it. And he said eventually and gradually we would seek and we would seek and we would really, you know, get rid of the sellout people.

Murray: So he was confident of that.

Don: Yes. And it's coming to that.

Murray: But did he see that taking a fairly lengthy period of time?

Don: Yes, he did.

Murray: A sort of necessary stage in the movement then was it?

Don: Yes, and he, like his philosophy or his belief was because that we were a sellout to political parties rather than to the cause. And Malcolm even, in his own way, he was a die-hard socialist, you know. And I can see his concept of sharing, you know, and it's very much of an Indian concept, to share what we have. And I think it's coming to that throughout the bands, cooperative bands right across the country, whether they are Liberals, Conservatives, or whatever.

Murray: You think there is a gradual movement away from political parties then, is there?

Don: Well, no. There is individuals in that. Like even, you see Gerry Hammersmith, and then you see your select group of people. Dave Ahenakew didn't go to that meeting up there, the rally for Gerry. And Sol Sanderson didn't because, of course, he didn't belong to the NDP party. But they played politics. Ahenakew didn't go. You know, we still are committed to our religion, so to speak, the Christian religions, Anglican or Catholic, Liberal or Conservative, along that line.

Murray: But the native politics is something that's, is it becoming more together do you think?

Don: I really don't know if it's becoming more together. We see the Indian leaders like Harold Cardinal, for example, go on to administration. But I think he's got a longer goal set ahead of him, eh. I think his is going to the Conservatives and running on the Conservative ticket in the next federal and becoming the minister. I think this is what he has in...

Murray: That's his idea is it?

Don: I think so. In fact, I know it.

Murray: He thinks he can do something within the system that way.

Don: Well, not something in the system. I think he has the thought of getting complete control and I don't know if he'll ever be able to do it. Only with the total unity of all native people will this be able to be done. Where the treaty Indians have the backing of the Metis organizations and non-status, the Native Council of Canada, all the way down in supporting each other on the political front for the enforcement and for the betterment of the treaty Indians to see that their treaties are upheld. And likewise for those things that the non-status Indians are hoping to present. And their aboriginal rights and legal claims.

Murray: Right. Did Malcolm see a significant difference between the Metis and the Indian in the sense that, sometimes I get the impression that the treaty Indians were more tied to

the traditional political parties, to some extent, than the Metis were.

Don: Well, they were in that sense too, that they were more controlled geographically. They were controlled also by the churches on the reserves and whichever way the priest or the minister voted, they went along with it, according from band to band and according from reserve to reserve, whoever got there first. They either followed the King James version of politics or the other version, the Roman version. If you were Roman you voted Liberal and if you were James, well, you voted Conservative and this was it (or Presbyterian eh, whatever). And that's about the way it still is in a lot of areas.

Murray: Did the Metis people manage to avoid some of that because they weren't in that sort of captured situation?

Don: In a way I think the non-status Indians and those that weren't really controlled but were out living among the non-Indian segment, so to speak, themselves being not only mixed blood but being out and living with...

Murray: Within the society.

Don: Yeah, within the system. I think they had more of a choice, eh. And I think it came this way for them a little easier and consequently they were able to become a little bit more, I think, politically aware earlier. And this is why you see that the halfbreeds had really become involved in their

own treaty Indians' or brothers' affairs and helped them organize in the earlier days like Malcolm did in Alberta and here.

Murray: Right. Work for the organizations, yeah.

Don: Right. Malcolm worked with both helping them form in Alberta and both the treaty and non, and the Metis Association of Alberta, the Indian Association of Alberta. He did that also here in Saskatchewan. This is why he's one of the few unique individuals in the last 75 years that - or in the 68 years that he lived - that worked in the field totally.

Murray: Right. Did he ever talk about those differences, about how the treaty Indians seemed to be not as far ahead politically as the Metis?

Don: Well he could see that they were controlled by the RCMP, by the churches, by the governments and this was his whole fight since he was young.

Murray: Against that kind of authoritarianism.

Don: Yeah. He was thrown in jail I think about eleven times for fighting, trying to help the Indians organize, eh.

Murray: Trespassing on reserves.

Don: Yeah, on his own relative's reserves, type of thing, and him not having a treaty number.

Murray: And yet the organizations didn't resent him at all, obviously, because he was on the executive of the Indian Association of Alberta.

Don: Yeah. He was a catalyst among all of them. And he educated many. And those that he didn't have to educate, he goaded their conscience until they got off their ass and organized and worked and that.

Murray: Did that kind of activity continue right till the end, as far as you know, talking to people and pressuring them and moving and...?

Don: This was his whole life, you know. He couldn't go to meetings, he couldn't go anywhere without speaking Indian, for the cause.

Murray: Right. Did he have quite a few contacts? Was there quite a bit of communication between him, do you think, and people like Walter Deiter and Ahenakew and all these people? I mean in the last few years.

Don: I don't think he really communicated that much with them.

Murray: But they had meetings and stuff.

Don: They knew of Malcolm and in their own ways, I suppose, they went to see him. They went to see him and many people used to go and see Malcolm for advice and how they should tackle this or that. Whenever he went to a community or that, many people would come pounding at his hotel door or wherever he was staying. He was greatly sought after. He was well

liked and respected by most of the Indian people that I knew. The older chiefs like old Two Bear from Round Plain Reserve out of Prince Albert there, one of the older chiefs. He died back in the sixties. He was ninety some years old, one of the old original chiefs. Even the old chiefs knew what he was talking about. They understood.

Murray: He could talk to everyone.

Don: Yes. The young people too. He'd fire them up and really get them going.

Murray: A rabble-rouser sort of, eh?

Don: He was, very much, in that sense of getting going. I know he stimulated me while I was with him.

Murray: You were conscious at the time but you needed that extra push.

Don: Oh yes, to get going and to help me see that there was hope, you know. And so many of our people always felt, and I think they still do, that there is really no hope. Today, they are only beginning to see what Malcolm saw years ago.

Murray: Right. That's one of the things I wanted to talk about again. Malcolm left Saskatchewan during his last year. I'm sure he must've known he was going to die soon. Did he realize that he hadn't convinced people like Rod Bishop and

Howard Adams about the government grant thing and all those things? He must've realized that he had failed to convince them. What did he predict would happen because of that?

Don: Well, his only statements that he used to make about people, he said they have to learn themselves. Some of them have to go through a lot of punishment, torture, they have to go through a lot of bull shit until they really understand.

Murray: Learn from experience.

Don: Learn from experience, he says, and that's the only thing you can do is just let them go and bang their heads against the wall. "If they don't want to listen now, they'll see that I was right," he used to say. And I can say he said it in a nice way and a good way, you know. He said, "If they'd only listen. They think I'm an old man and I don't know what I'm talking about but they forget that I've dedicated my whole life for my people."

Murray: Right.

Don: That's true.

Murray: So he saw it in a sort of historical way. He knew that people would have to go through that phase before they saw the light sort of thing.

Don: And about seeing the light, Malcolm used to have complete pity for a lot of the treaty Indians who used to try to separate

themselves from the non-status Indians, the halfbreeds, because a lot of them basically - and it's true statistically that the greater, what is it, 97% - and I wish you'd put this in your book for an understanding and the white people don't know, even the teachers of schools - that 97% of the native people in Canada today are breeds.

Murray: Sure, right.

Don: And this is why Ahenakew and them don't want nothing to do with them because they are giving away the name of the game. They are not Indians, they are Metis, they're breeds with a treaty number. And you tell Ahenakew that.

Murray: (Inaudible)

Don: Yeah, right, but they don't want to.

Murray: They hold that out, that there is a difference.

Don: Yeah, right. And they don't want to ever suggest that they have, you know, 85% white blood in their veins really.

Murray: Was this one of the things that made Malcolm most bitter that time?

Don: Yes, yes, bitter because of race and that and phoniness and people not really accepting who they were and what they were.

Murray: Did he see it in a way as sort of racism on the part of the treaty Indians themselves?

Don: Well, on the treaty Indians and having their treaty as a, you know, as a backup and getting lost in that whole rigamarole type of thing and not only that but they felt hopeless and yet they...

(break in tape)

Don: ...they said to put up their hand and shake hands and say, "Let's work together and help each other here, buddy." Or, "I need your help." Many of them in public wouldn't ask him but in...

Murray: Privately they'd....

Don: In the twilight of the early morning hours, they'd come banging at his door.

Murray: Ask for it on the sly.

Don: Yeah. Oh yes.

Murray: What accounted for that? Do you think it's partly because of the white man's paternalism saying, "Oh, the wonderful Indian"? That sort of thing?

Don: That was one thing. The other thing is that the image of the Indian was instilled within the Indian and they wanted no part of being part of the white people either because the white people were really hated among the Indians and if you even

suggested that I was part white, you know, I'd be looked down upon. I'd be looked down upon among my own people. And yet if we could all live in that perpetual lie that we weren't part white then we could live with each other. And this was the whole thing Malcolm knew about the Indians.

Murray: Did Malcolm try and put that across to the Indians at all?

Don: He didn't have to. We never talked about it. It was never talked about. And when you did talk about it, there would be no more talk. Everyone would get up and walk out.

Murray: They didn't want to hear it.

Don: No way. No way.

Murray: So there was no point in bringing it up.

Don: No, no. Today you can talk about it and this is why Ahenakew and so many of the treaty Indians, like Sol Sanderson... I can remember sometime at a meeting or something, he said something at the friendship centre in P.A. and old Chief Two Bear was there, I think. We were talking about... we formed the first Indian hockey league in the province here, eh. We had seven teams, and this friendship centre in Prince Albert, we had one team. I played on it with Dan Keshane and Solomon Sanderson and that. And Solomon brought out the fact that, "I don't know if we should have halfbreeds playing for the team," not really fully realizing what the hell he was saying. Him being on the board of this Indian/Metis Friendship Centre. And I turned, I think I said to him, "Well, Solomon

with you're curly hair and you're blue eyes, you know, I don't know what the hell you're talking about." And old Chief Two Bear looked way the hell and gone over and his big long ear with the hole in it was hanging over and, you know, so he was really looking at... it really never dawned on him about his blue eyes, you know.

Murray: He was looking at Solomon?

Don: Solomon's blue eyes and his curly hair.

Murray: He didn't get that from an Indian.

Don: Yeah, right.

Murray: What did Sol say then?

Don: Nothing. You know, I just kind of made it a comment and just one time.

Murray: Let it die?

Don: Yeah, that was a few years back.

Murray: That would be typical of the reaction.

Don: That's basically the whole crux of the point of the matter between the treaty and the non-treaty is that point right there. Is the admission of the treaty Indians that there is not hardly one of you that is a true Indian, so to speak or a Nee-Tee-Ow, that you are Caucasian blood and don't call us Metis or halfbreeds because you're all that yourself with a treaty number.

Murray: So it isn't so much that they actually have some benefits and treaty rights, it's this whole thing about being pure and having nothing to do with white blood.

Don: And trying to get on with their treaties, you know, and saying that they're - well they are, they have every right to get on with their treaties.

Murray: But it doesn't mean that you have to be divided.

Don: Yeah. And like Malcolm used to juice them every now and then. He used to say, "But I don't have a number stamped to my ass like the hogs going to market." (chuckles) But the government stamped them. It really used to get them pissed off but he used to say it jokingly, you know.

Murray: What would they say to that?

Don: Nothing, they just laughed. Some of them would fume but the ones that knew Malcolm would laugh with him because they knew he was right and they'd laugh at ourselves like, eh.

Murray: So he could get away with that?

Don: Oh hell, yeah. He used to tell more stories and that. But he was educating them all the time.

Murray: Right.

Don: This was his whole point. He says, "I might joke with them but,..."

Murray: But everything has a point.

Don: Everything that he did...

Murray: Was meant to educate or to prod.

Don: Yes, that was his life. I never met a man like that.

Murray: He never said anything that was just small talk?

Don: No. He was always deadly serious and he died seriously.

Murray: Yeah.

Don: You know, in that sense. No, I don't think there was a breath that he took without being sincere. Committed. Like he said so many of our people, I think I mentioned that before, he said about commitment and concern. "We're all concerned," he said, "but when the commitment comes you can't do anything about it." Like, everyone always yells and screams. Like Bruce Vermont and all these guys and rabble-rousers, shit-disturbers. They don't realize that they're not concerned anymore. They are committed to the cause. You know.

Murray: Big difference.

Don: And all this money bull shit that Malcolm talked about, it's so true. I've seen so many hundreds of good guys come in, but the money was gone and they were gone. Whereas if there was no money involved in the first place, maybe a lot of them would've - it would've developed into commitment. And they would have stayed.

Murray: Money corrupts.

Don: Money corrupts the values and they got used to living in a good style if they were getting paid good and as soon as they lost it, well shit, they had to go back welding or whatever good job they could get ahold of. And whether it was with selling themselves out to government agencies - that's why we have so many Indians that used to be in our organizations that are in every...

(break in tape)

Don: ...of parliament across the country. You know, and it's the good, the people that were really dedicated and they weren't committed yet, eh. They were on that line and that's when the government jumps in and gets them, or whoever, gets them off track.

Murray: And Malcolm predicted that?

Don: Oh definitely. He says, "We'll have them falling off that fence all on one side in a big pile of shit." You know.

Murray: With one or two, maybe, standing on the other.

Don: And some taking off flying and staying, you know. Some hovering and not knowing what to do.

Murray: All right, to get off that for just a minute, I've come across some things that indicate that Malcolm, when he took over as director of the friendship centre in Prince Albert, saw quite a different role for it than Pete Tomkins

and some of the people who had been working on it before. He saw it perhaps in a more political way, not simply a place for people to stay overnight or... Could you describe that a bit, how he saw that?

Don: Well, I think the way we used to talk about that as a place to drop in for coffee and that, but actually to him it was a place to meet, a place to discuss the issues of the day, he used to say. You know, and if there is coffee involved, okay. If we don't have any, okay, we'll still discuss the issues of the day.

Murray: But the primary thing was the issues of the day?

Don: Right. And this was his whole thing of friendship centres. He says, "I don't know how long we have to remain friends with these people you know. They build these places to meet and that for friendship," he says, "I don't know, maybe this is a way to get rid of us too." And this is true, eh. And he saw our organizations or groups of native action is to politicize them. And he says we have to politicize our own, first of all. We can't politicize our own because we don't have control of the board, so let's get an all native board, which we did. And then he went about politicizing us. I was one of his disciples.

Murray: So he was thoroughly critical of the way the Metis friendship centre had operated before?

Don: Oh shit, yeah. It was just a tease.

Murray: A beginners sort of organization, eh.

Don: Right, yeah. Like some of the other organizations were in those days, but we even see the churches and that starting to turn a little bit and form, and this is good. The stance that the two major churches in Canada havetaken. Two of the major churches.

Murray: Nationally.

Don: Yeah. The Anglican church and the Roman Catholic church. Have you gotten copies of their statements? Policy statements?

Murray: Not recently no, but I should get that.

Don: You can get one from Saskatoon from Bishop Mahoney. Tell him Don Nielson, his old student, sent you to him.

Murray: Right.

Don: He's got a lot of material.

Murray: Yeah, I want to do a whole study of the church and its role in the north too.

Don: Oh boy. You should have sat down with Malcolm for about ten years. He would have given you the whole low-down.

Murray: I'm sure he could've.

Don: Oh, deadly. That's it, Murray, without all his papers and his letters that I've had the opportunity... I can't remember them but reading them and the connections that he knew and had put together and, you know... that's in the south, his volumes, eh.

Murray: Yeah.

Don: To write on.

Murray: Well, I hope to get into his papers.

Don: I haven't written to Mary and I did it for a reason. I'd like to see her personally before I even write to her.

Murray: That would be a good idea.

Don: But it would be done and...

Murray: I won't be going there for a while anyway so it's not urgent. I may write her again as well and just keep her in touch with what I'm doing so that she knows who I am.

Another aspect of Malcolm and the Metis Association we talked about last time that I wanted to get a bit more on was that there were divisions in the communities that you were organizing, sort of ethnic and family and there was all kinds of little things happening. Did Malcolm try and deal with that in communities or did he just not speak about it and hope that it would be overcome?

Don: Yeah, in Malcolm's own way... he was never... he knew of it, he felt it, he never got involved in the divisions. He never... I cannot remember him saying in a meeting, "I know there is this group here, this group there, that group." He went in there as an overall preacher to all people in that community.

Murray: He spoke assuming there were no divisions. I mean, that was his...

Don: Yeah, he spoke like that. And whether there were priests there and they didn't want us in the community or whether there were Anglicans there together, he spoke to the native people and he wasn't actually speaking to the non-native people in any of the communities. He said, "I'm going there to speak to our people. If the other ones are there and they can become educated also," he says, "so much the better. Maybe those are the first ones we should educate."

Murray: So his strategy was just to try and politicize people and hope that that would overcome the divisions?

Don: Yeah, right. In unity, yeah, right. And most communities and a lot of them I see, it does do it. You know, the cause comes above all else.

Murray: Right. A popular sort of feel among socialists in organizing people is that the poor people are always the most difficult to organize because they are basically insecure. Did he talk about that at all in talking about why it was hard to organize people or did he mention that very much?

Don: Well, the only thing he ever mentioned is that we didn't have faith in ourselves because we were poor and we felt that

there was no hope. And he always told them that there is

always hope and we know that. "That's why we are at this meeting tonight or else you wouldn't be here," is what he'd say. You know, I often heard him say that. And he said, "The mere fact that you're here tonight is that you have faith in yourself and faith in a movement and fighting for your cause." And he always mentioned their children, of course. And that's something so dear, and that's true more so I think the native people, is their kids are their only possessions. They don't have all these worldly goods and that. And it's the most human basic instinct and it was so strong is the survival of their family, their kids and their grandchildren and their children's children.

Murray: Make a better world, if not for them, which might be hopeless in their eyes...

Don: And whether they are going to use this or not, I don't think he used it as a political gimmick. He used it out of love but it became, or it was, political, eh.

Murray: It wasn't manipulation on his part.

Don: No, it was love that he - and he had a lot of resentments and a lot of hatreds underneath, of the system and that. And I'd almost believe that he really deadly hated the white people. Even his father for being white. Like I have felt about my father who is dead. I shouldn't be talking like that but it's the truth.

Murray: Well, I think that's true of almost all native people. It would be hard not to, you know.

Don: Yeah, for letting the system do what it did to our people.

Murray: The individual white people may not be responsible but as a race they are. So that Malcolm would feel that even of his political associates who are white. There was always an undertone of resentment and...

Don: I think I told you that I believe that one time - and I don't know if it was a cabinet meeting but I think it was or thereabouts, I think. Mr. Douglas would clue you in on that date and time and where he stood up and called them a bunch of white supremacists. And he was the only Indian there. And he wasn't challenged, I don't think, at that time from what I remember him telling me.

Murray: It's not the kind of thing they would be likely to challenge.

Don: No, no.

Murray: He was a pretty strong individual. I wanted to get back a bit at that 1964 meeting, that important meeting that we've talked about a couple of times. Do you recall if Joe Amyotte was at that meeting? Do you remember that or not?

Don: In Saskatoon?

Murray: In 1964. The one that the Liberals called.

Don: I don't know if he was there or not. But all of the people we met with, like we had our own meeting of the non-status Indians, eh, the Metis, or call us what you want, as the saying was going then. Because we didn't have a political name, eh. Like treaty Indian. The treaty being given to us and the Indian...

Murray: You or everybody else.

Don: Yeah, right.

Murray: The treaty Indians and everyone else.

Don: Yeah. But we were 'people of Indian ancestry not being treaty.' That's the way it was termed. And I don't know if he was there or not but....

Murray: 'Cause his organization was going at the time, very slightly in a couple of places, maybe. Do you remember if the southern organization, were you aware that it existed at that time?

Don: Yes, we were aware of involvement. That's why people were represented at that meeting from the south.

Murray: People from Lebret and Qu'Appelle and Regina and...

Don: Yes, but like Malcolm and all of us knew... And at that time it was Liberals; well Malcolm had nothing to do with the Liberals and he saw a lot of the native people being involved in the politics of the Liberal party and...

Murray: And the government and...

Don: And he really didn't have that much to do with them.

Murray: That's one of his major reasons for avoiding them.

Don: That's right. That was one of the major reasons. And this was why I'm saying again, the political party system among the Indians, it helped divide us again. There was a purpose there of the government's, eh. And I think there still is today. If the two or three political parties get together every now and then and say, "How can we get the Indians, keep them divided?" Well, they are doing a good job with Dave Ahenakew and Jim Sinclair and Harold Cardinal and Dave Ahenakew and the other Conservative boys and Jim Sinclair, you know. They keep us all separated by political parties and the time we smarten up like Malcolm says and unify... And the only reason why he didn't do is because I think he was more correct in following the NDP party, being that it was more tuned to the

native, to the majority of the...

(End of Side A)

(Side B)

Don: ...was kind of a balance of Malcolm, you know.

Murray: Right.

Don: I remember this one old guy said, "Your son is kind of a balance." He thought we were father and son. He'd always see us together, you know. That's quite a compliment. It was

really good. I was really close to Malcolm in that sense. Geez, I loved that man.

Murray: So many people must have seen him as being just so thorny that it was impossible to get close to him, but once you got to know him he was....

Don: He was really human, oh yeah. His jokes and all his humor and in his own way... Jeez, I miss him so much when I think of him. Never meet another man like him again.

Murray: Do you recall if there was anyone among the treaty Indians who was comparable to Malcolm or who was anywhere close to Malcolm's equal as far as political understanding and leadership?

Don: Oh I think probably there is three that together maybe they could come close. Maybe Bill Wuttunee, I'd think Howard Adams, Ahenakew and Cardinal together would maybe make up 75% of what Malcolm... you know, I mean being honest. I'm not belittling Howard and all his years of study for his doctorates or William and his law and that. But Malcolm knew as much law if not more. And this army experience that Ahenakew had, and just being an Indian like Harold did, and Malcolm had all of that plus everything else.

Murray: Right. Well, you consider Wuttunee to be a pretty competent leader, eh?

Don: I think basically in his training in being an Indian he was thorough and I think he knew what he was talking about. Even though, in his own way, he was for William, as we know

today. He's kind of lost in the woodwork or whatever he's doing.

Murray: Did Malcolm ever state any opinion of him or did he think he was a...?

Don: I don't know. He probably called him what he usually called a lot of people. (chuckles) White brown men or sellouts to the system or, you know, opportunists. That's what he called them, opportunists. And the worst ones were our own

Indians and we had to get rid of them. That was his theme - politicalization of the people. First of all, get rid of your own sellouts. And if you don't get rid of them, they eventually get rid of themselves if the heat is hot and fast and strong enough.

Murray: Then they have to make decisions, yeah.

Don: And he died never being an opportunist.

Murray: Never, no, not for a minute.

Don: No, never. Him and James Brady. We'll never see a pair like that again. They themselves, they worked together many years and I don't know how much they got along that much, you know.

Murray: They were pretty close, I think.

Don: They were close underneath, yeah.

Murray: They were such different men that they wouldn't be close like some would because Brady was very introspective, you know, inward looking.

Don: Malcolm was forward and outgoing and really ran the show when he had to.

Murray: I think they really loved each other because they knew so much together, they accomplished so much together.

Don: They really complemented each other.

Murray: I think I asked you this before but I want to ask you again because it's sort of important to me. Malcolm really only got started in the summer, August of 1964, as you mentioned before. I'm wondering why. Did he feel that there was no point before that? Did he think the time was right? I'm trying to get a feeling for why he waited so long to start that?

Don: I really don't know. Maybe that he felt the time wasn't right and the opportunity for one thing wasn't right.

Murray: But he knew, must've known too, that in 1964 he was getting older.

Don: Yeah, the end of his term as a government civil servant was coming up and he no longer feared that security. I think he had to think basically, primarily first of his family.

Murray: Right. That was a major concern.

Don: Yeah, and this he always taught to everyone. And he was a living example of it, I feel.

Murray: That he (inaudible) first.

Don: Yeah, he had to support his family even before and above the cause and the cause of his people. Because in not doing that, he would show the Indian people that the family structure did not matter. I remember him talking about that. And he said, "My family comes first."

Murray: That was an important part of his politics. It wasn't just an outside decision.

Don: No, it was his life, eh. Because his politics was his life, his commitment was his life. But first of all, priorities come first. And as a human being, he said, "My family comes first." But he says, "I've always been able to somehow," he says, "you know, I've had two families. I've always been able to somehow fit both together." He said, "Sure my family suffered a lot," which I imagine they did. I really don't know that much about his first family and his second family that much either. But I imagine they did suffer a lot and I think Mary would be able to tell you a lot more about it, about his own personal life. After all, being such a vibrant person and that, and I knew his family must have been very much affected by his....

Murray: Under his shadow a lot.

Don: Yeah, right. You know, affected by his lifestyle and that.

Murray: Did he feel any contradictions? Like, if you talk to a lot of white people in Prince Albert, it's pretty interesting because they will say, and they don't mean to be racist because you know they're into it, and they'll say, "Well you know, I never even thought of Malcolm's children as being Indian." But I'm sure they were thinking in comparison with other native children who probably seemed much more shy and reserved and frightened.

Don: His kids were just, they were very active and very strong. They were the leaders in the high school there. His daughters and sons and whether they really identified themselves as being the native people, you know, Indians, I don't think so.

Murray: That's what I'm wondering about. Maybe Malcolm talked about that.

Don: No. They really felt being number one in competitions and everything else, maybe this was the underlying thing that drove them, you know.

Murray: To overcome their handicap sort of...

Don: Whatever it was.

Murray: I'm trying to get a feeling for whether Malcolm felt

that maybe he hadn't instilled the importance of saying that you're a native person in them. Did he feel that at all or did you ever get that?

Don: Maybe. I know what you mean because...

Murray: They lived a white lifestyle to a large extent.

Don: I don't think he felt he had to. You know.

Murray: He didn't feel there was a contradiction at all there, right?

Don: No. Because this was his second marriage and his kids and that...

Murray: He wanted his kids to have the best advantage possible. That was his goal.

Don: Yeah, right. And that's the way he went about it.

Murray: But he did talk to them about being proud to be native too, I'm sure.

Don: Oh, definitely.

Murray: Because I think you mentioned he used to call one of his sons Black somebody...

Don: Or something or other, yeah.

Murray: I forget his son's name but he was very dark skinned and he used to call him Black David or something like that.

Don: Yeah.

Murray: Do you think that Malcolm was surprised at all at being fired by the Liberal government from his civil service job?

Don: No, no, he was expecting it. Like, after the meeting and all...

Murray: Especially after that 1964 meeting.

Don: Oh yeah. He says, "Well, shit, I'll be lucky to last," and he didn't last, eh.

Murray: January 1st. He got dumped.

Don: Yeah, I remember the night he told me. He had just gotten his message...

Murray: I came across a letter. He wrote a letter to Brady talking about it.

Don: Yeah, I think we were down at the friendship centre when

he was writing that letter if I remember correct that night. I don't know if it was a Monday night. You take a check on the letter, the date. I forget, or Sunday or Monday. I forget. We were in the office alone and he was banging out the letter on the old typewriter.

Murray: Did you spend a lot of time with him there working at the typewriter?

Don: Oh, lots of hours, yeah.

Murray: Describe an evening like that. I'm trying to get an impression of what it was like.

Don: Everything. Politics. He'd reminisce, eh, and talk about people that he knew over the last, since he come to Saskatchewan, people that we'd be meeting. And "If you ever go to this community or that community,...."

Murray: Look for this guy or that guy.

Don: See, he laid the groundwork in all the years that he was with the government. Wherever he went to, he was always politicizing the people. Whether the other civil servants liked it or not.

Murray: And he'd recognized the people in the various communities who were more progressive or...

Don: And he knew who to contact, who to see, and everything else. And he made friends throughout the north long before getting fired from government and politically organizing, actively organizing. Well, he was actively organizing long before he got fired.

Murray: All the time.

Don: Yeah.

Murray: That's why when he went up the west side with you, people were ready to listen to him already.

Don: Oh yes, they knew Malcolm. They called him, you know, "lawyer" or whatever they called him.

Murray: Do you think it was partly that he didn't organize the association earlier was security? That he didn't want to have pressure put on from the government?

Don: He didn't have the time, I don't think. Nor the health, I don't think. But now when he knew that he didn't have long to live - and I know he really knew that - he had to give it everything he could.

Murray: So it was a last drive?

Don: Because he said it himself, eh. He said, "You know, I'm going to die anyway soon or I might be lucky to last ten years but," he says, "I know I'm not going to." I remember him stating that. We were sitting there in the front room. Even at his house, he mentioned that.

Murray: Because he'd had, by this time, a couple of heart attacks already, I suppose. And he knew that he was unhealthy.

Don: Yes, that was his second one. Yeah, I was with him on his second one.

Murray: Right. Yeah, you told me about that. Did he ever talk to you about the strategy of the north, of sort of having the government take aside a certain amount of the natural resources and for the benefit of native people? Was that part of his...?

Don: No, his goal was for the native...(break in tape)... pounded into their heads, "Don't ever buy land and don't ever set up your communities," and that's what they're doing now, eh. (break in tape) I told Bishop and all of them, "What the hell are you guys doing, you're LCA's and, ah jeez, local community authorities and..."

Murray: So he saw it as the legal basis for owning the resources was the main base for native rehabilitation.

Don: Yeah, right. He said, "Prepare, do your homework." He'd always say that, "Do your homework, do your homework, you guys, and get your stuff down."

Murray: He knew then that somewhere, if you researched it well enough, that the Metis people had land claims as well as the treaty Indians.

Don: Right. And he said, "All of this is going down the river," and it will too. "It might be the Churchill or wherever," he says, "but it will all end up on the state somewhere too." I remember Martin Smith saying that at one interview, it was really good. He kind of understood. I often wondered, when I was thinking of that interview Bill Daniels and him did with the CBC reporter, I often thought, I think he got that from Malcolm when Malcolm got ahold of those fishermen and trappers and often used to talk to them at their conventions.

Murray: And put a bee in their bonnet.

Don: Oh boy. He politicized a lot of people in the north.

Murray: So he didn't see much of a role for government other than forcing government to recognize the land claims as far as economic development and that sort of thing.

Don: Right. And he was really thinking in terms, on the same

basis as what he did with the Metis Claims Commission in Alberta, eh. This is what he foresaw, not only in the north, but

he knew it was easier in the north. But he saw it on a provincial basis, having not laid claim to anything yet in this province.

Murray: Right. So that was the major thing.

Don: It's still his major thing I think. I'd just like to get into all of his diaries and a lot of his stuff that he left in his last years that he wrote.

Murray: He wrote every day did he or almost?

Don: Oh, every day.

Murray: These are the leather bound ones you mentioned.

Don: Yeah, I bet there was not a day went by that he didn't bang out some letters to somebody about the goddamn Indian situation there.

Murray: Did he keep copies of his letters that he sent?

Don: Oh, everything, everything. You wouldn't believe it. I thought law offices were meticulous in that sense.

Murray: He kept a record of all his stuff?

Don: He did. That's why I say...

Murray: I hope it's there. I hope it hasn't been lost somewhere.

Don: And his printing and writing, oh, my God. That's why I say those couple of trunks and all those stuff, letters that he has there and notes and papers and fabulous documents and letters from this person and that person, he kept them all filed and...

Murray: In talking to you about what was the proper way to organize people, did he talk much about how to deal with the church and what to say to the people about the church?

Don: The issues of the day were the things that would sway the people.

Murray: Right. And the church would either support him or not support him and he didn't care.

Don: He was a realist and he... always that old quote, he used it many times, "There is no goddamn pie in the sky for us," you know, he would say.

Murray: That's how he dealt with the church.

Don: Yeah, and everything else. But I mean, there is no pie in the sky in regards to politicians either.

Murray: Do it yourself or it won't get done.

Don: Yeah. "Deal with the issues," he always said. "Be a realist, put it before the people. They are realists," he said. They have just been swayed somewhat by the churches and political parties and that.

Murray: Just got to bring them back to the track.

Don: And get rid of our people who are influencing our people to continue to do this. These are the sellouts and the..

Murray: Right. So he didn't feel a necessity at all of attacking the church or...

Don: He didn't have to.

Murray: So as long as you put the issue strongly enough, they should never have to...

Don: The church will have to deal with it themselves, yeah. "They either have to shit or get off the pot," he'd say. And that's true.

Murray: So he wouldn't have done what Sinclair did and go into a community and attack the church and say the church has exploited you. He wouldn't bother.

Don: He didn't have to.

Murray: Because if he talked about what the issues were, the people would know.

Don: "You're just building up forces against yourself," he'd say.

Murray: Right. That would be an adventure.

Don: Go in there and have tea with the priest, yeah. He'd go in there and have tea with them and coffee and....

Murray: He must have thought that was quite funny sometimes, eh?

Don: Oh yes, it was humorous. And all the people respected him for it, for respecting his people.

Murray: Because they'd all see, I mean it wouldn't take two minutes for it to get around town that he'd gone to see the priest.

Don: Oh they all knew, they knew. And they respected him for that too, you know, because he did respect people as human beings. Even though he didn't believe in what they were doing.

Murray: Right. He wasn't going to spit on them or anything.

Don: No, no, he wasn't like that. He was very much human. He really was.

Murray: Right.

Don: I don't know, he was a contrast to so many things, you know, it seems. And yet he was human.

Murray: He was a fascinating individual for sure. Did he talk much about the RCMP? Was he...?

Don: Oh yeah. He was once an RCMP, eh.

Murray: That's right, I remember that.

Don: He was in the last contingent that went overseas, that was supposed to go overseas in the First World War.

Murray: To fight the communists.

Don: Well, the Czars, yeah, right. And the Bolsheviks, yeah. And here he turned out to be one.

Murray: Did he think that was pretty funny?

Don: Yeah, oh yeah. He used to comment about it, you know.

Murray: Did he talk much about his days in the RCMP and what it was like?

Don: No, he really never...

Murray: He just mentioned that incident as being amusing.

Don: Yeah, right, and they disbanded when he was in Victoria, I believe.

Murray: How long was he in the police?

Don: I'm not sure. He'd be fairly young, eh, eighteen, nineteen.

Murray: He was seventeen, I think, because he was underage, I think, at the time.

Don: Maybe when he first joined them but he was about eighteen or nineteen when he got out of it, I think.

Murray: Right. So maybe a couple of years.

Don: Yeah. But he lived all over, you know. And he politicized, like I said, up in Camsell Portage. Two years ago while I was there, there are some guys in their seventies, they

remember Malcolm good when he used to trap up there, up in the...

Murray: That's right, you mentioned Camsell Portage, right.

Don: Yeah, Uranium City area. He used to have a trapline way up in the tundra in the barrens up there.

Murray: That's where....

Don: And he used to politicize them at campfires in those days then even, too.

Murray: Everywhere.

Don: Oh yeah. Wherever he met a human being or a soul, he used to say, if they needed education, by jeez, our discussion, he said. And that's where I learned it all is basically from talking with other people. And that's true.

Murray: I want to get an impression from you. I think I've asked you this before. What I'd like is to get as many details as you can remember of a sort of typical meeting and just exactly how he would start a meeting off and whether the people would sit at the back of the hall or the front of the hall and whether they were nervous or, you know, that I just want to get a feel for the meetings he used to have. The ones that you were at up the west side.

Don: I don't know. All the meetings I went to, Malcolm was very quiet when he came into a room. He was himself. He knew he could feel the people and he was always sensing. I think he was very much with his mind in contact with people and groups of people. Like, at a meeting, he could sense their feeling and he'd never speak or that until the time was right.

Murray: He'd let people sit and talk and get loosened up or...?

Don: Yes, and he'd get them going in some sense and if any time where he felt the Indian way of humor and that, eh, he was a great humorist you know, really.

Murray: He'd always make people laugh.

Don: He could make people laugh at themselves or the church or the politics or the people right there. And they would too, you know. He'd make humor of white people at the meeting, them not knowing it, you know, and...

Murray: But he'd speak in Cree.

Don: Yeah, he'd speak in Cree but he'd do it in such a way that everyone would laugh like hell and then he'd turn and tell the person something what the story was about. And sometimes it wasn't the right one because he didn't want to hurt the

person. To them it would hurt them but to the Indian people it was a good joke, eh.

Murray: Right. And that was all it was.

Don: Yeah, right. It wasn't something facetious. And this was the way he'd do it. But then he'd wait for the issues.

Murray: How would he start? What would he talk about when he first stood up and started talking.

Don: He'd tell them who he was if they didn't know and some people usually introduced him.

Murray: He'd have someone in the community introduce him would he?

Don: He wouldn't have them, they'd automatically do it. He'd ask them who their committee was and who was their spokesman usually and they usually talked among themselves even right during the meeting. They weren't organized; they didn't organize. And then they'd get going on it. And then they'd give him the floor and they'd ask him issues.

Murray: That's what he'd get people to talk about.

Don: Right away, that's how it would start usually. "What's your problems here? Do you have any?" You know, right away, boom! Well it was started, eh. That was it.

Murray: Would people usually bring up things that affected them directly, welfare, they couldn't get a job, or the kids couldn't go to school?

Don: Personally, yeah, personally. Government people, politicians, anything and everything. RCMP, Indian Affairs, it didn't matter what it was.

Murray: So this is the kind of problems he would get when he asked for them, in answer to that question?

Don: Yeah.

Murray: What would he say to them then about that?

Don: He'd give them the truth, what he thought of it. No punches pulled either because he was a civil servant, and they knew that. They respected him for it.

Murray: How would he deal with it? You know, a problem that was obviously a small one in a way...?

Don: He'd take their name down.

Murray: He would, eh?

Don: He'd take the issue down, he'd take the people, he'd write those people a letter. He'd send them a copy, etcetera. He never let things go undone.

Murray: He wouldn't make a promise and then let it go down.

Don: Yeah, if he said he'll do this, he'll do it. Oh, that's why he was always on the typewriter. I don't know how many letters he wrote for people, you know, of that issue and follow it through. He must have had files and files he kept in order and that.

Murray: So every little individual complaint, he would try and...

Don: Deal with it himself, yeah. And he'd try to get them to do it themselves. That's why he said, "That's why you should have committees. You see, if you have any trouble you just write a letter here and let us know about it, all the time."

Murray: So that he would always help them if they were having problems.

Don: Either in Prince Albert or in Regina, he said, where the (Cree) always are. (Cree) The white chiefs down there, you know. And they all knew he knew them and they all knew that those white people knew Malcolm too. He was well known in that way.

Murray: They knew that he was respected by everybody.

Don: Right.

Murray: How would meetings go on then? Would it be a give and take all the time? Like Malcolm wouldn't just sit and give a speech?

Don: Oh sometimes he'd rant and rave for half an hour and really give them shit. I can remember in, oh Jesus... If there were any white people in the room in the communities, he'd get them going too.

Murray: Get their ears burning.

Don: And a lot of the people that they were related to those white people, they'd side with their own white people there; and Malcolm would get them going so mad that they'd have to get

involved. Quite often they eventually came back and worked with the group because a lot of the white people worked with the native peoples. But they were afraid to act and move too in the communities because they knew the score.

Murray: What would happen after one of these ranting sessions? What would happen after that? Would he just sit back and let people question him then or how...?

Don: Yeah, usually people would react to him either in a silent way - they'd think about it and the next time he came back into the community, they'd really go at him too, eh.

Murray: And that's what he wanted. He wanted it that way.

Don: Yeah, he wanted reaction. But you know, he'd get them going in the right direction though. He says, "The people you should really be giving shit to are these guys sitting up here with me," and then they'd turn on them. And they'd get things done that way and they knew and they saw their own living experience of getting together. By unity, he always told them, eh. He always used to use that symbol of one stick in a bundle of sticks. Arrows he used to call them.

Murray: Couldn't break them if they were in a bundle.

Don: If you had a bundle of spears or arrows, you can't break them.

Murray: He was always talking about arrows as a symbol...

Don: Yeah, he always did, yeah. Arrows and arrows and arrows. He always used to say, you have to have lots of arrows.

Murray: He used that symbol of a bundle being strong.

Don: Yeah. "When you go to meetings, always have a quiver full of arrows," he'd always say. Oh yeah, he was always warfare, mental warfare and do your homework.

Murray: Did he talk a lot about encouraging the local people to put pressure on their own leaders too? Is that part of what he said?

Don: Yeah. Organize and live up to your responsibilities. Oh, he was very much like that to the individual. He'd tell them you know. "You have responsibilities as the president of this local. And if not, maybe you should get the others to get another leader." Then, "No, no, no, I'm the leader here." "Well, live up to your goddamn responsibilities then."

Murray: He never let up on them.

Don: No, he would never. He never let up on me either. You know, he was so strong like that.

Murray: Did he ever have criticisms of you? What kind of things did he say to you, and where would he try and push you?

Don: Me? Of being there on time and doing the things. We have to go here and that's it.

Murray: And not being slack.

Don: Yeah, that's right. You can't afford...

Murray: If you say you're going to be there, you have to be there.

Don: You've got to be there, or get out. Plain and simple.

Murray: And there is no way you can argue against that because you knew it was true.

Don: No, yeah right. And that's how I learned from him, he taught. He was quite a teacher. Mostly by action he taught but he also had the answers and the words and that.

Murray: He was always trying to teach you. I mean, speaking of yourself individually.

Don: Things to read. Things to do. Mostly do. Mostly do and then read and see how you can better it.

Murray: Right.

Don: That's what he always said. "I'd suggest you read this here," he says, "but to heck with it. Go and do it and then read it later and then see how you can improve that person's spot. That way you'll know."

Murray: So it was always a combination of experience. That's where most of your learning was going to come from. I'm just wondering a technical sort of thing. Were there more young people or old people or men or women at these meetings?

Don: In the beginning there was mostly older people, mostly older people that knew him over the years.

Murray: That's why they came, because they knew Malcolm.

Don: Yeah, about the previous twenty years, eh, something like that. The previous fifteen years or whatever it was, eh. Fifteen, twenty. Oh yeah, fifteen, twenty years. Malcolm was throughout the north all those years.

Murray: But gradually younger people started coming too.

Don: Yes. Those parents' children.

Murray: Was that because the older people talked to their children?

Don: Yeah, right. And they felt the need of...

Murray: Were there quite a few women come to the meetings too?

Don: Oh yes, yeah.

Murray: I'm wondering, in white society, women have been almost second class citizens, like native people have been in many ways in the white society. What about in the native

society? Did women speak up much or were they back in the background a bit?

Don: Not before. They were more or less in the background I think but as them becoming involved in the school activities and church activities and that and they eventually became involved in the locals.

Murray: So that changed gradually.

Don: Yeah, right.

Murray: Because some of the women were pretty slow.

Don: And the reason why they really formed... They never formed first of all so much in the actual local, local number 92 or whatever it was in the Metis Society of Saskatchewan. They were involved in, say, the school issue committee or this or that committee and then they'd come back and get personally involved and run for office in their own locals. And many of them become the treasurer or secretary or the president. Holy smokes, away we'd go. And it was accepted. They were, and they still are, respected as much as any man right there. There is a great equality today among the leadership and it's always the self-respect of, you know...

Murray: Of each other.

Don: Yeah, right. Like if you're a leader, you're a leader. It doesn't matter on the sex...

Murray: Or anything else, as long as you're doing your job.

Don: Yeah. I feel, it is felt out here, "Ah shit, she's only a woman." Among the native, no way. Among the native, if she's

elected president by the people, she's the voice of those people. You don't think of her as a separate sex, eh.

Murray: A mother or a woman or whatever.

Don: She's their spokesman, that's it. She's chief there and I don't give a shit who you are, you'll respect that woman when you go to that community. And no one had to tell you to do that; it was automatic.

Murray: I was wondering, we're nearing the end of our tape here. I'm wondering if there were more Chipewyan people or less in terms of their response to Malcolm? Did the Chipewyan people respond pretty much the same as the Cree? I'm wondering if there was any difference in the response.

Don: No, the Chipewyans, even to this day, they still kind of shy from the Cree, eh. They still do.

Murray: And they would see Malcolm as a Cree and perhaps not respond to him as well.

Don: Yeah, but I think Malcolm got to a lot of them up there too.

Murray: Even in La Loche then, the people would come out to...?

Don: Yeah, I think a lot of them did, yeah. If I remember correctly. I forget what priest was there when we were up in there.

Murray: Well....

(End of Side B)

(End of Interview)

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-attitudes toward	IH-399A	DON NIELSON2	97		13-17
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