

Douglas' Indian Policy on Reserves.

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(in pencil) Douglas on
Indian Reserves.

James' Bay.

14 Oct. 1874.

Sir

The question presented in your letter of the 9th Oct., being limited to one specific point, hardly affords breadth or scope enough to admit of an explicit reply without going more largely into the matter. You ask "if during the period of my governorship in British Columbia there was any particular basis of acreage used in setting apart Indian Reserves?"

To this enquiry I may briefly rejoin, that in laying out Indian reserves no specific number of acres was insisted on. The principle followed in all cases, was to leave the extent & selection of the land, entirely optional with the Indians who were immediately interested in the Reserve; the surveying officers having instructions to meet their wishes in every particular & to include in each reserve the permanent Village sites, the fishing stations, & Burial Grounds, cultivated land & all the favourite resorts of the Tribes, & in short to include ~~in each reserve the permanent Village sites, the fishing stations, & Burial Grounds, cultivated land & all the favourite resorts of the Tribes, & in short to include~~ every piece of ground to which they had acquired an equitable title through continuous occupation, tillage or other investment of their labour. This was done with the object of securing to each community their natural or acquired rights; of removing all cause for complaint on the ground of unjust deprivation of the land indispensable for their convenience or support, & to provide against the occurrence of Agrarian disputes with the white settlers.

Before my retirement from Office several of these Reserves, chiefly in the lower districts of Frasers River & Vancouvers Island, were regularly surveyed & marked out with the sanction & approval of the several communities concerned, & it was found on a comparison of acreages with population that the land reserved in none of these cases exceeded the proportion of 10 acres per family, so moderate were the demands of the natives.

It was however never intended that they should be restricted or limited to the possession of 10 acres of land, on the contrary, we were prepared, if such had been their wish to have made for their use much more extensive grants.

The Indian Reserves in the Pastoral country east of the Cascades, especially in Lytton & Thompson's River districts where the natives are wealthy, having in many instances large numbers of horses & cattle were, on my retirement from Office, only roughly traced out upon the ground by the Gold commissioners of the day, the regular surveys not having been completed. These latter Reserves were necessarily laid out on a large scale, commensurate with the wants of these tribes; to allow sufficient space & range for their cattle at all seasons.

Such is an outline of the policy & motives which influenced my Government when determining the principle on which these grants of land should be made.

Moreover, as a safeguard & protection to these Indian Communities who might, in their primal state of ignorance & natural improvidence, have made away with the land, it was provided that their Reserves should be the common property of the Tribes, & that the title should remain vested in the crown, so as to be unalienable by any of their own acts.

The policy of the Government was carried even a step beyond this point, in providing for the future. Contemplating the probable advance of the Aboriginies in knowledge & intelligence & assuming that a time would certainly arrive when they might aspire to a higher rank in the social scale, & feel the essential wants of & claims of a better condition, it was determined to remove every obstacle from their path, by placing them in the most favourable circumstances for acquiring land in their private & individual capacity, apart from the Tribal Reserves. They were therefore legally authorized to acquire property in lands, either by direct purchase at the Government offices, or through the operation of the pre-emption laws of the Colony, on precisely the same terms & considerations, in all respects, as other classes of Her Majesty's subjects.

These measures gave universal satisfaction when they were officially announced to the native Tribes & still satisfy their highest aspirations.

A departure from the practice then adopted with respect to this class of native rights will give rise to unbounded disaffection, & may imperil the vital interests of the province.

This letter may be regarded & treated as an official communication.

I remain

Dear Sir

Yours sincerely

(signed)

....

James Douglas

Lieut. Col. Powell

Indian Commissioner.