

OUR CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE

16mm. Colour. 51 minutes.

1981. Direction Films.

Producer-director: Tony Snowsill.

Associate Producer-editor: Christine Welch.

Purchase: \$900 plus shipping; rental: \$100 (applicable against purchase).

Distributor: Canadian Learning Company,
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Children represent the future of a culture to most people in Canadian society. French-speaking Canadians in Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Saskatchewan see the issue of language of instruction of children and teenagers in grade school and high school as crucial to the continuation and development of their culture. Several groups in Metro Toronto in the spring of 1982 argued extensively in favour of the inclusion of "heritage" instruction in the regular curriculum. Children of one ethnic background would be instructed in their "heritage" for part of the school day while children from another culture would receive classes in their "heritage". A recent (1981) documentary, "Our Children are our Future" also relates this issue of cultural preservation and enhancement to native foster children in Canada. It examines the issue from two perspectives - that of the continuation of the cultural or ethnic group and of the individual within that group. The film argues that a culturally-based identity is necessary for an individual to develop to his or her potential, but those individuals are essential to preserve and enhance the culture for future generations.

"Our Children are our Future" is a deftly crafted film. The director, Tony Snowsill, and editor, Christine Welch, present a view and an interpretation of an important political and social issue within Canada with an expertise that is too often lacking in other documentaries. Their film is not emotionless but emotional rhetoric, which often does little to help resolve any such issue, is absent.

The documentary comprises three intertwined case studies of adoption of native children and teenagers. One of the cases involves Michael, a teenager, who was adopted by a non-native family in Saskatchewan.

Michael was born into a trapping family. He was adopted by a prosperous farming family that is non-native. At first he adjusted well to his new surroundings, but as he approached his teen years he became involved in various illegal activities, including robbery and drinking underage. He ran away from home to pursue his activities and was subsequently incarcerated.

His "parents" are a loving couple who claim to care a great deal for Michael. They have attempted to the best of their abilities to help Michael, but, as with many couples, ultimately fail. The film argues that the reason for the failure is that they did not provide Michael with his heritage. The other influences upon Michael, such as his native friends, are not considered to be decisive.

Michael is interviewed in his jail. The shadows of the jail bars metaphorically entrap him alone in this grey and depressing interior. A persistent and irritating dripping of water counterpoints the freedom and loving family life of Chip, who is the second case in this film.

Chip's condition prior to his adoption by Indian parents on an Indian Reserve in Alberta serves to explain why government officials have removed native children from the care of their parents. Chip, as a baby, was left alone for long periods of time by his alcoholic mother. He was found by an Indian social worker with a bottle of artificial coffee creamer mixed with water for nutrition. He was being starved physically and culturally. Chip's new parents live on an apparently prosperous Indian Reserve. The scene consistently portrays the potential of the Indian Reserve, its space and strong economic base. The family are very caring and loving towards each other. His new father is teaching him the culture of that Indian Reserve, making Chip part of that Indian Reserve's heritage and future.

The third case focuses upon the institutional level. It tells the audience about the activities of a female native counsellor in Edmonton who works with the family courts. In the instance at hand, the native counsellor is explaining to the judge why a mother left her children with a male relative. There is a strong suggestion that the mother is, or was, unfit to take proper care of her children.

The judge is presented with two options. The government social worker, a young sour-faced woman who is not native, recommends that the children become wards of the government. The children would presumably be adopted by non-native parents. The second option is presented by the counsellor. She argues, persuasively and successfully, that the children are best off with their mother. The mother has agreed to undergo counselling for her problems. The native counsellor has undertaken to obtain adequate housing for the family and provide other support essential for the success of the family. The judge adopts the counsellor's suggestions.

The comparison of Michael and Chip by the producer and director of the film is not entirely fair. Michael was already a young teenager when he was adopted by his non-native parents. He was removed from a familiar background, the trappings, and brought to a much different economic and cultural base. Chip, on the other hand, was still an infant when he was adopted. He had not developed a recognition of his culture. His new family provided this for him, at least in this individual case.

There are no villains in "Our Children are our Future". The problems of child neglect, and abuse, whether native or non-native, are endemic to Canadian society. The issue is what is the best resolution of the problem is at the individual level. At one time it may have been appropriate to remove children from one

cultural milieu to another. This occurred with native children and with other cultural and ethnic groups. To condemn the practice outright, which this film does not do, misses the point - at the time, it may have been, or seemed to have been the best solution for the child. But when a community can and is willing to care for its own children, perhaps the practice should be changed. The "removal" practice like any approach, can fail and apparently did in the case of Michael.

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Film reviewers, no doubt, generally review a film in a private setting, but I had the distinct pleasure of seeing "Our Children are our Future" for the second time with a group of native women and one man who are in a class that I teach on a nearby rural-urban reserve. These people include members of the Missis-sauga of New Credit Indian Band and some members of the Six Nations Indian Band. The discussion that followed our viewing of the film provided another dimension to the film that I had earlier seen alone in a viewing room.

The reaction of the group to "Our Children are our Future" was mixed. However, it reflected deep personal feelings and experiences of some of the women who, when young, had had visits from a children's aid agency to their family. What emerged clearly from our discussion was that institutions involved with native people, including courts, counsellors, probation officers, social workers, police and family agencies, must receive training to acquaint them with native cultures. Native personnel should also be used in those institutions at all levels.

The film depicts two situations. One is a Blackfoot family in rural Alberta who adopted a month old baby left on a doorstep and fed coffeemate and water and now has a lively seven year old named Chip, who shares not only the family life of his society but also participates in the community's spiritual life. The father speaks of the problems besetting a native family which wishes to adopt a child or offer it a foster home. Does the dwelling unit meet provincial standards? Are there two parents? Does the family income meet a certain standard? As one of the students in my class suggested, the extended family should be recognized in situations involved directly with native people even though this criterion may not be valid in a non-nativesociety. (This is a cultural dimension).

Some of these difficulties were highlighted by the Blackfoot Band Chief who suggested that wishing to adopt a child may give that Indian family a higher ranking for new housing with the Band.

The film also has an interview with two non-native adults in Regina, who live on a farm nearby and who have given a home to Michael, a Cree boy, taken at age 10 from his father after his mother had died. He maintains contact with a sister locally, but other members of his family were located as far afield as Nova Scotia. He gets into difficulty because of alcohol and drugs and eventually is imprisoned. The non-native parents are dismayed at his behaviour. What emerges clearly from the film is the relative rigidity of these adults and their apparent inability to provide affection and love using a cultural base which the boy would understand and need. Later, Michael, now a young man, tells of a returning native friend who shoots himself. The thread of suicide among young native males is well identified in the popular press as well as in journals such as *White Cloud*, the *Journal of Native Mental Health*. However, knowing this does not make the account of this returning young man any less poignant. The making of the film was encouraged by the recent movement to have only native foster homes for native children. Is this realistically possible? Perhaps it should not be the determining question, but rather that Government policy should indicate that this is a desired objective. Native political organizations have already stressed this as a desired objective. Children's Aid Societies have been under attack all over Canada, so the frailty of the process is not peculiar to native peoples. It is the spirituality of native peoples that makes the process involved in caring for children more sensitive than for non-natives.

Obviously, our viewing group had a biased point of view but what better bias to have than from the base of knowing concern. A number of the group suggested that given the "right" sort of non-native family, such a setting might be quite good, if that family made it possible for the native child to engage in the pursuit of native culture in an ongoing fashion. Does the film show a seamy side to native life and would it not endorse the already narrow and prejudiced views of some non-natives who contend that native people are, etc., etc? Perhaps so, but it does not change the significance of the needs of native children as expressed in the film.

The film is a tragic commentary of our times - a description of a system created by a well-meaning society which transacts its business on the basis of a norm, acceptable to all persons, but which does not (and cannot) provide an appropriate sub-system for native people. Native peoples have a singularly strong spirituality which cannot live outside their own culture. The only reasonable solution will be for children's aid groups to be formed by native groups and then to find appropriate funding where needed for the well-being of the child. This film is an important documentary which, through the picture of Michael and Chip, two foster children, reveals a tremendous need of native peoples in Canada. It gives a dimension to the positive values of native culture and how it can work in a contemporaneous manner.

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