

Last night, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (C.B.C.) ran a news story on the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Confederacy of Nations meeting being held here in Ottawa. The story featured a segment where Ovide Mercredi, National Chief, was on the phone with someone at the Prime Minister's Office (P.M.O.), asking if "Canada's Aboriginal leaders" are going to be included in the upcoming First Minister's Conference. He was apparently told no.

Ovide told the elected chiefs that discussions on Canadian unity must include his people. So, who does Ovide represent? He claims to represent all status Indians in Canada.

But how does he get to be National Chief? The National Chief is chosen through a "democratic", Canadian-style election, which is held every two years. Who elects the National Chief? Only representatives of Canada's band councils can participate in the AFN's voting process.

The band council system is a creation of the Canadian government imposed on our people, sometimes violently, as part of Canada's campaign to assimilate us. Band councils are part of the Canadian government's administrative and political structure. In fact, they are on the bottom rung of the Canadian ladder.

In our experience, the Canadian concept of democracy is an exercise in dividing, not uniting, the people. Elections, confrontational in nature as they are, are not the best method of ensuring strength of unity when it counts. This is why the A.F.N. is always divided, always bickering.

I always find it interesting to hear today's "Aboriginal leaders" talk about their identity. They say they are fighting for the recognition of our nationhood. At the same time, however, they say they want to remain a part of Canada. Well, you can't have it both ways.

If you believe you're Canadian, or that's what you're striving for, then you surrender your nationhood and you assimilate into Canada's socio-political structure. You become another ethnic component of Canada's melting pot. Your place in the Kaswentah (Two Row Wampum) is clear and set. You shut up and take all that side has to "offer".

If, however, you truly believe that you are a citizen of your par-

ticular nation, you should focus all your energy and power in rebuilding that nation and having it recognized, on the same basis as any other nation in the world.

Representation in the A.F.N. consists of a "National Chief" and "Regional Chiefs" from the provinces. As such, its structure reflects that of Canada, and not that of the indigenous nations in this part of Mother Earth. This sets up a weird situation in terms of representation where one nation may be represented by more than one elected representative (if that indigenous nation falls within the territories of more than one artificial region, also known as provinces). This is the case where the Ojibway, Cree, Mohawks, and others are concerned.

This means that the A.F.N. by its very nature, adopts the pan-Aboriginal approach created by its political master, the government of Canada. This propagates the myth that all indigenous peoples are the same.

Ever since he was elected "National Chief", Ovide has been fighting for Constitutional recognition of Aboriginal governments as a "third order of government, within Canada". But which government? As far as I know, none of the traditional governments of any of our nations, such as the Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs, are affiliated with the A.F.N.

Does Ovide really represent all "status Indians" in Canada. No. He represents some, but not all, band council chiefs. If the A.F.N. is to survive and play any significant, and useful, role in the attainment of our goals as indigenous peoples, it will need a major restructuring. No one man can speak on behalf of all the indigenous nations in this part of Turtle Island. That is not our way.

Besides, how effective a lobbyist can Ovide be when Canada provides his funding? We all saw how easy it was for Ron Irwin to freeze him out of his discussions with local "leaders".

No, things have to change if progress is to be made. So, "national leaders", you have a conscious choice to make. Are you Canadian or are you a citizen of your own nation? Remember, the Creator put all the nations here on Mother Earth. Who are you to undermine that?

Elijah Harper recently said that

God is an Indian and that he wants unity for all Canadians. I think the Creator would like to see justice done. I think the Creator would like to see us respect one another, as equals. I think the Creator would like us to incorporate the teachings of Creation into the moral fabric of ourselves and our societies.

As the indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, our right place within the Circle of Life is, at the very least, equal to that of Canada, the United States, or any other people. It is legitimate for us to live in accordance with our own laws, ceremonies and values. No other people or nation has the moral right to subjugate us.

Is peace and harmony a magical thing? Do we need to travel to India to find the answers? Do the answers lie in complex political science theories? No.

The simple truth is that there exists a great diversity within the Circle of Life, and that diversity exists for a reason. Each element of Creation has the equal right to exist. Otherwise, it would not exist in the first place. Each element of Creation is vital to the existence of all the others. We are all inextricably linked. The fundamental basis for success in achieving peace and harmony is basic respect, for one another and for all elements of Creation.

Here in Canada, those simple principles are not understood. I often hear Canadians who decry the fact that they are being held accountable for the crimes of their ancestors. "We can't be blamed for what was done in the past. We can't change history, "they lament". Well, I'd buy that argument if they were trying to do something about it.

But the crimes continue, even today Canada's stated policy objective of assimilation is alive and well, only we don't call it that anymore. The new buzz word is "partnership." Call it what you like, the end result for our people is the same — assimilation.

You have but to read the Nunavut agreement, the Nisga'a Agreement-in-Principle, and the Manitoba devolution initiative to see that. The leaders say these agreements are "good business". I don't know much about business but, I wonder what their grandchildren will think when they discover that they were sold out.

I think these "leaders" believe they're getting the best deal they can give Canada's track record. The Canadian government steadfastly refuses to recognize the fact that we, as the indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, are the legitimate title holders of the lands it claims as its own. The Canadian government also refuses to recognize our traditional governments, preferring to deal with its band councils, which it funds.

The Canadian government continues, in the name of all its citizens, to perpetrate crimes against us. I know some Canadians oppose this and try to do something about it. But to those who do and say nothing, I say silence is collusion. So, yes indeed, you can be held accountable for the wrongs of the past, because you allow them to continue.

Is there a way out of this dilemma? Is there a path to peaceful co-existence? Of course, but that path involves justice, a willingness to listen with respect and acceptance that "Made in Canada" is not the only choice.

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