Aboriginal Nations and the Canadian Nation

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In the winter of 1763, Nipissing and Algonquin messengers were dispatched across North America. They carried strings of wampum and spread word of an important conference to be held at Niagara Falls. Two thousand chiefs gathered the next summer. There were Mic Mac from the east coast, Cree from the north, Iroquois from Lake Ontario, and Arapaho from the west—twenty-four nations in all. They were met by William Johnson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, who presented wampum belts and gifts to negotiate a peace between the British and the First Nations.

One of the belts exchanged was the Two Row Wampum of the Iroquois. On this belt, there were twelve rows of parallel purple beads, on a bed of white beads. One row of purple represented the Grand River, the other the Eastern Lake. The two rows of purple were separated by three rows of white beads representing peace, friendship, and respect. William Johnson was told that, while the two boats shared the same river, they maintained their distinct identities. Neither nation was to interfere in the internal affairs of the other.

In the spring of 1987, there was another historic conference. Representatives of Aboriginal peoples from across Canada arrived in Ottawa to negotiate amending the Constitution to recognize the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-government. They met with Brian Mulroney and other First Ministers. Under the glare of television lights, an Algonquin Elder gave a reading of three wampum belts. One of the belts showed three figures holding hands with a cross on the right-hand side. The Elder explained that the figures represented the partnership, as equals, among the French, the British, and the Algonquin people. The cross showed that a priest witnessed the agreement.

“Canadians need to understand that Aboriginal peoples are nations. To this day, Aboriginal people’s sense of confidence and well-being as individuals remains tied to the strength of their nations. Only as members of restored nations can they reach their potential in the twenty-first century.”

What does it mean for Canadians if Aboriginal peoples are recognized as nations? Can the nation state remain intact? Such questions are currently being raised throughout the world, as countries strain to find political accommodation between indigenous peoples within their boundaries.

At the United Nations, there has been a remarkable turnaround. Until 1989, the U.N. focused on the importance of assimilation of indigenous peoples. In that year, the International Labour Organization enacted a new Convention which recognized the right of indigenous peoples to maintain their own institutions, cultures, and identities within the framework of existing nations.

At around the same time, the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations went further with a draft declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This draft stated that “[I]ndigenous peoples ... have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs.”

Until the release of the Report of the Royal Commission, there was no comprehensive source of ideas on how to implement the principles being developed in the U.N. In spite of the existence of an extremely complex and diverse situation in Canada, the Royal Commission has succeeded in developing a set of specific proposals which will clarify the implications and guide the debate on these issues.

The Challenge of the Canadian Nation

The diverse history, geography, and culture of Aboriginal peoples in Canada present unique challenges for the implementation of self-government rights.

[The Report provides a flexible and creative array of options for giving political reality to the existence of Aboriginal nations.]

The federal Indian Act organizes the 600,000 registered Indians into some 609 Bands. Most Bands have small reserves of about twenty square miles.

There is no registration scheme for the approximately 30,000-50,000 Inuit. Their land base is being negotiated through large land-claims agreements, such as the massive Nunavut Agreement covering the entire eastern Arctic.

There is no registration scheme for the Métis. Depending on one’s definition, the Métis may number from 100,000 to 200,000. Only in Alberta do Métis communities have small land bases.

The majority of Aboriginal people live in urban centres. In Toronto, for example, estimates range from 35,000 to 60,000 native people. There are additional native communities in the city.

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