

CONTACT AND RESISTANCE:

The History of Canada from an
Aboriginal Perspective

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Being asked to cover several hundred years in about twenty minutes, I'd like to lay a basis because unless you have that basis, it is difficult to understand how Indian people think.

In the country that I come from, called Vantut North of the Arctic Circle in the Yukon, there are several tribes within the Nation, which stretches from Alaska over to the North West Territories. In all the history of my nation there is no story of us coming over any ice bridge to what we call "This Great Island", which is what you call North America. In the oral history of our people there is no story about that. We have stories of people like Genghis Khan thousands of years before Columbus was conceived in Italy. So the reality breaks from the history that children learn in schools today.

I also want to explain the importance of the oral tradition. It ought not to be demeaned as "myth". The Indian people, or indigenous people's origins are such that our ancestors say to us that we were placed on our territories by the Creator to care for and protect our lands for future generations. When He placed us in our territories, He breathed life into man, and out came the spoken word. Therein lies a commitment to speak the truth and that is a fundamental principle of the oral tradition. I can write a thousand pages and each word could be a lie with no subsistence to it. And yet I can speak to you, to a place in you, a place that speaks to your heart, and it stays there forever - that's the power of the spoken word. When we are taught things in our tradition we don't write things down and so we have to listen very, very carefully in our hearts and minds. Whatever is put into us never leaves. We make it our own power, as you must do today.

If there's ever going to be any action on any principles that you believe in, you must have the power to do it and so the responsibility is to listen with your hearts.

In ancient times in Persia, an intellectual revolution began on that Great Island when the Greek Empire broke away. Some of the three great thinkers of that time, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, formed a line of thought which literally revolutionized the world. Much of the thinking of

today came from that era. When the Greek Empire fell and the Roman Empire rose up, the Roman jurists first wrote down the law and tried to figure out how to carry it out in relation to the customs of the peoples they had conquered. The Roman Empire had conquered the whole of what is now called Europe, made up of many different peoples, or tribes. In studying the Chinese, and the Indians in India, it can be seen that they had a system of Emperors and Kings, similar to the system the Romans evolved. In Europe, the law was vested in the Kings and Queens. What does all that have to do with Aboriginal Rights? After several centuries in Europe of basing survival on intellectual thought and separating out the spiritual aspects of life, it became a bit of a bore for the people and so they created souls for themselves in the formation of the Roman Catholic Church. The term "sovereignty" was first coined by the Pope, the head of the Church. He said he is the Sovereign, and if the Kings and Queens of Europe want to speak to God, they should speak through him. And if there is something that God has to say to them, He would speak through the Pope in the form of a Papal Bull, which are like papers with His instructions on them.

In 1491, there was a Pope, Alexander VI, who came out with a Papal Bull for the King and Queen of Spain, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. In that Papal Bull he says, "You are to go into the Islands". He splits the world in half, East and West, and gives them the West. He says, "You are to go into the Oceans and find some islands and lands in the Oceans, and you are to bring the non-Christian peoples to Christianity". So Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand find this guy who is unemployed, they give him three ships and they sail him across the Ocean Blue - Christopher Columbus. He sails for the East Indies but he bumps into Barbados. There are the Arawak people and he calls them "Indians". He has a friend back in Italy named Amerigo, so he calls the land "America".

Within the Great Island, we are happily continuing our lives and all of a sudden new human beings have come to our shores, something like False Encounters of the Third Kind. These new human beings arrive in ships, very sick, malnourished, lost. And the people on the East Coast and later on the West Coast, take pity on the people in these boats, bring them in, bring them back to health, and allow them to live among their people. It's Spain which discovers what they call the "New World", then the English get into the act, and the French and the Dutch. What they really want to do is claim all of the land for their mother countries, these people who came over on these boats. Those who land on the East Coast of what is now called Canada, are the French and the English in the majority. Because they are in no condition to conquer the Indian people, it is established among themselves that the title, the ownership of the land,

would be obtained in one of two ways - by conquering the non-Christian peoples and thereby claiming their territories, or, if they couldn't conquer them, they would have to get the consent of those people to live in their territories. That was the agreement among the European nations. The French and the English, not being able to conquer the Indian people, chose a process of taking the consent of the non-Christian peoples to live in their territories.

The first time we see contact between a European nation and an Indian nation is in the 1600's, the mid to late 1600's. The Six Nations and the English came to an agreement known as the "Gus-Wen-Tah" or the Two-Wampan. The Haudenosaunee people explain this agreement in this way: "For many years we sat down with the English to see if we could live together, if we could 'integrate'. But after many, many years we found that our way of thinking was too different. The International principles of the Indian people are Peace, Friendship, and Respect. Our philosophy says that our obligations to the Creator to care for and protect our lands for the future generations is an obligation which we carry out by living in harmony with nature and striving to live in harmony with all mankind. The Gus-Wen-Tah reflected the attempt of the Haudenosaunee people to find another way of living together with the Europeans. It is a Wampan belt which has two rows of purple beads parallel to each other with three rows of white beads in between. One row of purple beads represents the Haudenosaunee people, their land, their governments, their laws. The other row represents the English nations, its laws, its government and its people. The Haudenosaunee say that these two rows never meet and that is because the English will not govern for the Indian people and the Indians will not govern for the English but we will live side by side in Peace, Friendship, and Respect.

This illustrates that the first compact was never one in which an Indian nation or Confederacy said to the English: "You will govern us and our lands will be your lands". No, we will live side by side and the lands we will share. Now that same agreement exists on the West Coast.

The next important event was the French-English war of 1752. Because both the English and the French seek the alliances of the Indian nations on the East Coast, the majority of them ally with the English for an important reason - the English promised to protect the lands. At the end of that war in 1759, when the French surrendered on the Plains of Abraham, several forts were built from Ottawa through Detroit territories and Ottawa is not just the capital city of what is called Canada. There are Indian people, a nation of people. Detroit is also a nation of people, it's not a motor city, and the man I'm going to talk about, Pontiac, is not a G.M. car. He was one of our

fearless leaders and should be respected as such.

When the forts were built, the Indian nations along these territories had allowed the British to do that in order to win the war. Pontiac went to the English and said: "Now that you've won your war, get rid of your forts". The British said no. Pontiac sent runners to different nations along the East Coast, they formed a Confederacy and proceeded to destroy all those forts on Indian lands.

In the colonies on the East Coast, many of the legislators, the colonial leadership, became concerned that Pontiac's destruction of their forts and the Indian nations aligning with him was like an omen of their own loss because they feared that other Indian nations would unite and drive them into the Atlantic Ocean. They couldn't win a war against the Indian people so they recommended to the English Crown a different way. In the Royal Proclamation of 1763 by King George III was the basis on which the English would settle title of the Indian people. If you read the Royal Proclamation, what it basically says is that the English Crown would obtain the Indian title through the consent of the Indian nations in an assembly of their people. That partly caused the American Revolution because there were land grabbers in the thirteen colonies. The English had set a boundary line at the Allegheny Mountains and the Mississippi River and called all the territory in between, Indian Territory. They told the colonists, "You cannot go beyond these mountains until we get the consent of these Indian nations for you to settle there". There was a revolution, England lost, and the thirteen colonies formed the U.S.A. Those who were loyalists to the British Crown moved north to what was called British North America.

We'll concern ourselves with British North America because out of that Royal Proclamation which is Canada's first constitution (there was no "Canada" then), out of that process, over eighty treaties were concluded with several of the Indian nations on the East Coast and thirteen on Vancouver Island. That allowed the British to then bring people over from other countries. The key to their claiming of title to these lands, in international terms, was that they had effective occupation of it. With the conclusion of the treaties, then, the colonies which formed Canada on the East Coast were Upper and Lower Canada, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. In 1864, the Nova Scotia legislature authorized its Governor to meet with the other colonies to talk about a unity. They feared an American invasion. The result of that was the British North American Act which formed Canada as a nation in 1867.

Therein the lie begins because the Indian nations, up to this point, are treating with the English Crown, with Queen Victoria and her predecessors. When Canada forms a

nation the B.N.A. Act does not carry Indian consent to even have formed Canada. No Indian nations were invited, no Indian nations were told, no Indian individuals were made aware of it. In 1980, when I was giving a workshop in the Indian community, they had never heard of the B.N.A. Act. I dare say there are many Indian and Inuit communities today where that still remains true. So these colonies which formed this nation called Canada did so without the knowledge or consent of the Indian people and they perpetuated a lie because when they looked to the West and they had this motto of stretching Canada "From Sea to Sea" they saw on the prairies more Indian nations, many as powerful or more powerful than those in the East. And Canada, being a young nation without an army, without a police force and with very little money, they were already in a deficit at that time, (nothing new, I guess), they couldn't launch an Indian war. They looked at the U.S. and the U.S. was at war with the Indian people. It was costing them something like \$20 million a year. They didn't have that money and so looking at the British experience, they opted for treaty making - the process of obtaining Indian consent. They looked at the prairies to the north and they sent out Indian agents who are originally diplomats of the British Crown, and they were to go out and make treaties. Now if you go to these areas and there are a number of treaties 1 to 11, and you talk to old the old people, some of whom were present as children in that process, they have an entirely different view of what that whole process was all about.

One of the elders from Hobema says, "When they first came, the people who spoke on their behalf told them, 'You see that mountain over there - that's not ours to give you - the land we cannot give you because it's not ours to give, it belongs to the Creator. Those trees and the animals we cannot give you, they're not ours to give. But this is what we'll do. That mountain, that rock, represents our faith and we will treat you in good faith. The animals represent our sharing and our kindness and we will treat you with kindness'". And as they went down the different elements and made their commitment to treat, the Canadian government offered them then medicine, education and other things.

Now in this process of treaty making the commitment that the Indian people made to the treaty was an obligation never to break it, and that obligation today still stands. It is not simply a piece of paper that you can tear up. The obligation they made is a spiritual one to the Creator that they would never break their word. The money which changes hands every year, the \$5.00, does not represent five loonies, it represents a spiritual obligation on the part of the Canadian Crown to maintain its obligations. But those Indian people didn't know that Canada existed. They believed that they were treating with the English Crown and the

Indian agents who came forward in the name of Canada under the instructions of the government went forward in the name of the English Crown, misrepresenting the whole process on the Canadian side. So in 1980, when the people on the prairies go to England to meet with the Queen to discuss the treaties and to find out why it is Canada is interfering in the Indian people's relations to the English Crown, to the utter dismay of the elders, they find the Queen has no power. A little prime minister called Joe Clark could tell the Queen not to meet with them and she would have to do what Joe Clark says. They had been lied to in a most devious way.

So the treaties, then, have yet still to be honoured because the Indian people, for whom the Treaty is an obligation, say "The land we have now we never gave up". And all those rights which were never put on the table in the treaty remain Aboriginal. They never consented to be governed by Canada under those treaties. And the Canadian government to this day continues to retain that lie. In B.C. in 1871, when the colonies of Vancouver Island joined confederation, they do not tell the Indians either. The terms of union do not carry the consent of the Indian nations in B.C. They weren't even informed. I'm not surprised to find the Gitskan and Wet'suwet'en in a court and don't be surprised when you find every other Indian nation going to court. All these things were done in isolation from the Indian people.

In subsequent legislatures which formed there was no room for the Indian nations because they had never been part of any of those discussions. There is no consent evident anywhere in Canadian history, in all your millions of books, in all the filing cabinets or in all the bureaucrats' heads. There is no Indian consent evidenced, the Canadian government cannot produce that kind of evidence. What they are saying in the court is, "we acquiesced".

If I wear this shirt, then I've agreed to become White. Well, this shirt is not "Indian" or "White". It is a shirt. A TV is not "Indian" or "White". It is a TV. It is not even human. And yet they are saying, "if we watched that TV then we are White and we have agreed to become part of the Canadian system". Well, everybody is on Indian land does that make you Indian?

It wasn't enough that they couldn't kill off the Indian people, genocide is outlawed in International Law thanks to people who believed in human rights - the anti-slavery society, the Levellers in England and many of the philosophers who promoted the rights of Indians and others were certainly human. But the Canadian government, which could not kill us off physically, opted to kill us off spiritually. When it came to religion, the government gave

missionaries full freedom to destroy the Indian customs and traditions and they did so with eager minds. They taught us there is a heaven and there is a hell. If you loved the land too much, if you exercise your customs and traditions, you are going to go to hell. Many Indian people gave up their religious practices, yet still many continued. When it came to education, the Indian parents said, "No, you are not going to take our children away from us. If you do that, when they come back we will not know them". So the law was changed and it was made compulsory. Parents were faced with jail or fines if their children were not put in the residential schools. The schools were not Indian schools. Many were run by the churches. In the residential schools, many of them in B.C. and all over Canada, the children were not taught the Indian traditions, language or values. They were intended to make little Europeans out of little Indians. When their language was spoken, the children were punished and conflict was resolved with violence. There was tremendous abuse, psychological and physical abuse. Today when you see, in the skid rows of the nation, Indian people drowning their sorrows in a bottle of booze, don't be surprised - they have come out of those schools. They were told that they were "savage". What does a child do when someone says, "you are savage"? How can a child absorb that as being not "good" or "bad"? The education system teaches children that they are good or bad, it doesn't teach them that they are human beings. The children in the schools who resisted that were punished - imagine that. And so we reap what we sow. You reap the anger, the frustration and the rage and the violence today.

The Indian Act was used to set up reserve lands and band councils which could be controlled by the government as part of a process of enfranchising Indian people so that we become Canadian citizens. The reserve lands are not traditional Indian territories. They are tiny pieces of land which force the Indian people to be dependent on the government, and that's still what the government wants today. More is put into welfare on the Indian reserves than into economic development because they want the souls of the Indian people. In B.C. when the Indian people rejected all government funding in 1975, the first people coming up on the reserves were the welfare workers telling the Indian people to take back the welfare. The Indian people were saying, "No, we don't want your handouts", and they were saying, "take it back". The Indian Agents, who didn't want to be seen to be controlling people in the communities on the reserves, put Chiefs-in-Council in. Those Chief-in-Council didn't have any power to make decisions, they are told what to do and if they don't do it their money gets cut off. They are also told "how" to do it. This is part of the reason for the cry for Indian self-government today. Here they are, facing their own people, many of them don't have running water, they can't make decisions in their own homes,

the Chiefs-in-Council are paralysed. We want to make the decisions. If we want medicines, we want the power to buy medicine, not Health and Welfare sending us film projectors because that's what they have in their budgets. An Indian Agent, after he makes his decision, can go home to his family, enjoy himself and watch a hockey game. The Chiefs-in-Council take all the consequences even though they didn't make the decision.

With the process of enfranchisement, the Indian Act was amended in 1985 to correct the discrimination which caused people to be called Indian, or not to be called Indian. The government was forced to amend the Act but instead of correcting the discrimination, they made it even worse. We have gone from eighteen different legal categories of Indians now to over twenty-five. That's a great way to correct discrimination - you just create more classes of Indians. The fight isn't over yet, it's only just beginning. In all of that when you make a decision to oppress people what you do is increase their resistance. You only make a people stronger when you try to take their humanity from them. We've only just begun.

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