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**Editor's Subject:** The Persistent Rhetoric of Empire: Strengthening Canadian Sovereignty at the Expense of Indigenous Peoples

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**Date Written:** Oct 18, 2007

**Date Posted:** Fri, 18 Oct 2007 12:37:10 -0400

Sovereignty at the Expense of Indigenous Peoples"

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"The Persistent Rhetoric of Empire:  
Strengthening Canadian Sovereignty at the Expense of Indigenous Peoples"

The Canadian "Speech from the Throne" is a bit of ritualized political performance art that annually recalls the grand history and charts the future course and aspirations of the Canadian nation. This year's Speech, delivered on October 16th, begins as follows:

> "And although Canada is a young country, its history is marked  
> by our unwavering willingness—which I was touched to see all  
> across Canada—to be and to continue to be a generous society.  
> A society that is concerned about the well being of others. A  
> society that is protective of the spirit of this bountiful land,  
> a deep respect learned from Aboriginal peoples. A society that  
> is committed to finding solutions to today's challenges..."  
>  
> "Canada is built on a common heritage of values, which Canadians  
> have fought and died to defend. It is a country that continues  
> to attract newcomers seeking refuge and opportunity, who see  
> Canada as a place where they can work hard, raise families and  
> live in freedom. Our Government is resolved to uphold this  
> heritage by protecting our sovereignty at home and living by our  
> values abroad."

[See <<http://www.sft-ddt.gc.ca/eng/index.asp>>]

This statement is a fascinating bit of political speech that utterly resounds with the rhetoric of empire. It clearly exemplifies the paternalism, imperialism, colonialism, and universalism that continue to have such profound influence on Canada's political dealings with First Nations peoples. Part of what makes this statement so surprising is its glorification of "a proud and sovereign Canada" ---which, incidentally, was carved out of, and superimposed upon, the lands of "proud and sovereign" Native First Nations peoples. The dreams of empire are particularly visible in the descriptions of the arctic, seen as a perfect locale for fulfilling "our sense of exploration, the beauty and the bounty of our land, and our limitless potential." Canada's increasing participation in world conflicts and economic globalization (activities that link Canada with its southern neighbor, the United States) and its hospitality to international refugees from world conflicts are highlighted, without any reflection on the possibility that the imperialistic dreams of Euro-Americans and Euro-Canadians might be important forces in fueling international strife.

Canada's attention to human rights is praised, through mention of the "bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in the British Empire," and the "60th anniversary of the adoption of the Citizenship Act on January 1, 1947." Canada's obligations to Native peoples---who have been slaves to empire since the founding of the Canadian nation---are summed up as follows:

- > "...Our Government remains committed to improving the lives of
- > Canada's Aboriginal people. The Government will reintroduce
- > legislation to guarantee to people living on reserve the same
- > protections other Canadians enjoy under the Canadian Human
- > Rights Act. Our Government will also present legislation on
- > specific claims, which will finally bring fairness and timely
- > resolution to the claims process."

[See <<http://www.sft-ddt.gc.ca/eng/index.asp>>]

What a curious statement! In this instance, there is no concern for the global nature of Aboriginal rights. There is no mention of the fact that, only one month ago, Canada voted a resounding "NO" on 61/295, a resolution adopted by an overwhelming majority (143 YES, 4 NO, and 11 abstentions) during the 61st session of the General Assembly of the United Nations---the "Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples."

- > "The Declaration establishes a universal framework of minimum
- > standards for the survival, dignity, well-being and rights of
- > the world's indigenous peoples. The Declaration addresses both
- > individual and collective rights; cultural rights and identity;
- > rights to education, health, employment, language, and others.
- > It outlaws discrimination against indigenous peoples and promotes
- > their full and effective participation in all matters that concern
- > them. It also ensures their right to remain distinct and to pursue
- > their own priorities in economic, social and cultural development.
- > The Declaration explicitly encourages harmonious and cooperative
- > relations between States and indigenous peoples."

[See <<http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/declaration.htm>>]

On September 14, 2007, Valerie Taliman, a reporter for \_Indian Country Today\_, summarized the objections of Canada as follows:

- > "As expected, the only countries opposing the adoption were the
- > United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The main
- > objections of these countries centered on indigenous peoples'
- > control over land and resources, their right to self-
- > determination, and that the declaration might give indigenous
- > peoples veto authority over development on their lands and
- > territories."

[See <<http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096415761>>]

Lest anyone imagine that this reporter misunderstood Canada's grounds for refusal, here is how Chuck Strahl, Minister of Indian Affairs, and Maxime Bernier, Minister of Foreign Affairs, rationalized this negative vote. They opposed the Declaration because it "does not recognize Canada's need to balance indigenous rights to lands and resources with the rights of others." They articulated this stance as follows:

- > "We have stated publicly that we have significant concerns
- > with the wording of provisions of the Declaration such as those
- > on: lands, territories and resources; free, prior and informed
- > consent when used as a veto; self-government without recognition
- > of the importance of negotiations; intellectual property; military
- > issues; and the need to achieve an appropriate balance between
- > the rights and obligations of indigenous peoples, member States

> and third parties."

[See <<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/prs/s-d2007/2-2936-eng.asp>>]

In other words, their wordplay suggests, any attempt to resolve the concerns of Indigenous peoples would hold the potential for conflict with non-Indigenous rights, and might therefore result in an inappropriate balance that would threaten to unsettle the rights of all Canadians. This appears to be a universalist and colonialist stance that implies that the all-powerful Canadian government is better equipped to resolve this situation than any Indigenous governance system, or any consensus of world nations like the UN, might ever be.

In a press interview with CanWest News Services, Strahl articulated his belief that the UN Declaration of Indigenous rights "is unworkable in a Western democracy under a constitutional government" (a rather telling admission). He explained:

> "In Canada . . . you negotiate on this . . . because (native  
> rights) don't trump all other rights in the country," he said.  
> "You need also to consider the people who have sometimes also  
> lived on those lands for two or three hundred years, and have  
> hunted and fished alongside the First Nations."

[See <<http://www.canada.com/topics/news/story.html?id=23df9769-3423-4f43-b828-a755725c2719>>]

Many Native leaders have been struggling to remind Canadian leaders that the UN Declaration is simply the beginning stage of a much longer process that will, of course, include negotiations. Negotiations in good faith have always been a key element of Indigenous relations. But in this case, the necessary trust and good faith on the part of the Canadian government seem to be sadly lacking. Arguments about the time-depth of land occupation are specious. The suggestion that indigenous tenure in "Canada"---over 10,000 years---is apparently trumped by only 300 years of European tenure is an imperialist notion if ever there was one.

Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine, in a plea for a reasoned approach, described the UN Declaration as "an aspirational document:"

> ...Fontaine, arguing the minister was reading too much into its  
> legal implications. "It's neither a convention, nor a treaty. When  
> it comes to the standards that are set, if there is a legal  
> (conflict), domestic laws will prevail." On balancing rights,  
> Fontaine said the record of Canadian native groups is one of  
> responsible partner. "We have never taken a decision that has  
> resulted in the dispossession of land and property of others,"  
> he said. "Yes, this declaration reaffirms the collective rights  
> of indigenous peoples - to land, to culture and to self-rule -  
> but not in a way that will result in the human rights of others  
> being compromised."

[See <<http://www.canada.com/topics/news/story.html?id=23df9769-3423-4f43-b828-a755725c2719>>]

There are some in the Canadian government who apparently believe that Canada's obligations to Indigenous peoples have already been dealt with, given the tone of the text in the Speech from the Throne. In a statement delivered as smoothly as a wave of the royal hand, the problems of the Boarding Schools are imagined to have been resolved:

> "Our Government recently concluded a final settlement on Indian  
> Residential Schools and will launch a commission for truth and  
> reconciliation. The Prime Minister, on behalf of our Government,  
> will use this occasion to make a statement of apology to close  
> this sad chapter in our history.

[See <<http://www.sft-ddt.gc.ca/eng/index.asp>>]

Part of what makes this statement such an intriguing historical document is the style of discursive engagement over time. In 2006, Canadian First Nations people complained that the "Speech from the Throne" had failed to mention the horrors of the Indian Residential Schools. On April 4, 2006, First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine stated:

- > "Our expectation was that there would be no specific mention
- > of First Nations issues, given that we were not one of the
- > government's five stated priorities, but we are still
- > disappointed that there was no reference to our agenda, nor
- > any reference to our historic agreements on residential
- > schools or to close the gap in quality of life between
- > First Nations and other Canadians."

[See <<http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=2490>>].

So, this year's Speech from the Throne finally made mention of First Nations issues with specific reference to the Residential Schools, but in a somewhat dismissive tone that does not really satisfy. Will a statement of apology end the abuse?

Canada's First Nations Indigenous people are not quietly acquiescing to this latest attempt to erase them from history. One reaction to Canada's failure to acknowledge Indigenous rights can be heard in the statement recently released by the Secretariat of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador:

- > "Once again the federal government missed out on the
- > opportunity to honor its obligations towards the First Nations
- > of the country, and to finally get out of the colonialism
- > era...the Speech from the Throne is another example of the lack
- > of will on the part of the Canadian government, to assume its
- > responsibilities and to really tackle all the abuses that the
- > First Nations of Canada have to suffer, day after day",
- > stated the Chief of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec
- > and Labrador, Ghislain Picard.

- >
- > "...It is disappointing to see that, once again, the First
- > Nations are largely ignored, in spite of a Canadian economy
- > that is flourishing, a strong Canadian dollar and a 14
- > billion \$ of budgetary surplus...The elements in last night's
- > Speech of the Throne, which concern us, are not adequate in
- > relation to the real needs."

- >
- > "It should be noted that, last Friday, the AFNQL put the
- > federal government on notice that from now on, the Department
- > of Indian Affairs would be under external monitoring. Tired of
- > seeing the issues drag on and on, the AFNQL decided to turn
- > towards international organizations, such as the UNESCO, the
- > International Amnesty and the UN, in order to pay a special
- > attention to the special problems faced by the First Nations
- > and the irrationalities caused by a system which is still
- > influenced by the colonialist ideology."

(Statement released October 17, 2007 by Alain Garon, Communication Officer, AFNQL)

Sadly, this discourse, played out in bold relief on a world stage, is yet more proof that the colonial era has not yet ended. This fact is powerfully evident in the actions of non-Native nations and the inequalities that Indigenous people around the world suffer. It is most particularly evident in the extreme reluctance of some of the world's most theoretically "civilized" nations (using their own problematic and highly Eurocentric definitions of what constitutes "civilization")---the United States and Canada---to acknowledge

Indigenous self-determination. I would suggest that the intolerance for Indigenous sovereignty is a marker, not of civilization, but of colonization, and that intolerance is a state of affairs that perpetuates universal injustice, rather than ensures universal freedom, for all of its peoples. The "Speech from the Throne" boldly enumerates Canada's national priorities as follows: "A Proud and Sovereign Canada. A Strong Federation. A Prosperous Future. A Safe and Secure Canada. A Healthy Environment for Canadians."

Canada promises a prosperous future for Canadians. Which Canadians? At whose expense? Ah, yes, the Speech tells us, let's close a "sad chapter" in history. Whose history? And whose hand is poised, at present, to slam the book shut?

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