

Assembly of First Nations – Our Story

The story of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) is one that remains unknown to most Canadians. It is the story that is lived each day by the First Nations peoples of Canada. It is the story of a struggle for self-determination and human dignity. It is a story that must be told.

Many Canadians are unaware of the enormous problems that the First Nations peoples have faced on the road to political recognition in this country.

Few Canadians realize that the First Nations peoples are identified in the Constitution as one of the founding nations of Canada, along with the English and French. Few Canadians are aware that up until the 1983-87 First Ministers Conference on Aboriginal Rights, the First Nations People were excluded from taking part in the Constitutional developments of Canada. First Nations peoples have had to deal with conditions of extreme poverty and isolation, and vast geographical dispersion, within the tremendous diversity of aboriginal cultures, languages, and political ideologies. Improved communications and transportation have allowed First Nations Peoples to begin to talk to each other, to the rest of Canada, and to the rest of the world. These relatively recent developments have meant that the First Nations Peoples have had to work harder and faster in order to catch up with the federal and provincial governments in the fields of political knowledge, political reality, and especially in political expertise. The years of being excluded from Canada's formal political process has left First Nations Peoples with an incredible void to fill just in order to attain a level of political, social, and legal knowledge that is on par with other groups in Canadian society.

Unfortunately, most Canadians are not aware of the many issues which brought about the need for First Nations Peoples to assert their rightful position in Canadian society. (Many are unaware of conditions that aboriginal people experience in Canada; in recent years such as, discrimination; exploitation; violations against basic human rights.) Furthermore, all of these infractions were/are grossly ignored and/or glossed over by standard Canadian history textbooks.

The past cannot be changed, but yesterday's injustices can be corrected by today's political leaders. The Assembly of First Nations exists to fulfill the goal of correcting these past injustices and to enhance the rightful position of the First Nations Peoples in Canada's future. Considering the short time that the AFN has been in existence, significant progress has been made in the Canadian political arena, as witnessed by the First Ministers Conferences and constitutional exercises.

The development of representatives in Canada has never been easy. For instance, the 1927 Indian Act forbade First Nations people from forming political organizations.

Hence, it was common for a First Nation leaders to be jailed by the RCMP for trying to organize any form of political group. This apartheid law prohibited traditional First Nation government systems from existing in the native communities and in its place established the present day "band council" system.

In addition to suppressing the political activity of First Nations, the 1927 Indian Act also denied the Aboriginal people of Canada from speaking their native language, or practicing their

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traditional religion. Aboriginal children attending residential schools were often severely punished for uttering even a single word of their native language.

The Potlatch ceremonies, a ritual common to most First Nations religions across the country, were declared illegal (in fact, only recently has their legality been approved by the federal government). Government officials, clergy, and educators were of the opinion that all Aboriginal cultures and traditions were a complete regression from, and affront to, their own supposedly superior English and French civilizations. It was because of such contempt that the First Nations of Canada realized the pressing need to form a national Aboriginal lobby to fight for their rights in Ottawa.

One of the first attempts at forming a national presence for First Nations came soon after the First World War. During this time, The League of Nations was formed. The League of Indians in Canada was also formed, but like the League of Nations it failed to attract wide-spread support and often faced Canadian government actions that were suppressive and detrimental to their early goals and actions. The League of Indians in Canada soon faded from the national scene.

After the Second World War, First Nations again attempted to form a national lobby group. The North American Indian Brotherhood (N.A.I.B.) was established in the late 1940's, but like its predecessor, the N.A.I.B.'s efforts were hindered by a lack of nation-wide support and suppressive government actions, especially in Saskatchewan, where the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation government actively worked against all First Nations initiatives. Furthermore, internal administrative problems caused the organization to break into regional factions, causing the N.A.I.B. to be disbanded by the early 1950's.

During the next ten years, First Nations began to re-organize their efforts to form a new national lobby group. In 1961, the National Indian Council was formed to represent three of the four major groups of Aboriginal people in Canada. They are as follows: Treaty and Status people; the Non-status people and; the Metis people (the Inuit were excluded). From this point on, the First Nations of Canada have always had a national lobby group to represent them in Ottawa. The stated purpose of the National Indian Council was to promote "unity among all Indian people."

However, the National Indian Council found the task of uniting all of the various First Nations peoples interests into one national lobby to be quite trying.

Also, as the various First Nations became more articulate in their demands, they found less and less in common with each other. This disunity led to the National Indian Council splitting up, by mutual agreement of the three aboriginal groups in 1968. The Status and Treaty aboriginal groups formed the National Indian Brotherhood, while the non-status and the metis groups remained united and formed the Native Council of Canada.

Thus, the National Indian Brotherhood (N.I.B.) was born in the midst of controversy. Soon after the N.I.B. came into existence, the Federal Liberal Government revealed its 1969 White Paper policy which called for the assimilation of all First Nation peoples into the mainstream of Canadian society, and the removal of First Nations from the Canadian Constitution. The N.I.B.

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quickly organized itself and confronted the Liberal government. With the unity of its provincial and territorial members the N.I.B. successfully lobbied parliament and the Canadian public to defeat the White Paper. For the next thirteen years the N.I.B.'s structure remained relatively unchanged with the provincial and territorial organizations forming its major pillars of strength.

From 1969 to the present the National Indian Brotherhood has become a very powerful and increasingly articulate lobby group for aboriginal rights in Canada under the leadership of individuals such as George Manuel, Walter Dieter, Noel Starblanket, Delbert Riley, Dr. David Ahenakew, Georges Erasmus, Ovide Mercredi, Phil Fontaine, Matthew Coon Come and National Chief Phil Fontaine, elected again in 2003.

Over the years the NIB became an ever present watch-dog agency as well as a means for First Nations to press for changes in federal and provincial Aboriginal policies. The solid research and careful application of political pressure has resulted in many changes in federal and provincial aboriginal policies, and more memorably, the defeat of the Meech Lake Accord.

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood's Indian Control of Indian Education policy paper was a breakthrough in gaining support from then Indian Affairs Minister, Jean Chretien, to implement First Nations philosophy on self-governance. It was a clever way to promote Indian Government philosophy nationally as it brought an awareness of Indian Control to the Indian communities. Through issues such as housing, health care, and economic development, the NIB soon established itself as a powerful voice for Status Aboriginal people in Canada.

Despite the success of the NIB, problems were apparent. Organizing all the various status First Nation groups across Canada into a single, cohesive lobby group still presented the biggest difficulty. The NIB drew an increasing amount of criticism for not being truly representative of all the Status First Nations in the country. The issue slowly rose to the forefront in 1979 and culminated in the arrival of three hundred (300) status First Nations and Chiefs in London, England in an attempt to halt the repatriation of the Canadian Constitution. The Constitution repatriation battle, in England and Canada, was soon reflected internally at the NIB. The basic structure of the NIB was in flux and in need of change.

Just as the people of the First Nations across Canada were becoming familiar with the NIB and its role in serving the Status Aboriginal people, an important transition in the structure of the secretariat was being discussed and eventually the Chiefs wanted to develop an organization which was truly representative and accountable to their community members, thus the NIB made the transition to becoming the Assembly of First Nations in 1982.

During those years, the NIB underwent a drastic revision of its basic structure. With this revision came the name change to the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). From being an "organization of representatives from regions" the AFN became an "Organization of First Nations Government Leaders."

The AFN became the secretariat, or administrative body, to the newly formed Assembly of First Nations. With the change in structure, First Nation government leaders were able to directly

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formulate and administer the policies of the Assembly of First Nations. Thus, the secretariat, NIB/AFN, became more directly responsible to the First Nations Chiefs-in-Assembly, who were themselves responsible to their First Nations communities. Hence, the NIB/AFN became a truly representative body of the Status & Treaty First Nations Peoples in Canada, and at the same time, a consensus driver.

At the 1982 Annual General Assembly in Penticton, BC, Dr. David Ahenakew was elected the first National Chief to the Assembly of First Nations. Dr. Ahenakew, along with the leaders of the other three aboriginal groups in Canada, attended the first three First Ministers Conferences (FMC) on Aboriginal rights in Ottawa in 1983, 1984, and 1985. These FMC's (which numbered four, with last one taking place in 1987), were historic developments in themselves, because they marked the first time that Aboriginal Leaders were represented in Constitutional talks that directly affected them.

The four First Ministers Conferences between 1983, and 1987 were a series of Constitutionally guaranteed meetings between the Prime Minister, the Premiers, and the Leaders of the four Aboriginal groups in order to identify, define and discuss aboriginal and treaty rights. The initial intent of the F.M.C.'s were to address the fears that the federal and provincial governments had concerning the meaning of section 35(1) of the Canadian Constitution, which recognizes and affirms the existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal people in Canada.

The first FMC conference was marked by lack of solidarity among the four aboriginal groups in expressing their concerns for various aboriginal matters including land claims, natural resources rights, self-determination rights, education rights, etc. Also prevalent was the position of some provincial governments, especially Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Newfoundland, who made it clear that they were unwilling to accept any concept of "inherent" aboriginal rights, and that they would only agree to discuss "contingent" aboriginal rights. Such a provincial position was unacceptable to the AFN and other aboriginal groups, and the conference ended with no consensus on aboriginal rights.

This conference did however, lead to one very important amendment to the Constitution. The section 35(3), which provided for greater certainty that the rights in land claim agreements were to be given the same Constitutional protection as the rights in treaties. Furthermore, the First Ministers agreed to (in 1983) have a series of three more F.M.C.s to discuss constitutional matters that directly affected the aboriginal people of Canada.

Over the next two years, in 1984 and 1985, the Assembly of First Nations was represented by the National Chief, Dr. David Ahenakew. The agenda at these conferences was narrowed by the governments to consider the single issue of aboriginal self-government. The discussion of aboriginal self-government inevitably led to the impasse between the provinces notably Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Newfoundland, and the aboriginal groups. This impasse again prevented any constitutional consensus defining aboriginal self-government.

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In 1985, Dr. David Ahenakew was replaced as the AFN National Chief by Georges Erasmus at that year's VI Annual General Assembly. Like his predecessor, the new National Chief vowed to continue the fight for aboriginal rights, including self-government.

At the fourth and last FMC in 1987, federal and provincial governments unanimously refused to recognize that aboriginal people already had, through their history, an inherent right to self-government. This attitude eventually permeated all of the discussions and was the ultimate stumbling block upon which consensus failed.

This however, did not mean that the AFN had failed but, by all accounts, Georges Erasmus and the AFN's public profile had never been higher. A great deal was accomplished such as: a heightened awareness of issues affecting aboriginal peoples, including; public education, public support, and the support of several eminent persons in this country and abroad, on Canadian native issues. At the negotiating table, AFN won support from some of the provinces (Ontario, Manitoba, New Brunswick), but not enough to make an amendment in favour of aboriginal people.

Nonetheless, AFN had clear, rational arguments and close unity with the other three aboriginal groups which helped to preserve the importance of the entrenched, though undefined, aboriginal and treaty rights against tremendous pressure from several provinces and the federal government. This, in itself, was a great success, for it demonstrated to the governments and to the people of Canada that the First Nations are serious in their conviction of attaining an explicit Constitutional amendment that entrenches their rights and position in Canadian society forever.

Since this time, the AFN has been actively involved in several areas where Aboriginal concerns are of great importance. The Meech Lake Accord of 1987, the Charolettown Accord of 1992, the Free Trade deal with the United States, and other legislative business (i.e. Bill C-31). Additionally, numerous other areas have intensive ongoing study and lobbying efforts by various sections of the AFN and its regional organizations

Apart from the other three aboriginal organizations, the AFN also works in close association with other prominent lobby groups. Together, many support groups have helped the AFN to maintain a high profile on both the Canadian and world scene on such issues as native culture, history, and education, acid rain, air/water pollution, and endangered animal species. The AFN has approached the United Nations in an attempt to find ways to enforce the spirit and intent of treaties between indigenous peoples and settler governments, such as the situation in Canada warrants.

The First Nations Peoples of this land governed their affairs for centuries. Their unique customs, languages, and way of life was intrinsically tied to the lands they occupied. It is not a story, not a fictitious tall tale, but historical fact. The AFN strives to present and preserve the authenticity of North American history with the goal of enhancing justice for the aboriginal peoples of Canada. Fighting for long standing First Nations rights is not merely a fight for natural resources and self-determination, it is also a fight for human rights, human dignity, and cultural survival. It is a

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struggle for those truths which are so outstanding and self-evident that they render any challenge to them as being absurd and beyond all enlightened reason.

The AFN is still relatively young, yet it has accomplished a great deal for an entire population of unique people in Canada and around the world.

The efforts of dedicated people, such as every National Chief, the Assembly-of-Chiefs, and the Secretariat, all help to make the AFN highly organized and able to represent First Nations governments in Canada. From its fragmented beginnings, the Assembly of First Nations grew out of the need for First Nations Peoples to meet the past and present challenges that threaten their unique identities and rights as the first inhabitants of the North American continent. The challenges still exist and the future still holds many battles for the AFN to fight. But, with the growing acceptance of First Nations rights amongst the Canadian public, and the growing capabilities of the AFN to meet new challenges, the future for the First Nations People of Canada may soon look brighter.

Even more recently in August of 1992 , the AFN, federal and provincial governments, other First Nations and Territorial leaders agreed in principle to a Constitutional reform package namely, the Charlottetown Accord. This agreement, subject to the final legal text may have provided for a historic reconciliation with Canada. This agreement would have recognized First Nations' inherent right of self-government within Canada. However, this agreement was not ratified in the Referendum of October 28, 1992.

Making our Nations strong and exerting the right to govern our own affairs is important work. Much remains to be accomplished, both at the local level and within the Assembly. Therefore, the support of each individual First Nation and its citizens is needed if the national organization is to continue to be a strong and united voice for all the First Nations people in Canada.

The Assembly of First Nations is committed to the belief that such support is building and that the future will yield the desired accomplishment of self-determination for each First Nation in Canada.