



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

June 6, 2008 Round Table on Indigenous Rights

July 2, 2008



Introduction

On June 5th and 6th, 2008, a group of concerned citizens gathered at the University of Winnipeg to discuss Indigenous rights issues. The round table was organized by *Canada's World*, a three-year citizens' initiative to shift Canadians' thinking on international policy issues. The conversation was set in the context of the historical relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people(s) in Canada, and Canada's recent reversal of support for international Indigenous rights instruments.

The round table was designed with two main goals in mind. First, we hoped to offer a learning environment where participants could deepen their understanding of Indigenous rights issues, and explore further avenues for personal involvement. The second goal was to engage participants in a conversation on how the local community can work together to improve the situation of Indigenous rights.

Through a series of exploratory exercises, participants identified the issues and values that they see as the most important to the advancement of Indigenous rights; they explored the assets currently available to Indigenous communities in Canada; and finally, the group engaged in a "gap analysis" where they developed strategies for using the assets they identified to work towards the top issues and values.

The group identified a number of challenges facing the struggle for Indigenous rights in Canada. They were also able to identify a substantial number of avenues for change that could be developed or improved upon. These make up the *Citizens' Agenda for Action* developed by the group, and presented in this report.

The information presented in this report is a reflection of the dialogue that took place between participants in this round table, and the variety of perspectives that were presented. Following the dialogue model, participants focused on sharing perspectives, rather than locating a singular "right answer." In representation here, it is entirely possible that contradictory or ambiguous statements appear. These should be understood as they are: areas where the dialogue must continue.



Executive Summary

The Round Table on Indigenous Rights identified a number of issues, values, and assets in the struggle for Indigenous rights. While many participants acknowledged a lack of knowledge among Aboriginal Peoples of national and international human rights instruments, and how to use them, the most pressing concern was not for these instruments. Through a full day discussion, participants distilled their ideas until they were able to identify “unity and reclamation of identity” as the highest priority in the struggle for rights.

This is revealing for a number of reasons. As much as Aboriginal Peoples are struggling with legal, political, economic, and social systems foreign to their traditions (and often counter to their values), integration into these systems, and cooperation with their internal workings are not considered a priority. For many Aboriginal Peoples the struggle to understand their relationship to these systems, and their place in a society of fractured identities is much more pressing.

Aboriginal Peoples today face a confusing landscape of identity, where residential schools have broken down language and culture, and clauses of legislation have determined identity. With groups divided between Indian, Métis, Status, non-Status, Inuit, on- or off-reserve, and with governance, health, and education directed by a system out of touch with their values, Aboriginal Peoples find themselves no longer in control of the most important aspects of their own identity.

By reclaiming identity, and rebuilding unity, Aboriginal Peoples will find themselves better situated to assert their rights. In order to do this there needs to be a dialogue between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal people(s) in Canada. Knowledge and understanding of unique cultures and their histories can go a long way to bridging this gap. Likewise, round table participants suggested a number of ways that Aboriginal Peoples can explore their own culture amongst themselves, as well as with non-Aboriginal people. These can be found within this report.

Other Major Issues Identified by the Round Table

- The Indian Act has had substantially negative implications for Aboriginal Peoples, and has degraded the relationship and the promise of treaties.
- The negotiation of Treaties was prejudiced by different understandings and interpretations of the language and concepts used at the time. This has led to a renewed focus on oral traditions and Aboriginal understandings of what was negotiated.
- Aboriginal Peoples do not have the resources needed to pursue human rights cases. This is due in part to limited federal funding for Aboriginal programming, as well as to the cancellation of the Court Challenges Program. This resource limitation is particularly acute at the international level.
- Reliance on Federal funding for programming is seen as a major liability. Aboriginal Peoples should branch out to find alternate forms of funding.
- Government apologies, if not followed by substantial action, can be compared to an abusive relationship where the abuser’s words ring hollow in the face of inaction.