



Natives Set Example for Minorities

By Dr. Lorne Foster

The great sociologist Anthony Oberschall, who conducted a life-long study of social change, came to the conclusion that the advancement of an underprivileged minority group is dependent upon the ability to “teach the necessity of organization, tactics and patience” to its members.

To Oberschall’s way of thinking, the central problem in creating enduring social change is not the development of humanitarian beliefs and progressive ideas – progressive ideas have always circulated throughout history – but the cementing together of an organizational network that can effectively mobilize revolutionary energies, and resist the reactionary forces of the status quo.

For the last 24 years, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has continued to exercise its sociological imagination in this regard, by building organizational stamina for the protection and advocacy of native rights. Although the Aboriginal community in Canada is comprised of natives who speak 80 different languages, this remarkable diversity has not prevented the formation of an encompassing national organizational network for the pursuit of its common interests.

The AFN is being forged by its leadership over time into a political instrumental for the establishment of a unique and irrevocable relationship between Aboriginal people and the state, in a manner that curtails state jurisdictions while fostering 1) Accelerated land claims settlement, 2) Improved socioeconomic status on reserves, 3) Reconstruction of aboriginal-government relations, and 4) Fulfillment of aboriginal concerns (i.e., privileging indigenous interests and practices).

It is against this backdrop that hundreds of delegates from across the country gathered for the recent (July 16th) election of a new grand chief of the central body via touch-screen kiosks at a conference centre in downtown Edmonton.

The three candidates challenging for the national leadership of the AFN —incumbent Matthew Coon Come; Phil Fontaine, a former national chief; and Roberta Jamieson, chief of the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario – engaged in a vigorous and hard-fought race, each promising radical changes to rebuild the AFN's credibility and to make the organization more relevant.

In the final tally, veteran Indian politician Phil Fontaine won a second chance to lead the Assembly of First Nations when he scored a second-ballot victory over rival Roberta Jamieson. Incumbent Matthew Coon Come was nowhere to be seen as Fontaine was announced the victor, having been dropped from the leadership race after the first ballot when he received just 18.5% of the vote, compared to Fontaine's 51.5% and Jamieson's 29.5%. Fontaine, who served a three-year term as national chief of the Indian lobby group from 1997 to 2000, edged Jamieson 338 to 217 on the second ballot, capturing nearly 61% of the 555 final votes cast.

Many of the 566 delegates had been critical of Mr. Coon Come's provocative style, saying the AFN had become divided and lost its vision under his leadership. Coon Come's relations with the federal Liberals were especially hostile, which many natives saw as a roadblock to securing better treatment. Indian Affairs Minister Robert Nault has dismissed the 24-year-old organization — whose funding was recently cut by half — as “structurally incapable of working with the government.”

In accepting defeat, Mr. Coon Come countered criticism of his leadership, saying: "I believe we are a great organization. I don't believe we are irrelevant. I don't believe we are a protest group ... I think I gave it my best shot and I feel that the support that I got is what I deserved. I tried everything that I could and I respect the position of the chiefs."

Roberta Jamieson, Canada's first female aboriginal lawyer and Ontario's ombudsman for 10 years, also acknowledged the will of the Aboriginal constituency: “Your choice today was very clear and it was a far different vision than the one that I have offered,” she said. “You can count on me to continue to be on Parliament Hill, opposing (the First Nations' Governance Act).”

The AFN opposes the sweeping new native legislation of the proposed Native Governance Act, which Indian Affairs Minister Robert Nault argues will give native communities more control in electing their leaders and managing their finances while requiring more accountability in both areas. The federal government has promised more consultation with native leaders, but has insisted that rules to promote accountability and transparency in band administrations will be enacted. Critics, however, say it is “colonialistic” legislation that contravenes the constitutional rights of natives to govern themselves.

Mr. Nault, welcomed Mr. Fontaine's victory, and said they had worked together for several months after he was appointed minister during the aboriginal leader's first term as national chief between 1997 and 2000, a tenure that ended with the election of Mr. Coon Come.

"I do think it is not necessarily a new era, but I think you'll see business done differently," he said. "I think you'll see a lot more co-operation between the AFN and the Department of Indian Affairs, and I'm optimistic we'll be able to develop joint initiatives as we did in the past that fell by the wayside under the previous administration."

Asked in an CBC interview about the Native Governance Act, Mr. Fontaine responded by saying that addressing poverty is the “overriding concern”. Still, he said he plans to “start all over” in discussing the issue with Mr. Nault. “One of the challenges faced by my predecessor, of course, was the articulation of a clear vision. The government felt that was a matter pretty much left unresolved, and so we're more than prepared to set out our vision very clearly.”

In the end, it is important to look beyond the internal struggles and micro-ideological differences within the native community and leadership, to see that the search for Aboriginality spearheaded by the Assembly of First Nations has become the primer contemporary example in Canada of how a minority group can begin to maximize its own revolutionary, change-provoking powers.

As the dust settles on the touch-screen kiosks at a conference centre in downtown Edmonton, the lesson for all disparate underprivileged minorities is that you can either be overwhelmed by your own diversity, or you can learn the necessity of organization, tactics and patience.