

## **“First Nations”: An Unsettling Compromise**

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A week or two ago, I had seen a recent topographic map depicting Montreal and its neighboring communities. Upon glancing at the territory of Kahnawake, I had noticed that Kahnawake was no longer referred to as the *Caughnawaga Indian Reserve*. Rather, the map labeled our community as the *Kahnawake First Nation*, no doubt a liberal compromise resolved by the Government of Canada to appease the new assertive and nationalistic attitude of native people. I suppose the term *First Nation* is the new politically correct term in Canada that describes the native peoples of North America.

Both the governments of Canada and the United States have long been reluctant to refer to different native peoples as nations and have been erroneously and insultingly using derogatory terms such as *bands* or *tribes*, which suggest images of nomadic groups of uncivilized and unorganized savages. The Government of Canada had insisted since its confederation that they could not tolerate a nation within a nation. Only until recently, have they begun referring to different native peoples as nations. Why, suddenly, did they become tolerant enough to finally use the term nation?

Since the so-called Oka Crisis in 1990 it seems as though the Government of Canada, as well as its provincial minions, began to openly use the term *nation* to identify different native peoples in Canada. In time, this term had evolved into *First Nation*. Many perceived this as a victory in the indigenous struggle, and in a way it is as common Canadians have been conditioned to use this new lingo. However, different concepts exist surrounding the term nation or nationhood. A nation by definition is a collection of people whose unique traditional components, such as language, culture, historical links, and specific political institutions with defined territories, sets them apart from the fundamental characteristics of another collection of people.

Commonly, the popular perception of nationhood is usually associated with statehood, a concept that exercises the social, political, and economic jurisdiction authorized through nationhood and other inherent claims. Statehood, the nation's next stage of evolution, is a sovereign or self-determining nation that occupies and controls a particular territory. A synonym for state would be country.

Therefore one can recognize now that a nation doesn't necessarily have any jurisdiction independent from the country or state which surrounds it. Indeed, Canada is not threaten by its use, as the term *First Nation* is a compromising term that enables Canada to still have plausible deniability of its popular implications and still maintain an image that champions the rights and treatment of its native people. Moreover, simply being a *First Nation* doesn't provide recognition of the scenario that these particular native peoples had in fact originated from those continents, but rather they were the *first* to settle and establish the conditions of literal nationhood.

I'm sure there are many who would then wonder if not a *First Nation*, what then? Let us examine various terms that are currently in use to describe native peoples. It is clear that the word *Indian* is unacceptable due to its literal translation that depicts the inhabitants of India. *Aboriginal* is another

popular term that classifies those who are the first inhabitants of a particular country. However, this term is usually identified with the native peoples of Australia and still doesn't address the claim that North and South American native peoples originated from those continents, but rather they were the first to discover and inhabit it.

On an international level the term *indigenous* is used by organizations such as the United Nations among other international political bodies. The term *indigenous* would adequately define those who originated or were inborn out of a particular innate geographical area. It would then seem that *indigenous* be a choice term in the English language to generally identify the original native peoples of North and South America.

Indeed, this author would certainly recommend the use of our own terms, in our own native languages, that genuinely depicts the true titles of our different people. Unfortunately, when fighting for indigenous rights on the international stage, where our adversaries certainly dissect every word spoken or written by our peoples, foreign languages must be used to express arguments. For the more assertive and nationalistic of indigenous peoples, they should perhaps emphasize their political classification as an *indigenous state*, which would certainly frighten the most oppressive of countries. However, regardless of what classification is chosen for a particular indigenous people, those who wish to be referred to as nations, states, or simply people; will have the legal ability to be self-determining as long as they never relinquish such assertive and nationalistic titles for themselves. You are who you struggle to be.

Ever onward towards the good tidings of peace and power!