

United Nations Sunday Remarks

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October 21, 2012

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During the past year, the importance of the United Nations and our Canadian connection with it has been impressed upon me perhaps as never before. Let me give you two reasons. The first has to do with a very basic fact of life: we are born into dialogue as a way of life with the first breaths we take as infants. We learn to breath—inhaling and exhaling—and immediately after we learn to be active participants in dialogical relations with parents, siblings and others. Here we respond to the expressions of those around us and actively call forth their responses to our expressions of need, sympathy and engagement. We do not choose the bodies we have and our need for breath; we don't choose families into which we are born; we don't choose the nations of our birth, nor dictate just which countries make up the international community—they are given to us as partners with whom life calls to us: to enter into the complicated dialogical dance of family, labour, learning, citizenry and diplomacy.

Can you imagine what the inter-subjective life of families, neighbourhoods, schools and workplace would look like if we imagined ourselves somehow immune or above the need, the fact of dialogical engagement with others? Where parents didn't respond to the cries of an infant; where annoyed siblings tuned each other out and stopped talking, where co-workers shunned one another because communicating and problem solving over difficult issues just wasn't worth the effort? Can you imagine a world where there were only monologues and ultimatums? Where squabbling nations treated each other with contempt or only as means to short-term self-interest and advantage?

Before I moved here ten years ago, I admired the fact that Canada acted internationally like it got this—it acted and was seen as an honest broker and mediator trusted by both so-called

developed and developing nations. We'd earned the role: Canada's John Humphrey basically wrote the UN Declaration Human Rights; Brock Chisholm helped found the World Health Organization, Adelaide Sinclair contributed to the founding of UNICEF, and Canada took multilateral engagement and action with enemies, troubled nations and allies alike seriously. We were prime supporters of the creation of the post of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Canada's contributed more to UN peacekeeping operations than any other nation—after having helped create the role for the UN to begin with.

This is a nation that acted as though inhaling and exhaling, the give and take of dialogue and multilateral diplomacy and peacekeeping were the most natural things in the world for an important “middle power” nation such as ours. Given that, perhaps you can understand my distress at how we seem to have lost our way: passed over last year for a seat at the Security Council, this year our Prime Minister travels to New York to accept an award from a private organization but steers clear of the UN, and instead, dispatches our Foreign Affairs Minister to lecture the General Assembly for its “endless, fruitless, inward-looking exercises.”

We do not choose the world into which we have been born; its nations and its international bodies, like the UN, may at times be dysfunctional because the world often is; our families may not be heaven on earth, our interpersonal relations may be under strain—but where lies our best hopes for mending and making things better at home, in school, at work, and in the world? Monologue or dialogue? Multilateral engagement or simply throwing in the towel and hanging out only with our friends?

The second reason this year that has impressed upon me the importance of the United Nations and our Canadian connection with it: have you heard about the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples? Did you know that we are currently in the

middle of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples? Do we know the rights identified in the Declaration or the objectives of the Second Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples? If you haven't heard or didn't know, you're in common company with many or most of us. And it's no wonder.

For years, we were one of only three nations in the world that refused to sign the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples. And when, two years ago, the government finally signed the Declaration, it went out of its way to underline how non-binding it was. Since then, I've seen precious little in terms of understanding or implementing it or following through with the mandates of the Second International Decade, let alone the First one. And I'm not sure I understand why.

It is striking to me that Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples are the fastest growing communities in our country. Striking to me that over $\frac{3}{4}$ of Canada's landmass, Canada's aboriginal peoples are the only Canadians present, established and living there twelve months of the year, every year. Striking that the federal government has a constitutional obligation to consult with and accommodate First Nations and Inuit peoples "before taking any steps that may infringe on aboriginal or treaty rights." (M. Jill Dougherty, "Duty to Consult...*WeirFoulds LLP—Government Update, January 1, 2008*) And striking for me, the immigrant, to have learned, in the words of John Ralston Saul, that "we are a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government...That is our reality," he writes, "that is what lies at the heart of our story...and mythology. Indigenous peoples are already here, at the core of our civilization..." a foundation planted in the Aboriginal tradition of eating from "a common bowl" and a culture based on the idea of an ever expanding "inclusive circle that grows and adapts as

new people join us....Our challenge,” he concludes, “is to learn how to recognize what we have trained ourselves not to see.” (from Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*)

What we have trained ourselves not to see...Our blindness can contribute to situations where, according to former Conservative cabinet minister Jim Prentice, our government, for example, “has failed in its obligation to properly consult with and accommodate First Nations” over proposed tar sands pipeline plans, routes and contingencies, as well as tankers on the north coast and Fraser River watershed. Prentice called it “complacency and shortsightedness”—there is “no way forward,” he wrote, “on West Coast access without the central participation of the First Nations of British Columbia.” And having not taken its constitutional obligations seriously, the government and petroleum companies now face the opposition of over 130 First Nations and First Nations organizations (as well as the BC government, the NDP Opposition, environmentalists and this congregation). “The Northern Gateway pipeline,” wrote Jeffrey Simpson of the *Globe and Mail*, “is dead.” (Simpson, “You heard it here...,” *Globe and Mail*, October 5, 2012)

Monologue or dialogue? Complacency of engagement? Working only with what our Foreign Minister called “our true friends” or “eating from a common bowl” and “expanding a circle that grows and adapts as new people join us?” There is, I believe, a similarity between the annoyance and surprise of both government and multinational corporations over First Nations opposition to pipelines and tankers, and the response to the election results last month for the chief of the Tsawwassen First Nations chief just south of here. The business community, local and provincial governments and the media thought that the incumbent Kim Baird was a shoe-in for another term as band chief. What no one had counted on was that a 23 year old, T-shirt wearing wood carver had any chance to win, but he did.

When asked why he thought the surprising election went the way it did, Bryce Williams said he was “more culturally involved in the community....I’m a carver and a singer and a dancer, and I’m going to bring that back here—our culture.” I want to bring “our community together” and “our culture back to where it was in the past....I think that message had a big impact on the votes.” (Gary Mason, “23-year-old elected chief...” *Globe and Mail*, September 7, 2012)

If we are, according to John Ralston Saul, “a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government,” I would suggest that the time is now for all levels of government, the business, media and cultural communities to “recognize what we have trained ourselves not to see:” that some things like treaty rights and indigenous knowledge and practices—what Tsawwassen’s 23 year-old chief calls “our culture”—may well be more deeply true to who they (and we!) are than the economic and political bottom line. That is the main message of our own Charter and of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Eating from a common bowl and expanding an inclusive circle—through dialogue, engagement, and a commitment to peace, fairness and good government—this is our heritage and our gift—both Canada’s and, I believe, the United Nations when we are at our best. May we cherish this heritage, this gift, and dedicate ourselves to opening our eyes and handing along this precious endowment to the coming generations so that they will one day rise up and call our names blessed.