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THE RIGHT TO MANAGE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: A CANADIAN FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVE

*By Wes Stevenson**

Education has always been part of the traditional life of indigenous societies. Each society possessed important knowledge about the world around them. Knowledge was vital to survival and to all aspects of traditional life including language, food, coping with the elements, healing, regulating family and community life, dealing with other tribes, and spirituality. To ensure that knowledge was not lost, each society developed its own unique educational system that was used to pass information on from one generation to the next. This transference resulted in strong indigenous societies for thousands of years.

Since contact with the non-indigenous world, the vast majority of our societies have struggled. Some have deteriorated and others have become extinct. In most cases the introduction of a foreign educational system was imposed on the indigenous populations. As a consequence, most traditional systems have been lost along with a great deal of the histories, languages, traditions and ceremonies.

Today many nations have articulated the right of indigenous peoples to exist as distinct cultures. The indigenous peoples of the world appreciate that recognition and support. However, for this right to become a reality it must include the right of indigenous peoples to reclaim control of their own education systems. Education helps us all to analyze, interpret and understand, but for indigenous peoples it must do much more. It is our one last hope of survival as distinct peoples.

Education must help preserve and transmit the traditional knowledge and values that are the foundations of our cultures. Only with the foundation intact will we be able to rebuild and/or sustain societies so they can contribute to and build the greater societies of tomorrow. A nation is only as strong as its individual communities. If a segment of the nation is not healthy, it affects the whole. Today we have a host of unhealthy indigenous societies resulting from years of destructive colonialist practices and policies, as well as education systems that have failed to protect and address the needs of these distinct cultures.

Canada and many other countries have long recognized the importance of primary and secondary education, and they have made it available to all their citizens as a basic human right. Many feel that this should be sufficient for everyone, both indigenous and non-indigenous. But all education is not the same. Education has hurt us and education has helped us. It is part of the problem and it is part of the solution. Fire that cooks our food and the fire of napalm are both called fire. But they are not

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the same. In the same way, not everything we call education is the same. There can be education for assimilation and there can be education for self-determination.

Education for assimilation is built on the delusion of racial and cultural superiority. For several generations Canadian First Nations individuals, families and communities have experienced something called education that has assumed non-indigenous culture and knowledge are of great value and are to be learned while our indigenous culture, language and knowledge are of no value and to be forgotten. The effects of this perversion of education have been devastating. Its legacy continues to haunt us in many ways today in forms of social, health and economic problems.

One hundred years ago the government of Canada and the Indian leaders negotiated ownership of Canada. This was a new concept to our people—ownership of land. In our view, the land was given to us by the Creator to be used and shared by all peoples. Regardless, our ancestors were forced to enter into treaties to divide and share this beautiful country. Therefore, they looked ahead with wisdom and vision and they saw a changing world. To the people newly arrived from Europe our leaders said, “Let us put our minds together and see what kind of world we will make for our children. We will share the land with you. You will share schools, medicine and tools for making a living in the changing world.”

As early as this, our leaders recognized the need for us to live in two worlds—one foot in our own and one foot in the other. They saw education as a key to the future, but they never thought of education as an assimilation tool. Education was supposed to be used to help our people become strong and equal in the new society.

Many of our indigenous brothers and sisters do not have treaties that recognize their rights. Although our treaties in Canada have many short falls, and although the government continues to erode promises of the past, the treaties have provided us with some protection. Today many of our Indian bands run their own primary schools, a smaller number have their own secondary schools and there are a few who own their own community and tribal colleges. As well, there is one national university level indigenous institution in Canada... the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. In 1995 it became the 76th institution to be added to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada's membership. In all of these cases, the First Nations of Canada have taken ownership and responsibility for educating their own and it is working very effectively.

In the very complex world we live in, a post-secondary education is becoming as necessary as a high school education was twenty years ago. Rights to university education can be looked at as a human right, and in Canada, a treaty right. Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain their language, culture and way of life. Post-secondary education has become a necessity in the struggles to preserve their indigenous life-style and culture.

The treaties that the Government of Canada made with Indian people in Canada go beyond basic human and indigenous rights. In exchange for taking 99% of our land, it committed itself to equally vast educational obligations. In the words of Alexander Morris, the Queen's treaty negotiator, “Your children will be taught, and

then they will be as able to take care of themselves as the whites around them.” (Morris, 1862) The essence of these words is the commitment to equal educational attainment for Indian and non-Indian people. This commitment cannot be fulfilled in today’s world without a strategy that enables indigenous people to obtain a university education based on self-determination. The right to manage their own institutions is a critical piece of that strategy.

The assimilation model, most clearly seen in the residential school experiences where indigenous children are taken from their families and placed in an imposed system, is a brain-washing model of education. This practice around the world has proven to be ineffective long-term and economically and culturally devastating to both the indigenous peoples and the countries in which they live. The result has been social and economic dysfunction, and often conflict and rebellion.

I wish to tell you about the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College since it is a model of best practices. It is an example of what post-secondary education for self-determination can achieve when indigenous control is allowed. However, since Canada does not recognize Indian post-secondary education as a treaty right, this is also an example of some of the problems that are faced when controlling our educational institutions is not a legislated right or where policy is non-existent.

The SIFC was established in 1976 with 7 students. In the 1970’s there were only a handful of indigenous students who had chosen post-secondary education as an option. The SIFC now has close to 1600 students, four campuses and 35 programs of studies. Our student body is multi-cultural and multi-lingual. We have students from all parts of Canada and from many parts of the world representing many different nationalities. We offer certificates, degrees and graduate programs in areas such as Indian Studies, social work, health sciences, business, fine arts, literature and communications. In two weeks at our next convocation we will have graduated our 2000th student.

SIFC is governed by an autonomous Board appointed by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. The Federation is the provincial Indian government body represented by the 72 chiefs of the province. We are owned and controlled by them. They have helped us preserve our integrity and success by ensuring that delivery of our academic programs is holistic in nature. We have embedded our values, culture and unique perspectives into our curriculum. Our Elders who are part of the staffing compliment teach us our culture, traditions and ceremonies. Our Academic Counselors ensure that the students succeed as they make their difficult transition from rural Indian reserves to an urban academic environment. Our students are made to feel that their cultures are equally respected. For these reasons we have gained a high success rate.

Despite our success and because the Government of Canada does not recognize post-secondary education as a treaty right, the SIFC operates well below the financial levels of the rest of Canada’s universities and colleges. We receive an annual “research grant” from the Department of Indian Affairs. It is through this research grant that our existence is justified. In practical terms this has meant that

there has been no long-term commitment to SIFC's funding. Each year the college must wait to see how much money it will have to operate and if in fact it will be funded at all. Regardless, we have grown and matured over the past 23 years even while operating in a government policy vacuum which funds us at 30% of what other Canadian universities receive.

This lack of resources is being strained further by an ever increasing demand. As I said earlier, SIFC has grown tremendously since its establishment in 1976. The indigenous population in Canada, like most indigenous populations in the world, is young and growing rapidly at a rate this is much higher than the general population. The increasing numbers of university-aged students combined with the growing success of our primary and secondary schools in preparing more students for university means that in the foreseeable future there will be increasing pressure on SIFC to expand its capacity.

Aside from the cultural, social and human rights arguments, there is a strong economic argument for Indigenous peoples to manage their own educational institutions. Effectiveness and success has been proven many times over. It has also been shown that wage and employment disparities between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations disappear. This provides for a strong, healthy economy in an era where globalization is stretching the resources of every country to keep expanding to sustain its quality of life. Those countries in the future that cannot equip their entire people with the tools to contribute will find themselves lagging behind the rest of the world.

A strong case can also be made for indigenous controlled education by looking at the benefits of preserving and fostering traditional knowledge. Living in harmony with the environment, an holistic approach to health, herbal medicines, family and community values and spirituality are all parts of traditional indigenous life that can be of immeasurable value to our out-of-balance world.

But these arguments have all been heard before and, as powerful as they are, they should not be what sways governments to establish indigenous rights to manage their own educational institutions. It is our basic right to survive as peoples, as distinct cultures, that must be recognized. And for us to survive we must have our values, our interpretations, our languages... our institutions. Only when we reclaim control of educating our own children can we be assured that our culture with its traditional values, knowledge and unique approaches to life will survive for the benefit of our peoples and the world.

At the end of the day, education is about power and whether the majorities are stable and confident enough to share that power. I dare to guess that human rights alone will never be enough to push governments to accept the fact that indigenous peoples should manage their own institutions, even if the effectiveness and success rates are indisputable. Economics and politics will be the reason governments provide indigenous peoples with the financial resources and tools to manage their own institutions. Those few governments who take a lead role and who have the foresight to allow their Indigenous peoples to manage their own institutions will be rewarded

with educated indigenous graduates who will contribute to the building of their countries' economies and standard of living, and who help strategically position their countries to deal with the global challenges of the next millennium.