

May 14, 2003
Economic and Social Development
Catherine Thunderbird (Coast Salish)



Chairman, Panel, Brothers and Sisters,

I welcome you to Turtle Island.

I direct the permanent forum to take action on the issues I am going to address.

Indigenous people are not Canadian, American, Brazilian, nor Africans. We are Fulani, Apache, Sioux, Coast Salish, Cuenca, Zulu, Iroquois, Deni, Kapo, Haida, Katchuwa, Luo, Inga, Menominee, Sami, Can Nocha Maoli, Massai, Gama La Roy, Matis, and many more...

We are the children of mother earth with a history spanning centuries. Our way of life is a love of her body, her fruitfulness, and an abundance of all that we needed. We have a great respect for Mother Earth. She fed us, clothed and sheltered us. Our languages were not Spanish, English, or French but of many tongues; some of which are forgotten today. And I urge the panel for a need to adopt a linguistic program in our native tongues so that our youth and children can learn before any more of our languages become extinct. Because at one time it became illegal to practice our native tongues and culture, much was lost to us. So the youth of yesterday grew up without their native tongues. I hope that someday with the help of the forum this will change. And now we must seek our way back to the path of our roots.

We were considered pagans and heathens by the invaders of our lands, yet they were the ones who raped, killed, and pillaged lands and devastated sacred mountains. I ask you, who was the heathen? What of our children of today and our children not yet born? What lies ahead for our indigenous children, what is their future?

Where alcoholism, drug addiction, physical and sexual abuse is ramped and a way of life. Where they are oppressed and depressed and seek to take their young lives and are often put in forced homes? We needed to do something yesterday, so I beseech you Chairman, panel to take action on this issue before we lose anymore of our youth. There are young girls and women giving birth to babies with fetal alcohol syndrome (F.A.S). There is a lack of nourishment, and decent shelter, and a lack of funds for future education is non-existent.

I have a mom on the Pine Ridge Reservation . Her name is Geraldine Janis. She is 79 and active in political affairs. She was there at Wounded Knee. Her concerns for her people, the children and youth is over-whelming for her and how to get people to truly hear and to listen to the plight of the indigenous children of Pine Ridge. Pine Ridge, the poorest reservation in the nation, is an outrage to society. In this day and age where on our own lands, people live in total luxury...it boggles my mind...while others live in the

streets and in sub-standard housing. How do we expect children and youth to overcome their obstacles laid before them? How is this going to be solved, and when is this going to be solved? What does it take to penetrate the minds, hearts, and spirits, to encourage us to find a solution for yesterday?

Every two weeks on the Pine Ridge Reservation the BIA gives them 44 to 57 dollars to live on. Some receive food stamps, they receive commodities, which include sugar, salt, lard, cheese, powdered milk, one chicken per family per month, one bag of fruit, one pound of beef, Christmas and Thanksgiving they are given a tiny little ham. This is why on Pine Ridge and other indigenous people who eat this type of food are coming down with an epidemic proportion of diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer, heart condition, and asthma. People may say why don't they get jobs? South and North Dakota is surrounded from the four directions by racism. They feel that Indians are stupid and lazy. Two years ago an eleven-year old boy was murdered by a sheriff, no charges...and there are many more unsolved murders. Also, look at what happened to Leonard Peltier. This would never happen in a non-indigenous culture where the media would jump on it like maggots. So there are no job opportunities for those on the reservation in South Dakota where there is a 85% unemployment rate.

History books? What do they record? What are our children taught in school? Nothing but lies of indigenous people. It is not our history. It is the history the invaders want you to hear. Left to our own devices, if we had had an equal hand when the invaders first set foot on our lands, we would have overcome all adversity and obstacles. But due to the fact of their weaponry, here in what you call America, we have become a true minority. It is amazing how we are your forgotten children, pushed in the dark corner of politics like lepers. Though they push and take away our land, we will not go away. They take our children, cut their hair, change their clothes, and give them a new tongue. Well, we will not go away. One day, the spirit within them will cause them to seek out their elders and then they will learn what they have tried to destroy.

But we will not go away.

In conclusion, when we come together at the forum or conferences, we are seized by the moment of euphoria and as time goes by it fades. I urge you like the runner in the marathon, we need to continue to run the race even if you have to crawl to the finish line.

Thank you.