



*Between Us
It's a Question of Fairness*

*Entre Nous
C'est une Question d'Équité*

***Opening Remarks to the
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
May 2002***

Quey, bonjour, and hello,

Mr. Chairperson, distinguished members of the Permanent Forum, fellow representatives of Indigenous Peoples, ladies and gentleman,

First, on behalf of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, let me congratulate you on your appointment and election and we trust you will accomplish the important work that you have been mandated to do.

My name is Patrick Brazeau and I am thankful for being given the opportunity to speak and address the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues with you today.

The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is a National Organization representing the interests of Aboriginal people living outside reserves in Canada. This constituency comprises approximately of 800,000 people and has been affected by national policy and legislation in Canada that attempts to impose definitions of Aboriginal People. Many of our members have been arbitrarily excluded from our cultural communities, lands and access to programs and services aimed at Aboriginal People.

CAP has been active in speaking for the excluded, for the marginalized urban and rural population of Aboriginal People in Canada.

The Congress is currently focused on getting partnerships established with our national government in various social and economic policy issues such as labour market development, health, while also being active on key issues affecting our fundamental rights as individuals and as peoples.

CAP is very encouraged by the realization of this Forum and regards it as an important place to share ideas in developing policy with National governments and to bring key issues of concern to Indigenous Peoples the world over in their relationships with the United Nations.

Indigenous Peoples around the world have been seeking representation on the international level for many years. For the first time in history, Indigenous Peoples will have the opportunity to participate directly in their own capacity, in the work of an official United Nations body. With the creation of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Indigenous Peoples will be able to do just that, to participate and to be heard on levels relating to economic, social, cultural, political, civil, educational and developmental issues. The establishment of the Permanent Forum is a major step forward for Indigenous Peoples and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is excited to participate at this Forum and to possibly aide in shaping the future work of the Permanent Forum.

In Canada, Indigenous Peoples still find themselves in vulnerable situations due to the effects of colonization. Four years after Confederation in 1867, the process of shrinking the size of the Indigenous population in Canada began, with the Indian Act as the instrument used by the federal government. The Act became an internal colonial device used to regulate and control the affairs of Indians and lands reserved for them. In 1991, the Canadian federal government appointed a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to investigate the situation of these peoples. Five years of inquiry, deliberations and testimonies brought about the most extensive Report on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. Six years have gone by since the Report concluded and very few of the Commission's recommendations have been implemented. Therefore, the most extensive work done on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada has been fundamentally ignored.

The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples wants to formally acknowledge good work done by various UN agencies. Like the International Labour Organization (ILO) which is in the process of initiating an Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Fellowship Programme. This will undoubtedly contribute to the strengthening of the capacity of Indigenous Peoples in engaging in meaningful and informed participation at all levels of development and policy processes affecting them.

We encourage the work done by the World Health Organization (WHO), governed by the World Health Assembly in positively responding to the global objectives of the International Decade by re-affirming its continuing commitment on requesting its regional bodies to address the deplorable health situations and conditions of Indigenous Peoples. It is encouraging that the WHO Secretariat, in its last report (WHA 54/33), acknowledged the advisory mandate of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to the bodies of the UN system.

We are excited that the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, at article 4 of the Declaration and paragraph 14 of the Action Plan that the term, "indigenous peoples" was adopted, despite hesitation by some States.

These are just a few examples of what UN agencies are doing which illustrate the following:

- 1) that there is good work being done out there;
- 2) that there needs to be more work and research conducted with the full and equal participation of UN agencies, governments and Indigenous Peoples.

It is vital that partnerships include all the players involved on an equal basis in order to achieve sustainable development for our future generations.

The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples played a monumental role and was a key participant in the World Conference on "Science for the 21st Century: A New Commitment" which took place in 1999. The Congress helped ensure that the use of scientific knowledge should respect human rights in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and further emphasized that use of scientific knowledge should respect and maintain life in all its diversity.

After decades of exclusion in the UN's body, we now find ourselves before the Permanent Forum as a means of bringing our concerns on the international level. We know that in order to have a higher universal standard we must turn to the world community. Matters such as human rights, we owe our highest allegiance to the international community.

In conclusion Mr. Chairperson, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples supports the establishment of the Permanent Forum, we acknowledge the importance of this body for all Indigenous Peoples and the history we are all experiencing but we would also like to stress the need for a follow-up system on the Forum's recommendations and the need for resources to ensure that the Permanent Forum will be fully functional, such as building relationships with Indigenous Peoples so that recommendations brought forth are paid attention to and not ignored. We are here, we want to participate, contribute and benefit. We've been a long time waiting.

Meegwetch, merci and thank you.