

Statement by Canadian Observer Delegation  
to the 4th Session of the Working Group  
on Indigenous Populations

August 1, 1985

Madam Chairman,

The Canadian observer delegation supports the decision which you announced at the first meeting of this session on behalf of the working group to start at this session the elaboration of principles on those areas of concern which are listed in the work plan, namely, the right to education, culture and religion. Because, these issues are important as well as complex ones, we believe that the standard setting work of this session should focus on them on the basis of an in-depth analysis by the working group of their contents and implications.

It strikes my delegation that much time has been spent during this fourth session in hearing a considerable number of statements; because of this we, observers, may have made it difficult for the working group to devote as much time as it might have wished to such in-depth analysis and reflection.

My delegation fully shares the wise and timely comments made yesterday by the representative of the government of Argentina and also those expressed so eloquently this morning by Ambassador Calero of Brazil; overly ambitious targets could in our view jeopardize the depth and seriousness of such an analysis. To attempt this year to put on paper principles on too many - and complicated - issues without a thorough and full review and study of these issues may give the appearance of progress; but it could also jeopardize the early acceptance by the international community of a document which must reflect the circumstances and needs of all concerned, on the basis of the serious and careful treatment of vital and complex concepts.

With these considerations in mind, I would now like, on behalf of the Canadian observer delegation, to make some specific remarks on the rights of indigenous populations to develop their own cultures and languages and to education.

In his opening comments to the working group the head of the Canadian delegation noted the important steps that Canada has taken to assist Canada's Indians. Inuit and Metis to preserve and enhance their traditional cultures, languages and religions, and to receive education

which is appropriate to their special cultural and linguistic needs. I would like to discuss briefly how these important issues, which the Canadian government is already addressing daily at home, might be reflected in an eventual international instrument regarding the rights of indigenous populations.

As was also noted in our opening comments Canada's aboriginal populations share with all Canadians basic constitutional and legal guarantees, most notably in this context freedom of religion and free access for all to primary and secondary education, as well as other basic democratic rights such as freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association. These basic rights assist Canada's aboriginal populations to preserve and enhance their aboriginal cultures and languages.

Canada would consider favourably the inclusion of these kinds of basic rights in an international instrument addressing directly the needs of indigenous populations. Without these basic rights being secure it is fruitless to consider more specific rights.

At the same time, of course, it is also important to look beyond fundamental rights and address the issue of

how to deal with the special cultural and linguistic concerns of indigenous populations.

In addressing the principles which may apply to the education and culture of indigenous populations, some basic issues which we think must be discussed include the following:

How best to preserve and enhance indigenous cultures, languages, and religions within larger societies ?

What are appropriate methods for ensuring that indigenous populations have control, and influence, over their own cultural and educational activities ?

How can the values of indigenous populations be preserved within their own communities, and shared with the broader society ?

What measures are appropriate to overcome the cultural losses experienced by many indigenous populations through history ?

These are difficult issues. But in discussing them, we may be able to reach satisfactory conclusions and

to make significant progress towards a workable scheme for ensuring that the culture, languages, and religions of indigenous populations are respected.

Such discussions must clearly face the serious issues stemming from the uneasy juxtaposition of the indigenous and the broader societies. The Canadian government is committed to the enhancement and preservation of traditional aboriginal values while still making available to those groups an equitable share in the social and economic benefits of the wider society. Accomplishing this aim requires a careful balancing, by governments and aboriginal populations, between traditional and non-traditional values. At the same time, it must be recognized that cultures evolve and develop. The challenge is to enable indigenous populations to benefit from change but still preserve their essential values.

In Canada the situation is complicated by the fact that there are many different aboriginal cultures and languages, and consequently distinct educational needs. For example, over 50 languages are spoken by Canada's aboriginal peoples. Many linguistic groups are very small, sometimes numbering only several hundred people. Clearly, in Canada at least, one set of solutions will not serve

the needs of all aboriginal groups. For example, the enhancement and preservation of indigenous languages is a necessary goal. But, can a requirement that the indigenous language be the language of instruction, be reconciled in all cases with the need to advance the social, cultural, and economic interests of the indigenous populations concerned ? In our view the answer to this kind of issue is not readily apparent.

It has been clearly shown that a key to the flourishing of culture and language is the control over one's own social, cultural and educational development. Hence, the movement in Canada towards local control of education within Indian communities, as well as other steps aimed at broader self-government. Recognizing this, Canada suggests that we should explore together, perhaps at later sessions, the sorts of principles which would link protection of the education and culture of indigenous populations with appropriate forms of local self-government for such groups.

I have only touched briefly on some of Canada's views on this issue. I look forward to hearing the opinions of other participants and working together towards standards that will well serve the special needs of indigenous populations.