

REMARKS OF NATIONAL CHIEF MATTHEW COON COME  
PERMANENT FORUM ON INDIGENOUS ISSUES  
NEW YORK MAY 13 2002

Wachiya! Greetings! Bonjour! [Short traditional greeting in Cree]

1. Champion  
2. Disruption  
3. Govt

I am honoured to have the opportunity to address this historic occasion, the first meeting of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. This meeting is the most significant achievement to date of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People.

On behalf of the Assembly of First Nations and all Indigenous peoples in Canada, I congratulate the Permanent Members on your appointment to this body. I call upon each of you individually to safeguard and assure your personal and collective independence, which is the cornerstone of your mandate and of the effectiveness of this key U.N. mechanism.

This historic Permanent Forum provides indigenous peoples with a fundamentally important international arena within the United Nations system to which to bring our issues. It is our hope that this mechanism will enable us to remind and inform the international community that like all peoples, we Indigenous Peoples have

fundamental rights that have been suppressed and ignored for far too long.

There is a need for immediate action to approve the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Most governments have already voiced their support for the existing text, which provides a minimum standard by which to address the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Only a small number of states still refuse to recognize that like all other peoples, Indigenous Peoples have inherent collective rights. It is important that the Permanent Forum now set out in its work with the existing text of the Declaration as its basic guiding standard. Indigenous Peoples. Those who believe in the indivisibility and universality of all human rights, can accept no less.

All over the world and almost without exception, we have been dispossessed in our own lands. Vast empires and wealthy nation states have been built upon the exploitation of our lands and resources, while we have been marginalized, pushed aside, and deprived of any say or control over the future of our peoples. The time has come for this unjust process to come to an end, and for the international community to work with us so we can be released from the burdens of colonization and mistreatment.

Indigenous peoples must be allowed to determine our future based on the basis of the same principles and rights that the United Nations has recognized for a being fundamental for all peoples of the world.

Like all other peoples, Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination, without discrimination. By virtue of that right, we have the right to govern ourselves in accordance with our history, our traditions, our cultures and our languages. We have the right to choose the path that we want for ourselves and our children and the generations yet to come. We have the right to freely dispose of or retain and conserve, and benefit from our own natural wealth and resources.

We have high expectations for this new entity, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. This body must act as the international manifestation and guardian of our rights. It must be a body to which we can bring our aspirations, our concerns and – yes – our grievances to the immediate attention of the international community.

We must be free to speak our minds in this place, to praise or condemn, as the case may be. And we must have access through this forum to other United Nations bodies in order to ensure that no state can treat our citizens in ways that contradict the basic precepts upon which the United Nations was founded and has evolved over the decades – the precepts of cooperation and friendly relations; freedom from oppression and colonization; freedom from discrimination and dispossession; and the right to survive, thrive and develop in peace.

The Permanent Forum must be more than a house of complaints. We must work with it and member states to develop within the United

Nations system practical steps and concrete actions that will protect and advance the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Nation States must become accountable for the way they treat the Indigenous Peoples living within their boundaries. Where there is dispossession, mistreatment, aggression or worse, this forum must be in a position to bring the issue to the immediate attention of the international community and work with all concerned to bring these things to an end.

In the long term, this forum must become the means by which we will attain equality as peoples and fair and equitable treatment around the world. All nations must come to the realization that we deserve fair and equitable treatment. The international community can no longer sanction or close its eyes to the unfair treatment of Indigenous Peoples around the world.

Canada's official policy is that the right of self-determination applies without discrimination to all peoples, including Indigenous peoples. This is a world-leading formal position, for which Canada must be commended and which it must be encouraged to export to other states. The Prime Minister of Canada, The Right Honourable Jean Chretien, has a special understanding and sensitivity regarding the plight of indigenous peoples in Canada. We acknowledge and greatly appreciate Canada's support in getting the Permanent Forum established.

However, it must also be stated that there are still many serious differences between Indigenous Peoples and Governments in Canada, and that there are gross disparities between the "Third World" situation facing Indigenous peoples in Canada on the one hand and the enviable state of development enjoyed by most other Canadians on the other.

There is still a very long way to go before the sustained wrongs of the past are alleviated in the present, and our rights and status are recognized. Certainly, Canada's Constitution recognizes and affirms our inherent and treaty rights. It even refers to us as "Peoples". But unfortunately, we have had to use the Canadian Courts in every instance to seek and obtain recognition and concrete implementations of our rights. And sadly, away from the spotlight of international diplomacy, the government of Canada has repeatedly stated to Indigenous peoples and their leaders that it is simply not interested in pursuing or addressing what it calls a "rights agenda" within Canada.

In these circumstances, all Governments must, when necessary, be called to account and even isolated within the international community. There are even extreme cases which might require some type of immediate multi-lateral response, where gross violations of basic human rights or mass dispossession are taking place.

We now have a forum to voice our concerns and grievances, and also our hopes and aspirations. Let us use it wisely and well, and ensure that the full weight of the international organization that is the United Nations is dedicated to the survival and equitable development of our peoples. We would be failing our peoples and all of humanity if we expect any less.

Meegwetch. Merci. Thank you.