

Immediate Release

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A new era of fairness, justice begins, as Canada & the U.S. endorse the UN declaration

Coast Salish leaders celebrate the promise of a new course

With President Barak Obama's announcement on Dec. 16 that the U.S. will endorse the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the recent announcement of Canada's endorsement, the international community acknowledges the right of Indigenous peoples' right to exist as peoples, nations, cultures and societies.

"The aspirations it affirms—including the respect for the institutions and rich cultures of Native peoples—are ones we must always seek to fulfill," Obama said "...But I want to be clear: What matters far more than words—what matters far more than any resolution or declaration—are actions to match those words."

Obama made the announcement on Dec. 16 to the leaders of 565 federally-recognized tribes during the White House Tribal Nations Conference. A day earlier Brian Cladoosby, chairman of the Swinomish Tribal Indian Community and president of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, was one of 12 Indian nation leaders selected to participate in closed door meeting with the president, during which Cladoosby advocated for the need for the U.S. to uphold trust responsibility to Indian nations. Speaking after the announced endorsement Jewell James of the Lummi Indian Nation said Indian Country must pause to consider the promise contained in the Declaration.

"In almost every part of our life, our culture, our tribes, we have been impacted by the relationship we have had with the United States. This is an opportunity to address some of those impacts, some of the pain and suffering," James said.

"It sets the agenda for the future changing of the relationship between us and the United States. Where our values, our teachings, our cultures, our concepts of the sacred shall have more validity in the negotiations with not just the White House, but the Congress, hopefully, in the courts and with every politician that comes after this day to represent the United States."

Two days earlier the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo received a letter from Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper expressing the willingness to convene the first Crown-First Nations meeting following Canada's endorsement of the UN Declaration on Nov. 12.

Canada announced what it called its “qualified recognition” on the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada website, stating, “after careful and thoughtful consideration, Canada has concluded that it is better to endorse the Declaration while explaining its concerns, rather than simply rejecting the overall document. It stated, “Although the (Declaration) does not reflect customary international law or change Canadian laws, Canada believes that the (Declaration) has the potential to contribute positively to the promotion and respect of the rights of indigenous peoples around the world.”

Since the endorsement, Atleo, who is a Hereditary Chief from the Ahousaht First Nation, has called the declaration a guide and a framework for defining and affirming the First Nations the rights outlined in the Declaration.

“The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is now a reality and First Nations are taking action to transform our communities, governments and our relationship with Canada,” National Chief Atleo stated on Dec. 16. “I am pleased that the Prime Minister has responded to our call to work in respectful partnership to craft concrete plans for progress on our priorities.”

The Declaration was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, is an international law that condemns the policies of colonialism and assimilation. It favors self-determination for indigenous peoples. At the 2007 vote, only four UN members—the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia—voted against the declaration, and 11 abstained. Australia endorsed the Declaration in 2008, and New Zealand endorsed on April 19, 2010.

Robert T. Coulter, who is Potawatomi and the executive director of the Indian Law Resource Center, began to work with the Six Nations drafting the Declaration in 1976, but had “no idea that one day it would be universally accepted and supported first by Indigenous peoples and eventually by the countries of the world.” After circulating among Indian nations for several years, the Declaration was presented to the United Nations. In 2007 the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration with only these four countries opposing.

Coulter said in a statement on the Indian Law Resource Center website that, “This endorsement reflects the worldwide acceptance of indigenous peoples and our governments as a permanent part of the world community and the countries where we live. The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the most significant development in international human rights law in decades. International human rights law now recognizes the rights of indigenous peoples as peoples, including rights of self-determination, property, and culture.”