

Six Nations: 'They've started a war!'

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The recent massive early morning police raid on an encampment of Indian protesters at Six Nations Reserve in Canada left little doubt that authorities in that country are ready to play hardball over Indian claims, particularly when people make a stand over long-simmering disputes.

The police action struck with abrupt violence the morning of April 20. Armed and with weapons drawn, hundreds of Ontario Provincial Police invaded the encampment, clashing with activists at approximately 4 a.m. Arrests took place and at least one clan mother was reported as injured during the assault. The Six Nations quickly regrouped and within hours, hundreds more arrived to reinforce and retake the disputed property. Tires were set ablaze on the main road, Highway 6, which runs through town.

As of the deadline for this edition, it is being reported that as many as 1,000 OPP are suiting up in riot gear for another charge on the compound, while perhaps as many Native protesters have come in to support their compatriots.

Canada, it would appear, has another Indian war in the making. Reports confirmed that the warriors at the encampment kept their no-weapons stance as police moved in. However, the early morning raid unleashed a massive wave of sympathy for the beleaguered Native occupants, who were quickly reinforced by Six Nations residents, who formed a solid line and "walked back" the police from the contested camp area.

The OPP raid was the worst possible move to make at this juncture; it has already produced an intense radicalization at the Six Nations Reserve, and a response is forthcoming from other Haudenosaunee communities.

The "end-game" raid attempt on the encampment was predictable after talks between the protesters and Canadian authorities broke down two days earlier. What is less predictable is the reaction by activists and warriors across the Six Nations, where the argumentation against peaceful protest and in favor of physical confrontation will no doubt intensify.

Shame on Canada. Shame on a policy of carrot-and-stick against Natives that promises justice but only delivers the violence of the haughty and mighty.

Canada, like most every country in the Americas, sometimes has to face the reality of its sordid policy of dismantling the rightful land properties of Native peoples. Sometimes

brusquely - by war - but in the past century, mostly by stealth and encroachment, First Nations peoples have seen first "the Crown" and then Canada pretend to own lands that were clearly Indian property and over which Indian title has not been relinquished.

Like most tribal peoples with small populations surrounded by huge numbers of non-Natives, the often divided governments on the Six Nations Reserve have not always been able to save reservation properties from being annexed by local townships, but in the ever-present tribal memory the lands in question have not been relinquished but have been taken by force or by trickery - an insult of cultural memory and these days a contentious issue as the Indian population grows and new families want to expand their generations within Indian jurisdictions.

At Six Nations of the Grand River within Ontario - the most populous Indian community in Canada - the tenacious reality of tribal memory over land ownership and lingering questions over the theft of Indian lands, first by the British Crown and then the Canadian government, exploded into a physical standoff between some traditional authorities based on the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, backed up by warrior groups from various Indian communities, and the local, provincial and federal police forces.

The standoff at the encampment to stop a housing complex on contested land is going into its second month. While the occupying group had announced a no-guns policy, the potential for further violence is high, as local residents continue to clamor for police action.

The contention over the particular tract of land goes back 165 years. It is one of several under claim by the Six Nations Band Council and forms part of the nearly 95 percent of Six Nations Reserve lands taken with impunity after promised and granted by Canada. The Six Nations Reserve contains 46,500 acres currently, less than 5 percent of the land granted to people of Haudenosaunee nations who had fought as allies to Britain in the Revolutionary War.

The study of land holding by Native and non-Native experts is quite precise, and yet opinions on recovery strategies vary among groups - within and outside the reserve.

In the present case, protest was triggered by the construction of a massive housing subdivision in Caledonia, the Douglas Creek Estates (Henco Industries), of which 10 out of a projected 600 houses have been built. A number of clan mothers and other traditional authorities, based in the confederacy, along with young leaders, sought to challenge a new reality that would seem to finalize a process of encroachment over one of several contested tracts. They called for an encampment on the land, a call accompanied by intense emotion among Indian people of all political persuasions; and many have responded, including warrior groups from reservations across the Northeast.

The encampment, which has fluctuated between several dozen to several hundred people, asserts a position that the land has been effectively "reclaimed."

The Canadian government should pay off the developer and all construction should cease. This strict Haudenosaunee position, appreciable for its righteousness, leaves little room for compromise at this time and is seen by some media as recalcitrance on

the part of a warriors' movement that has had serious clashes with Canadian law enforcement in the past.

There had also been reasonable concern for the multimillion dollar business investment made by the developer in the case, Henco Industries, who merely intended to operate within a legality guaranteed by the federal government, which has ignored legitimate claims of many Indian bands for decades.

Tellingly, the painstaking research conducted by an office of the band council over the years has uncovered a good case that the disputed land tract - Hamilton/Port Dover Plank Road - was never intended for sale but only for lease by the Six Nations government of the reserve during the 1840s.

Six Nations land issues expert Phil Montour shared this with our network: "The last correspondence of record with the government of Canada as relates to the Hamilton/Port Dover Plank Road lands was in a Six Nations meeting as held at the Onondaga Council House on October 31, 1844, in which the Chiefs explicitly stated: 'the Plank Road Lots from the River at the Caledonia Bridge to the Walpole Townline, that is lots on the west side of the Road, be kept and that the lands comprising the pieces described be leased and not sold.'"

Hopefully, increased reconciliation of strategic objectives can be forthcoming among the various Indian entities represented in the issue. An online report by Kahentinetha Horn, an impassioned Mohawk voice from Caughnawaga, detailed the rejection by the confederacy group at the encampment of some interesting points offered by the government: "Ontario representative, Doug Carr, assistant deputy minister and secretary of aboriginal affairs, told [the encampment leaders and band council representatives] what the Ontario government was prepared to offer which in part was a land swap of 6,500 acres (some land in Cayuga, Burtch and another parcel for the 130 acres at Douglas Creek." The government would also see that "water mains from the house development site be extended into Six Nations as well."

An impromptu vote by band council members at an earlier meeting with the traditional group saw the majority of the elected council agree to "let the confederacy council 'take the lead' on the Douglas Creek estates," according to Horn. The confederacy group turned down the offer by the government, reiterating their two main demands: Henco should stop building for a 90-day moratorium and the government should indemnify Henco for its loss. As for the land, it is to be considered "reclaimed" into Indian jurisdiction.

This hard-line stance by confederacy representatives is not likely to be accepted by the government, which instead has chosen the typical path of unilateral law enforcement generated partly by increasing pressure from local anti-Native groups and from Henco, which is suing the OPP to enforce the eviction of the camp.

When it comes to the Ontario government, however, lessons are not easily learned. One crucial restraint on the government should have been the lingering blotch of scandalous conduct of the OPP at the Ipperwash Camp protest of September 1995, when an unarmed 38-year-old Chippewa man was shot to death by a pumped-up constable. That

case of a judicially unjustified killing of an unarmed Native activist remains in the courts and much in the news, and has even hounded Canadian foreign diplomats abroad.

One would have thought no Canadian police force would want responsibility for another Ipperwash, but it seems the historical trend of stealing Indian land and then holding it with force remains very much a part of Canada's dishonorable history.

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