

"Oh Canada! Your Home is Native Land": The Algonquin Land Claim Process

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The land is everything to me.
The land is part of my language, part of the way I perceive the world. The water, the trees, the smell of pine, the smell of autumn, the smell of wet leaves in the spring. It is all part of my imagination, part of my dreams.
(Vizenor 1993)

The government of Canada spent years colonizing and oppressing the Algonquin Nation. Colonial practices made it illegal for us to practise our ceremonies and rituals, eliminated our medical systems and healers, prevented us from speaking our languages, geographically dispersed us, dismantled our systems of governance, disempowered our women, starved and even killed us. During this process, they also established a small group of Algonquin on a little reservation, known today as the Algonquin of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation, which represents only a fraction of the Algonquin Nation and a fraction of our traditional territory (see Figure 1). Needless to say, today the larger

Algonquin Nation consists of on-reserve and off-reserve, status and non-status and in-territory and out-of-territory members and lacks a cohesive system of governance.

The Algonquin of Pikwàkanagàn are placed in the power position of the current Algonquin treaty process, which officially began in 1991 (Sarazin 1989), because they are the only federally recognized Indians, as defined by the *Indian Act*. In addition, government borders are determining the parameters of the land claim in that the

Algonquin who live in the province of Quebec are not consulted nor included. Thus, we have the government committing cultural genocide while at the same time producing a small group of economically

deprived Algonquin who may be more than eager to sell off or trade away Algonquin land (Gehl 2004d).

"Community" meetings are set up and it is determined that the larger non-status body of Algonquin must be involved. More economically deprived Algonquin "representatives," known politically as the Algonquin Nation Tribal Council (ANTC),



Figure 1. Ontario Native Affairs Secretariat

are established and the process proceeds (Gehl 2004d). It is my opinion that some of these "representatives" fail to appreciate the role that women have in their communities and in terms of establishing legitimacy in decisions being made and thus allow men and hunting issues to dominate these meetings (Gehl 2003). It is also my opinion that some of these same "representatives" manipulate senior male members of the Algonquin Nation, using them for political decisions while inappropriately referring to them as Elders (Gehl, 2004a). Further, it appears that some of these "representatives" lack compassionate minds and take advantage of the dedication that others have in furthering the Algonquin cause (Lighting 1992).

Oddly, the meetings are confined to our territory - as defined by provincial and federal boundaries - even though through processes of colonization many Algonquin were pushed out of our territory. This is particularly the case with women and their children in that many Algonquin women lost status because of the gender discrimination encoded in the

Indian Act (Gehl, 2000). Thus, today many Algonquin children,

grandchildren and great-grandchildren reside outside their ancestral traditional territory. Not surprisingly, very few Algonquin show up to the treaty meetings of which fewer are women, yet the government claims to be

negotiating a legitimate treaty. The unfortunate thing is that others (non-Native and/or non-Algonquin) actually think they are doing the Algonquin a favour in terms of social justice, heading up the negotiating team while operating completely within a Western paradigm versus on a Nation-to-Nation basis.

The Algonquin land claim is of particular interest in that Canada's parliament buildings are situated on Algonquin land, which, as I perceive it, makes this land and issue one of the most valuable and politically significant in the country. Algonquin must remember that the Creator has given us the responsibility for this land, thus we are its keeper (see Figure 2).

It is my contention that the Algonquin need not sell their land and need not fear that this is our "last chance" as others threaten. What the Algonquin need is to demand the time to repair the present unorganized and fractured Algonquin Nation. It took the colonizer well over 300 years to create this position of weakness and it will take us longer than 10 years to repair the damage. It should be appreciated by all Algonquin, that strategically speaking, the government prefers to negotiate with Aboriginal peoples in positions of weakness such as this because it further serves their purpose of getting rid of the age-old "Indian problem."

This being said, what the Algonquin need to do is to insist on a share of the tax dollars that the provincial and federal governments have generated from Algonquin land. Further, the Algonquin need to demand back taxes for the land on



Figure 2. Gehl 1998

which the parliament buildings are located. The only way the Algonquin will become a strong and independent Nation is with our share of the resources generated from Algonquin land. With this consistent flow of resources, we will be able to draw knowledgeable Algonquin persons back to help us rebuild our once strong and independent yet inter-dependant sub-Nations. Through this process, we can begin to revitalize our traditional cultural values, re-learn our language, re-empower our women, embrace the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren born of the Algonquin women who were pushed out of their communities, as well as learn to ignore government-generated divide and conquer tactics such as on-reserve versus off-reserve and status versus non-status.

Imagine the power we Algonquin have: the parliament buildings reside on our land. Yet, many of us are poor and hungry, oftentimes resorting to eating potatoes all winter long as our only source of nutrition. On a national and international level Canada should be ashamed for what they have done and are pushing the Algonquin to do when in a position of weakness. Such symbolic power we Algonquin hold! All we need to do is harness this power. It is my contention that there is no need for the final relinquishment of Algonquin land. Canada and Ontario have already taken and/or sold more than half of our traditional territory. We deserve compensation for this land versus losing more, as they are demanding.

If the provincial and federal governments proceed as is, it serves only to prove that the history of the treaty process has *not* changed and further, that the "Statement of Reconciliation" given by Jane Stewart on January 7, 1998, calling for Canada to find ways in which Aboriginal peoples' collective identities could evolve

and flourish in the future, was an artificial and false statement just as negotiating a treaty with 10 community members is a fiction created by parliament.

Finally, the Algonquin will always have more power than money can buy simply by stating, "Parliament Hill is unsundered Algonquin land!" This is a fundamental attitude an Algonquin should have sitting at the negotiating table. This is my view and you can be sure that the federal and provincial governments do not want me at their table, as somehow I have managed not to be hungry enough.

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