

Easy Chair Denials



A Public Form on

“Dialogue, Dispute, Resolution and Democracy” by Catherine Morris

Three big easy chairs were set up on a Winnipeg stage where two well-known people in Canada sat together in a mock “living room.” This was Conflict Resolution Network Canada’s public forum on “Dialogue, Dispute Resolution and Democracy,” held June 8, 2006.

In one chair was Chief Ovide Mercredi, famous in Canada as former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, from 1991 to 1997, and currently the Chief of the Grand Rapids First Nation in Manitoba. In another armchair was seated the Very Reverend, The Honourable Lois Wilson, former moderator of the United Church of Canada and a former Canadian Senator. Both are often described as “outspoken.” They did not disappoint as they spoke about peace, peacemaking and democracy. The third chair was for the moderator,

James Christie, Dean of Theology and Global College at the University of Winnipeg.

I sat in the audience among a group primarily composed of non-Aboriginal Canadians. I confess that I am among those Canadians who have preferred not to seek out in-depth information about concerns of

past, on this occasion I found myself hearing some new things. Was this because Ovide Mercredi and Lois Wilson were saying something new? Or have I somehow acquired a new set of ears to hear what Ovide Mercredi and other Aboriginal people are saying.



The Honourable Lois Wilson

Aboriginal peoples in Canada. I have listened to many speeches by leaders of First Nations over the years. While I have not been unsympathetic in the

Who said what?

The moderator first asked “what do we mean by ‘peace’?” Lois Wilson responded by defining “the things that make for peace,” using three pictorial words for peace in the Mandarin language. The first symbol is “rice in the mouth” or economic security. The second is “roof over head” or social security. The third is “two hearts beating together in understanding and friendship.”

Chief Mercredi said the conditions of peace are not present in

Continued on page 8...

...Continued from page 7

Canada. The majority of Canadians have not yet come to terms with the fact that indigenous peoples are still "trying to recover from the destruction of their environments and imposition of foreign values" in the past.

Even today, Mercredi is trying to stop the creation of a national park in Grand Rapids First Nation territory. "The national park is a last minute bid by Jean Chretien to build his legacy," said Mercredi. "What do I care about his legacy? What right does he have to give away our land?"

He talked about Canada's contemporary use of "state force to exact compliance. ... I have seen how Canada uses its laws and police." Mercredi was referring to his involvement as a mediator in high-profile incidents of conflict at Oka Quebec in 1990, Gustafson Lake British Columbia in 1995, Ipperwash Ontario in 1995 and Burnt Church Nova Scotia in 2000. "I was there," he said.

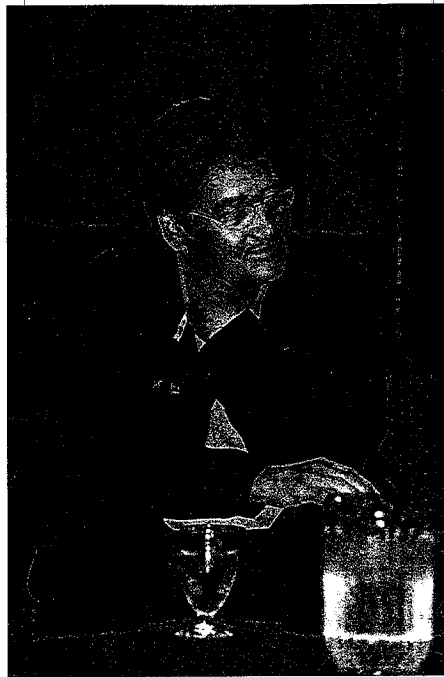
Mercredi illustrated with the current use of the term "home grown terrorists." These words are intended to "make us think in a certain way," he said. "Sometimes people exaggerate events not in the interests of peace but in the name of law and order. The media have a duty to be honest and not exaggerate. Citizens should not formulate opinions based on what they see in the news."

Recent news reports have tended to exaggerate "conflict between Muslim societies and the rest of the world," said Mercredi. In the same way, the media often "portray Aboriginal people as criminals when we are advocating for our rights." Mercredi added that "the saddest thing we witnessed in '9/11' was the loss of opportunity for people to lead the world to peace and show the way to forgiveness instead of embarking on revenge and retaliation."

Lois Wilson said that "relationships are more important than ideology" pointing out that building relationships requires a "commitment to knowing someone different from ourselves, so that we are as comfortable in their living rooms as we are in ours."

"Politicians may be allies," chastised Wilson. "There's no use belly-aching; engage them."

"I'm not a fan of Canadian democracy," Mercredi responded. "I won't sing 'Oh Canada.' I have no



Chief Ovide Mercredi

intention of ever singing it. Democracy is the rule of the majority and the imposition of foreign values on us. Our human rights and our culture are violated daily. I'm not opposed to being engaged with the political system, but I will not be an advocate of Canadian democracy because it ignores our right to self-determination as peoples."

"What are the key elements of peacemaking between indigenous peoples and dominant Canadians?" asked moderator James Christie.

"Treaties are a vehicle for peace between us and Canada," replied

Mercredi. "This is why there has been no outbreak of conflict between us and Canada. ... Canada has dishonoured the treaties, and yet we still advocate for them. On July 31, 2006 there will be a gathering at Lower Fort Garry of the chiefs of the 'numbered treaties.'" He was referring to the Post-Confederation Treaties One through Eleven made between 1871 and 1921, by which First Nations granted the federal government large tracts of land in the Prairie provinces, Northern Canada and Northwestern Ontario for agricultural and industrial development and settlement by non-Aboriginal people.

"We will meet to decide how to combat Canada for dishonouring the treaties," said Mercredi. "The treaties are the basis of our economic recovery," he said. "For example, our right to free education is our treaty right. It is dishonoured daily," he said.

"Canada's sovereignty hinges on the treaties. ... We are not engaged in improving democracy. We are engaged in securing justice from historical wrongs," he said.

What was new?

There is no news in anything said by Mercredi and Wilson on June 8, 2006. Chief Mercredi has been saying the same things for decades. He and other First Nations leaders continue to assert the distinct identity of First Nations and the need for nation to nation dialogue with Canada. Currently, "our world view is absent in the dialogue," noted Mercredi. Non-Aboriginal Canadians are often heard replying that Aboriginal matters should be treated as domestic Canadian matters and that people from First Nations should be treated equally with no more rights than any other Canadian citizen.

Lois Wilson's comments were not new, either. She has been a long-time proponent of international human

rights and democracy. In 1998 she was appointed to the Senate of Canada where she served as an independent member until her retirement in 2002. She founded the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights. Wilson is a Companion of the Order of Canada.

Apparently the media found nothing new either, judging by the lack of coverage of the event. How many non-Aboriginal Canadians are likely to pay attention to the "usual" concerns of First Nations without sighing impatiently and dismissing it as more "belly-aching"?

Also not new is the language of "combat" in Ovide Mercredi's speeches. This kind of language of struggle makes non-Aboriginal Canadians uneasy, particularly when First Nations' frustrations turn into roadblocks, as in the current dispute over First Nations land at Caledonia, Ontario. The Caledonia nonviolent direct action campaign has erupted in a few altercations that have injured some people. Many Canadians express worry and hostility when they see violence. One wonders whether Canadians heard as clearly the statements of the Six Nations Confederacy leaders, quoted in the *Globe and Mail*, saying they were disheartened by the violence and that they "don't condone violence in any form."

Ovide Mercredi has acknowledged the worries about First Nations' violence in his 1996 Mahatma Gandhi Lecture on Nonviolence: "When I ask 'what the next step is for First Nations in Canada,' the question that comes to mind for many journalists is: 'Are you going to advocate violence?' ... And even when I take great pains to explain what I mean by nonviolent direct action, they always come back to the same question: 'Are you advocating violence?' We, as a people, can't afford violence."

Mercredi uses the term "combat,"

which many conflict resolution practitioners see as inconsistent with goals of peace. But he has also been a long-time advocate of nonviolent direct action, which is recognized by most experts as having a legitimate place in the field of peacework, when it renounces the use of violence and replaces it with Gandhian methods of nonviolent struggle.

Mercredi is one among many Aboriginal leaders in Canada who have used deliberate and strategic combinations of nonviolent direct action, negotiation, mediation and advocacy to further their struggle against injustice in Canada. In 1990, Chief Mercredi helped co-ordinate efforts of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs to block the Meech Lake Accord. This campaign resulted in the famous "no" uttered by Manitoba Chief Elijah Harper, then a Member of Manitoba's legislative assembly. Known as a skilled and resolute negotiator, Ovide Mercredi participated in the constitutional discussions of 1991-92 that led to the Charlottetown Accord, which made a commitment in principle to Aboriginal rights. However, that agreement was defeated in a 1992 national public referendum. Chief Mercredi is among many Indigenous leaders who have made advocacy addresses to United Nations bodies in Geneva and New York.

What gets in the way of our hearing?

Despite Aboriginal peoples' sustained and vigorous nonviolent action, negotiation and advocacy in Canada and internationally, progress in the relationship between indigenous peoples and the Canadian government is proceeding at a snail's pace. The issues between Canadian governments and First Nations represent the oldest and most shameful public conflict in Canada. Yet, with

all the effort and international attention, why are these land, environmental and social conflicts not being resolved?

The major reason may be selective hearing. Canadians have traditionally seen themselves as "peacemakers" and definitely not as perpetrators of historic oppression. According to Dr. Paulette Regan, adjunct professor in the History Department at University of British Columbia, the Canadian "peacemaker myth" is not consistent with the history of Canada's relationships with indigenous peoples over the past century or more. Non-Aboriginal Canadians often tend to focus on fixing or "healing" what we think is wrong with Aboriginal people in order to avoid unsettling questions about ourselves – our own identity as perpetrators of violence.

A non-indigenous person, Regan says non-Aboriginal Canadians need to stop devising ways to "help" with the "Indian problem." Instead, Canadians need to look at the "settler problem" to examine our moral accountability. As a first step, we need to tell ourselves the truth about the history of injustice that is still present today.

Non-Aboriginal Canadians' responses to First Nations' concerns fall into patterns like those noted by South African sociologist Stanley Cohen in his influential book *States of Denial*. According to Cohen, perpetrators' methods of denial include statements that "it didn't happen," "it didn't happen that way," "they brought it on themselves" or "we did what we thought was right at the time." "Collaborators" say, "I had to" or "I was only doing my job." "Bystanders" may say, "it was none of my business." The willfully blind or ignorant say "I wasn't there" or "I didn't know." Meanwhile, beneficiaries of historical wrongdoing may develop a sense of entitlement to their benefits, avoiding responsibility

Continued on page 10...

...Continued from page 9

for current effects of past harms by saying that current inequities were caused by attitudes and actions of the past and that people need to bury the past and move on.

The problem with these attitudes is that most Aboriginal people in Canada still directly or indirectly experience terrible consequences of government, church, school and other policies and practices carried out by non-Aboriginal people who, then and now, for the most part live in comparative comfort and prosperity. The 2005 UN Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI) ranked Canada as the fifth most livable country in the world after Norway, Iceland, Australia and Luxembourg. Yet a 2005-2006 Canadian government report stated that applying the UN's HDI standards would rank on-reserve Aboriginal communities 68th among 174 nations.

Non-Aboriginal Canadians have been heard to say that Aboriginal people should just "pull up their socks" and stop expecting special privileges. The problem with this approach is that Canadians' comparative wealth has historically been built on lands and resources that

were the subject of historical promises by previous governments of Canada to respect indigenous peoples' land and autonomy. Overwhelmingly and consistently, these promises have been broken with disastrous economic, social and cultural consequences to Aboriginal peoples. This is why Aboriginal people in Canada find it difficult to understand how non-Aboriginal Canadians can, in good conscience, tell Aboriginal people and communities to accept the way things are and "move on."

The need for new ears

I have wondered how to account for the fact that I seem to have new ears to hear the concerns of indigenous peoples. I have also become aware that I am less uneasy about being morally uncomfortable. Perhaps this is because, for the most part, I have experienced much acceptance and patience from First Nations colleagues and students. While Ovide Mercredi's comments at the forum may seem harsh, I believe they are warranted, and they are delivered with patience and humour by someone who has proven himself

as a negotiator, mediator and non-violent strategist.

With new ears I noticed how, despite the strong presence of an articulate and highly accomplished Aboriginal leader, indigenous world views may have been subtly drummed out for the primarily non-Aboriginal audience at the Winnipeg dialogue. The event was framed within the terms of the conference title, "Dialogue, Dispute Resolution and Democracy." Mercredi's anti-democratic sentiments were dismissed by Wilson's easy retort that "democracy is all we've got!" Also, First Nations' understandings of conflict and peace are framed less in terms of "dispute resolution" and more in terms of their lengthy historic struggle for justice and reconciliation of political relationships.

Finally, the dialogue was framed within a conversation in the easy chairs of a middle-class Canadian living room. After all, aren't the informal settings of our homes the places where real dialogues take place? But who sets the topics of dialogue? What kind of "living room"? Whose place? And who's "easy"? ◆

HOW OTHERS SEE US

The international backdrop of the public forum may easily escape most non-Aboriginal Canadians' attention. There is little local Canadian news about the persistent concerns of the United Nations and international human rights groups like Amnesty International. In May 2006, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights once again noted "disparities that

still persist between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of the Canadian population in the enjoyment of Covenant rights," including employment, access to water, health, housing and education. On June 27, 2006 Amnesty International questioned the Canadian government's moves together with Australia, New Zealand, Russia and the United States, to continue to block the

adoption by the UN General Assembly of the *United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. The Canadian government now says the Draft Declaration infringes Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but the government has provided no details. The Draft Declaration has been negotiated internationally over a period of 24 years. It has been endorsed by the UN Perma-

nent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People, as well as many states, including Denmark and Norway. A coalition of Indigenous peoples from around the world recently reported they now feel "betrayed" by the Canadian government.