

David Courchene Sr.

Anishinaabe (Sagkeeng First Nation) 1926-1992

David Courchene Sr. was a renowned orator and advocate for Aboriginal people in Manitoba and Canada. Educated by his grandparents and later at Fort Alexander Residential School, Courchene worked as a hunter, trapper, and heavy machine operator until turning to politics in order to challenge the systemic discrimination and oppression that Aboriginal communities-and particularly youth-were experiencing. His inspirational speeches, tireless work ethic, and hopeful outlook inspired many; he was elected chief at Sagkeeng in 1965 and was the first Grand chief of Manitoba's First Nations when the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood (MIB; later the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs) was formed. Under Courchene, the MIB published *Wahbung: Our tomorrows* (1971), a response to Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's "White Paper," which advocated Aboriginal assimilation and the erasure of treaties. Courchene received many awards throughout his career, including an honorary doctorate from the University of Manitoba and induction into the Order of Canada. His words, actions, and legacy continue to be felt throughout all segments of Manitoba.

The following "Message of the Grand Chief" appeared at the beginning of *Wahbung* and is Courchene's message to Canadians-and Trudeau's government in particular. It speaks of the power and resiliency of Aboriginal people in Manitoba and calls for an end to assimilationist practices and policies as well as demands for a full recognition of Aboriginal rights, and self-determination. The second piece is an excerpt from an essay Courchene wrote in 1973 entitled "Problems and Possible Solutions." Written in honour of the hundredth anniversary of the signing of Treaties One and Two (which resulted in the province of Manitoba), Courchene examines the problems Aboriginal people have endured since "the coming of the white man": the failure to honour treaties, violence through colonial policies and practices, and a lack of respect. While fierce and motivated by injustice, in both these pieces most notable are Courchene's unwavering belief in hope, change, and possibility in Manitoba.

Message of the Grand Chief

We, the first people of this land now called Manitoba, are a people of indomitable will to survive, to survive as a people, strong and creative.

During the centuries in which we lived on this land, we faced many times of struggle, for the land is not always kind, and our people like any other people had to find ways to adapt to a changing environment.

These last one hundred years have been the time of most difficult struggle, but they have not broken our spirit nor altered our love for this land nor our attachment and commitment to it. We have survived as a people.

Our attachment means that we must also commit ourselves to help develop healthy societies for all the peoples who live upon this land. But we will not be able to contribute unless we have the means first to develop a healthy society for ourselves. Since the signing of the Treaties one hundred years ago, we have been constantly and consistently prevented from doing so.

Three fundamental facts underlie this paper and are reflected in all aspects of it.

First, we are determined to remain a strong and proud and identifiable group of people.

Second, we refuse to have our lives directed by others who do not and who cannot know our ways.

Third, we are a 20th-century people, not a colourful folkloric remnant. We are capable and competent and perfectly able to assess today's conditions and develop ways of adjusting positively and successfully to them.

Other Canadians must recognize these three facts.

We ask you for assistance for the good of all Canada and as a moral obligation resulting from injustice in the past, but such assistance must be based upon this understanding. If this can be done, we shall continue to commit ourselves to a spirit of cooperation.

Only thus can hope be bright that there might come a tomorrow when you, the descendants of the settlers of our lands, can say to the world, Look, we came and were welcomed, and then we wrought much despair; but we listened and we learned, we gave our support, and today we live in harmony with the first people of this land who now call us, brothers.

We hope that tomorrow will come.

-1971

Problems and Possible Solutions

It is indeed a pleasure for me to be given an opportunity to write an article in this year, the hundredth anniversary of the signing of Treaties number One and Two covering those lands held by Indians in what is now called the Province of Manitoba.

It may be of interest to note that in 1970 we all celebrated the centennial of the founding of Manitoba, a celebration that recognized that The Province of Manitoba was founded one year before the treaties were signed with the aboriginal owner of this land. One might take from that, that the treaties negotiated in 1871 were negotiated in an atmosphere of a *fait accompli* and that by virtue of the act of formation of the Province of Manitoba, white society had served notice upon Indians that they were determined to dispossess them of their land notwithstanding the agreements to be arrived at in 1871.

To fully appreciate the position of the Canadian Indian, one must consider the period prior to the white man's encroachment on the historic lands of the native people. For Centuries, Indians lived in this country, mastered their environment, and learned to live with nature, without the necessity of dominating it. Indians were an independent, interdependent, communal people who harvested the natural resources of the land to provide the necessities of food, clothing and shelter without abusing that privilege, They were largely nomadic, migrating to some extent with the buffalo, relying on one another for their security and wellbeing.

The coming of the white man significantly changed the historic balance between man and nature. The Indian became a resource for the early white explorer to exploit and, with the development of the fur trade, the white man successfully altered the Indians' traditional way of life through the encouragement of the commercial harvesting of fur-bearing animals for which the Indian was to receive trinkets, fire-water, and arms and ammunition. The pursuit of the fur industry also created elements of commercial competitiveness between Indian tribes as, in their pursuit of fur-bearing animals; they increasingly encroached upon each other's territories. The result of this was to strain relationships between tribes and to upset the historic balance between the Indian nations.

The real tragedy of the treaties and the practices of public policy by succeeding governments over the past century has been to destroy that element essential to all people for their survival, man's individual initiative and self reliance. At the point where the government designated reserves, it also suggested to people that if they stayed on such reserves, that government would in effect protect them and see that they did not suffer deprivation. A century of pursuit of such public policy finds Indian people now on the lowest rung of the social ladder not only suffering deprivation and poverty to a greater extent than any other Canadian, but also suffering from psychological intimidation brought about by their almost complete dependency upon the state for the necessities of life.

It is unconscionable not only in legal terms but in moral terms that white society has, wittingly or unwittingly, emasculated my people. You have not only denied us our traditional pursuits but you have also denied us our right to our identity and our pride in ourselves. It is impossible for any group of people to survive either economically or socially if they are compelled to live in both social and economic isolation from those who surround them. This deprivation of involvement and participation and the resulting effects of psychological depression and frustration can only be classified as the most subtle cultural genocide practiced by any people in the history of our times.

Government's lack of concern for Indian people can be clearly reflected in the past budgets of the government of Canada with respect to Indian programs. In 1946-47 the total Indian Affairs budget was 5.9 million dollars and as late as 1957-58 it was only 27 million dollars. When one considers that the generation of adult Indians presently in the work force is the product of that generation between 1946 and 1957, it is not hard to understand why many Indians of today are incapable of taking their place as contributing members of this society. It was not until the year 1966-67 that the budgets of the Department of Indian Affairs to provide for education, social services, housing and other amenities of life reached 100 million dollars and even at that time this represented an expenditure of only some 400 dollars per Indian person in Canada. It must be kept in mind in considering these figures that a

substantial portion of this money was eaten up in salaries and administration long before it was applied to the benefit of the people at the reserve level.

The end result of a century of indifference by white society finds the Indian today living in a situation of almost complete government dependence. His housing is not only disgraceful, it is intolerable. His academic achievement level is considerably below the level required to pursue almost any vocation, and his level of aspiration is considerably behind that of any of his fellow Canadians.

This then shows the bleak situation of the Indian people; a situation that is intolerable in a country that has the second highest standard of living in the world, and that is out of keeping with a country whose promise is unlimited.

While the picture is bleak, I do want to say that it is slowly but surely changing. The government of Canada is realizing more and more that there is a need for even greater investment in the human resources of the Indian people if they are to be able to achieve that level of participation that is the birthright of all Canadians. The Government of Manitoba, for the first time in its history, has begun to recognize its obligations to Indians as citizens of this province. The public at large is becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about the general indifference and apathy that has existed with respect to the first Canadian, the Indian people...

We are hopeful for tomorrow if only because for the first time in the history of Indian people, Indians are united and organized and are demanding the right of self determination, to participation, to be contributing members of this society, and to express our self-identity.

Three things are required to successfully bring about a social and economic revolution for Indian people.

First, it requires commitment on the part of the Indian people. A commitment to a process of change, a process of advancement, a process of catching up with the rest of Canadians and sharing with them in contributing to and enjoying the benefits of a productive society.

Secondly, it requires the investment of considerable sums of money on the part of the population of Canada to redress the wrongs of the past and to give opportunity to those who have been denied, so that they can catch up.

Thirdly, it requires a conscious effort on the part of the generation of today and the generation of tomorrow to minimize conflict and frustration to eliminate discrimination, to learn to understand one another, and to live in accordance with the precepts of the brotherhood of man.

To all white people I would say: dedicate yourselves to the development of an atmosphere of mutual understanding; commit yourselves to the process of redressing the ills of the past and to building for all of us a better tomorrow; open your minds as well as your hearts to the plight of your fellow man. We ask only that you approach the problem with objectivity and with an open mind; that you attempt to understand the difficulty of adjustment that is a burden the Indian must bear; that you attempt to recognize that there are no instant solutions to problems so long in the making.

If we appear to lack perception in our relationships with you it may be that you did not teach us to perceive. If we appear not to understand what you say, it may be because we were not taught to understand. If we appear slow to react, it may be because your acts have not always been creditable in our eyes and we are fearful and distrustful. If we make mistakes, it may be because our background lacks the experience of the mistakes that you have made and upon which, today, you base your judgments.

Having considered our position don't impose your solutions upon us for the experience we have endured for the last century. Don't seek solutions in isolation from those who must live with the problem but let's seek solutions together.

Don't apply corrective action. Let us apply that which we accept as being good and have defined for ourselves as a proper course of action.

Don't judge us harshly for our mistakes, for as it is said, let him who is without sin cast the first stone. Don't expect of us that which you would not expect of yourselves, and do recognize that we are, after all, human beings subject to all the human weaknesses and frailties that you are. In addition, we do not have generations of understanding in your way of life upon which to base our judgments.

Don't ask us to accept blindly and with the faith of religious fervor all that you tell us, but help us to learn to judge equitably the merits of a proposition. We ask not for your judgment but for your understanding, for we recognize the need for mutual understanding and mutual support.

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