

The term nation has particular sensitivity for many English-speaking Canadians because it is linked to the Quebec question in Confederation, but as used by Indian people it does not have separatist connotations. Rather, it means a group of people with a common language, culture and history who identify with each other as belonging to a common political entity.

Conflicting Views of History

The view of history held today by most non-Indian Canadians and the perspective held by most Indian people are almost mirror images. Indian people consider the 'discoverers' and 'explorers', in whose memory monuments are erected and postage stamps issued, to have been intruders in a land already well known to the nations that inhabited it. Indian people know their nations to have been productive, cultured, spiritual, intelligent civilizations comparable to those in Europe at the time of first contact. But they are portrayed instead as savages and pagans, unknowing of religion and needing instruction in simple tasks. Because only a one-sided, negative portrayal has been widely disseminated, non-Indian Canadians are poorly prepared to understand the perspective held by Indian people and to comprehend the background behind the distressing and unacceptable situation of Indian people in Canada today. This often leads to confrontation.

Indian people view treaties as reaffirmations of their sovereignty and rights and as agreements to allow settlement in certain areas; non-Indians regard treaties as an extinguishment of rights, an acceptance of the supremacy of the Crown, and a generous gift of land to the Indians so they might have land of their own. Indian people see Canadians respecting their own traditions and ancient doctrines such as Magna Carta, while at the same time regarding the Royal Proclamation as antiquated and Indian tradition as inappropriate for modern times.

Instead of accepting the Indian view of their own history and culture, non-Indians see only the self-fulfilling stereotypes that victimize people of the First Nations as drunks and welfare recipients, unable to practise acceptable standards of conduct and incapable of learning. That their situation has produced numerous examples of this image cannot be denied. But Canadians and their governments must understand their own part in creating the basic causes of this situation. Not only has the situation not been of the Indians' own making, but the federal government has removed from Indians the access to and control over their own resources that would allow them to take the actions necessary to end an unacceptable situation.

Particularly relevant to this report on Indian self-government is the view held by non-Indians that political structures were unknown to Indian people prior to contact with Europeans. Contrary to this view, most First Nations have complex forms of government that go far back into history and have evolved over time. They often operated in accord with spiritual values, because religion was not separated from other aspects of First Nation life. Indian nations did not generally have written constitutions, but, like England, conducted their affairs on the basis of traditions modified with pragmatic innovations. Witnesses gave evidence to the Committee of how these Indian political concepts had directly affected non-Indian institutions. Specifically, they described how the political philosophy of the Iroquois Confederacy had been incorporated into the Constitution of the United States.