

## Special News Feature

# Ellen Gabriel speaks at STU

by Veda Bowlin

Publicity posters describe her as a Mohawk Indian, an artist, freelance broadcaster, graduate of Concordia University and spokesperson for the Mohawks during the "Oka" crisis. She portrayed the characteristics of a woman, strong in her convictions and determined to continue the struggle for her beliefs - a true "custodian of the land" as the women of her nation are described.

Ellen Gabriel appeared before a capacity crowd at the Ted Daigle Auditorium, and proceeded to inform the gathering of the events of the crisis of July, 1990 at the communities of Kanehsatake, Kahnawake and Akwesasne.

She was introduced by Pat McDermott, STU Student Union representative of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) - both groups had been instrumental in inviting Ellen Gabriel to speak at the university.

Among the highlights of her address, Ellen Gabriel spoke of the unity forged among her people in response to the situation with the Quebec Provincial Police (S.Q.).

She spoke of the alliance of the Confederacy of Six Nations - the Mohawks, the Senecas, the Oneida, the Tuscarora, the Cayuga and the Onondaga.

She explained that the stand taken by them was the manifestation of the iron resistance which had always been employed whenever force

was used against them. It was the way of the traditional people to show that they would not recognize Ottawa as an authority over them, since as she stated "...the Assembly of Nations already have laws and obligations to fulfil and will not be subservient to the people in Ottawa." She was strongly critical of the role of the military in the crisis stating that "homes were vandalized, thefts were carried out and women treated brutally". She condemned these and other actions of the soldiers meted out during the "Oka" crisis.

"Apartheid exists here" - Ms. Gabriel claiming that it was on Canada's system of reservations that the South African government had modelled their homelands in that African state.

Referring to the controversy surrounding land rights, she said that the treaty signed between Britain and the Iroquois nations was still adhered to by them and that it should still be recognized by the Canadian government.

She refuted claims that Indian leaders had signed away their rights to land as she argued that Indian leaders had no such authority, rather they were the voice of the people.

In her address, Ellen Gabriel rejected the constitutional talks and their expected participation, though it was not made clear whether that position was the consensus of the Confederacy of Six Nations. She claimed that her people would rather like to see



Shown is Ellen Gabriel speaking at STU. Dave Smith photo

Indian traditional government working alongside the Canadian government. "Peaceful co-existence will never happen as long as Indian people are shunned and not granted their rights," she said.

Harshly critical of members of the government, particularly Brian Mulroney, Robert Bourassa, Jacques Parizeau and Tom Siddon, she said that their action were hurting Canada. The Department of Indian Affairs was also strongly criticized and labelled as a corrupt body. She questioned the actions of Brian Mulroney in the non-recognition of the treaty signed between Britain and the Iroquois, yet willingly sought help from that document in order to effect new policies here in Canada.

Speaking briefly of the aftermath of the crisis, Gabriel informed the audience that the communities of Kanehsatake, Kahnawake and Akwesasne, were being treated as "police states" with constant surveillance by the police and frequent over flights by army helicopters.

There have been beatings of the people there by police as recent as this month. She mentioned that 41 of her people were being tried on various charges ranging from assault and obstruction of a peace officer, to possession of weapons.

However, she failed to give details regarding the present state of legal proceedings or any information about financial or legal problems

about which rumors have been circulation. Nor did she state any concrete plans or proposals by which the Assembly of Nations would seek to bring the problem to a satisfactory end. Her speech ended with a standing ovation from the audience.

Following the lecture the audience viewed a short recording (the work of another Mohawk woman) of scenes which occurred the events of July, 1990. During the question and answer session which followed, Ellen Gabriel was called on to talk about the effects of the crisis on the children of the communities, her people's opinion of the self-government package and the controversy surrounding the loss of land rights.

She was also questioned about the "Treaty of Reconciliation" proposed by Ottawa, and which would grant self-government to the traditional people. Not much clarification was made on this issue as Gabriel said she could not speak on behalf of the Assembly of Nations.

Other questions concerned past systematic relocation of some Indian tribes which culminated in the loss of their lands. Concern was raised by Barbra Martin, of the NB Native Indian Women's Council that a similar situation might arise in this province, since land developers were examining plans for the development of an area which surrounded a burial ground for Maliseet people.

A tense moment developed

when an army officer in the audience, bluntly questioned the validity of Ellen Gabriels statements concerning acts of vandalism, theft and brutality by the army, stating that he has served during the crisis and had never witnessed or heard of any such incidents. It was later revealed that he has served in a different community while the incidents described took place at Kanehsatake (Gabriel's homeland). She invited the officer to visit the area and speak with the people, many of whom had been victims.

If Ellen Gabriel came to give her first hand knowledge of the "Oka" crisis then her objective was met. However, there are many other questions which are left unanswered.

What is the true state of affairs between the Indian people and the Canadian government? What specific agreements, if any, were made between the two parties? Can the public expect a settlement of this problem in the near future? If Quebec does become a separatist state, will this current problem be compounded?

Unfortunately, these questions could not have been answered by Ellen Gabriel so it was pointless for anyone to raise them at the meeting. One can only trust all the people involved will do some serious negotiation soon because as she stated "the young are not as patient as we were." The last thing Canada needs is another "Oka" crisis.

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