

Mercredi continues fight for native rights

Assembly of First Nations leader speaks out at Dal

BY KRISTIN MCNEILL

The sound of four young Mi'kmaq beating ceremonial drums heralded the arrival of Ovide Mercredi, the Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), to Dalhousie University.

Mercredi, who bears the scars of many political battles both within the AFN and with the Canadian government, addressed Dal students at the Law faculty last Thursday. His manner of speech was once described as "lawyer-like, but crossing over into politics, gathering its own self-conscious effects and rhythms." And this was certainly the case last week when he addressed an attentive crowd during Law Hour.

"What you have is what we lost," he began, launching into a description of the difficulties faced by aboriginal peoples in their fight for special recognition. He explained that non-native people are afraid of giving natives "special rights" in the belief that the granting of privileges to one group means a loss of rights for everyone else.

He criticized politicians for spreading a "philosophy of fear" by perpetuating this idea. Canadians are receptive to politicians' fear-mongering because shrinking governments are abandoning their role in aiding marginalized groups.

"The selfishness that we see now across the country is a response to that fear, and that sense of insecurity," he said. "People are trying to retain what they have."

A Cree from Manitoba, Mercredi is known for his moderate style in advocating native self-government for the over 600 First Nations across the country which represent some 600,000 status Indians. He is best known for his key role in the talks leading to the 1992 Charlottetown Accord in which he negotiated detailed recognition and rights for aboriginals. The accord was rejected by Canadians in a national referendum, and it was also voted down by a majority of natives, a fact which has plagued his leadership ever since.

Beyond a seemingly calm demeanour lies an aggression which has combatted perceived threats from federal and provincial governments. Representing the Québec Cree, he threatened Bourassa's government with non-violent civil disobedience if they went ahead with an expansion of hydroelectric power developments.

The summer of 1995 marked another relentless move to secure his distinct vision of native self-rule. Mercredi turned down the federal government's package for native self-rule as "too restrictive." Federal Minister of Indian Affairs Ron Irwin produced a plan which would have dismantled the reserve system through agreements with individual bands.

Native leaders across the country also voted to reject the federal government's proposal which would give native communities powers similar to those possessed by municipalities and provinces, such as health care, welfare, and police. Native leaders felt that this fell short of past demands for recognition and rights, demanding the special status within the Charter of Rights and Freedoms they had achieved in Charlottetown.

Mercredi said governments claim that accommodating native communities with self-determination is too much of a financial burden. The abandonment felt by these communities leads to a loss of faith in the government.

"We have been told by governments, successive governments for the past decade, that they cannot afford us, that the health care system is too expensive, the cost of education too high...that it's impossible for governments to meet the needs of its own citizens," said Mercredi. "But they still want their votes."

HE WENT on to speak about apathy and the lack of shared national values. Canadians tend to leave important political questions to the very leaders they don't trust, he said.

"There seems to be a drift away from the idea of accountability, even when it comes to the elections of heads of governments," he said.

The political climate of the times reflects a certain "paralysis" which may account for people being slow to recognize their participatory role in a democratic society, said Mercredi.

"Canadians, if they want to save their country, they have to become action-oriented," he said. "They have to practice their democracy."

Mercredi compared the struggle of natives for recognition and autonomy to the goals of Québec nationalists. He said Bouchard is not trying to discredit the rest of the country by advocating Québec's interests. The same, he said, holds true for native leaders who do not seek to become alienated by asking Canadians to acknowledge and respect native self-determination.

"Our people who are First Nations, we have a vision about our place in this country," he said. "And it has to do with respecting our diversity and respect for the life of the people."

CANADIANS ARE trapped into thinking of everything in terms of federal-provincial rela-

tions, said Mercredi. The two levels of government, federal and provincial, are irrelevant to First Nations communities.

"If the status quo is the answer, why is Québec leaving; why are my people suffering?" he asked.

The vision of a country running solely on the foundations of federalism is an idea he attributes partly to head of the Reform Party, Preston Manning.

"Their [Reform] vision called equality of provinces...well, pardon me, Preston, but the last time I looked...my people do not have a province. So your concept of provincial equality does not include me or the people I represent," said Mercredi.

"Why should native peoples adopt the idea of provincial equality?" he asked. "We have no reason. Because to do so is to ask them to forget an historical arrangement that was made in 1867."

CANADIAN HISTORY is laden with various episodes of assimilation. Mercredi spoke about native peoples negotiating during Confederation, implying that negotiators today share the same frustrations with their ancestors.

"In 1867, we used to bargain with the English and include certain rights...and at that time, we were fighting against assimilation," he said. "At that time, we were protecting our right to be different. And nothing has changed."

So for his people, the government's prospects of identifying native peoples in the same context as it does the provinces is unacceptable.

His last remarks were an appeal for the "grassroots" of Canada to take initiative and assume leadership.

"Our differences come in the way we organize ourselves," he said. As an afterthought, he added that every person shares a "human bond."

In light of his contributions to aboriginal communities across the country and as appreciation for coming to speak to the Dalhousie community, a member of the Dalhousie Aboriginal Law Students Society presented Mercredi with an eagle feather. In the Mi'kmaq tradition, the eagle feather is the highest honour one can receive.



Celebrating Aboriginal Awareness Week

BY WAYNE GROSZKO

"Celebrating Diversity" was the theme for the fourth annual Aboriginal Awareness Week that was presented by the Aboriginal Law Students Association (ALSA) last Tuesday through Thursday.

The following are just a few of the events which took place.

An Aboriginal Awareness Award was presented to Jane Abram, the counsellor at the Native Education Counselling Unit. The counselling unit is located at Dal and provides educational and support services to native post-secondary students.

"The award is to a person who has made a significant contribution to aboriginal education...[Jane Abram] is a mother-figure for us students," said Judy White, ALSA Vice President. "We can go to her for support, or a hug whenever we need to."

Dalhousie Law professor Patti Doyle-Bedwell spoke about the life of Anna Mae Aquash, a Mi'kmaq woman from Shubenacadie who was an activist in the American Indian Movement and was murdered in South Dakota in 1976.

Her murder remains unsolved.

On Tuesday evening, there was a Mi'kmaq film festival featuring works by Cathy Martin and Tina Young.

Wednesday morning's highlight was the Talking Circle. White described the Circle as a form of consensus-making in which participants sit on the floor in a circle and each have the opportunity to speak while the others listen.

White would not say what was discussed, because tradition requires that whatever is said in the circle stays in the circle.

Afterwards, several non-native law professors told White they thought the circle was an excellent learning tool for them, and asked questions which White felt showed a genuine interest in understanding.

Speakers on Wednesday included Murdena Marshall, a professor of Native Studies at UCCB, who spoke about "Women's Role in Mi'kmaq Society." She described Mi'kmaq society as a matriarchal system, where women had a leading role in teaching traditions to the next generation.

Everyone was invited to a free feast on Wednesday evening, with traditional drumming and dancing. Volunteers prepared mountains of traditional foods like salmon, eel, potatoes, and vegetables. Drumming was performed by the Eagle Call Drummers.

On Thursday, the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Ovide Mercredi spoke on the topic of national unity. For his inspiration to them and his work for First Nations, the aboriginal law students presented Mercredi with an eagle feather.

Bernie Francis, a linguist and member of the Membertou First Nation, was the last speaker of the week. His speech, entitled "Natural Influx of Wantables within Aboriginal Society," prompted a lively discussion.

By "wantables," he meant non-native people who want to suddenly adopt native spirituality and "play Indian," without the life-long learning that he feels is required for proper understanding of the Mi'kmaq culture.

Judy White said overall attendance was better than last year, but she was disappointed with the small number of non-native people in the audience for most of the events.

"The aboriginal students came, but we're already aware of ourselves," she said.

In contrast, both Ovide Mercredi's speech and the feast were very well-attended by non-natives.

White explained that Mercredi is nationally well-known, so he can attract a crowd. About the feast, she said, "Free food and starving students, that's easy to understand!"

White assured that Aboriginal Awareness Week will be held again next year.

"We are a diverse people, and we are going to continue celebrating our diversity," she said.