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OPINION | Canada sets lowest standard at World Conference on Indigenous Peoples

Matthew Coon Come says Canada contradicted own endorsement of UN Declaration this week

By Matthew Coon Come, for CBC News | Posted: Sep 27, 2014 10:21 AM ET | Last Updated: Sep 27, 2014 11:48 AM ET



Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come, centre, was part of a delegation attending the World Conference of Indigenous Peoples this week. (Jennifer Preston)

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Matthew Coon Come is the Grand Chief of the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) and the chairperson of the Cree Regional Authority.

The World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (WCIP), an historic two-day meeting, began on Sept. 22 at the UN General Assembly in New York.

I and other indigenous leaders attended the meeting with heads of government, ambassadors and ministers. We went there to witness and contribute to a new chapter of our history. We went to celebrate indigenous peoples' human rights and new and renewed commitments by UN members states in international law.

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Unfortunately, Canada's prime minister did not attend. Nor did any minister from Stephen Harper's government. Since its election in 2006, the government has refused to acknowledge within Canada that indigenous peoples' collective rights are human rights.

The idea for WCIP arose in 1993 at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Austria. However, it was indigenous leader Evo Morales who worked to achieve the WCIP. Upon his election as president of Bolivia in 2006, he pledged that he would propose a WCIP. It was the

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impetus of Morales that resulted in the UN General Assembly officially agreeing to hold a WCIP in 2014.

The highlight of this conference was the General Assembly's adoption by consensus of an outcome document, which includes the commitments of UN member states on a wide range of issues. Key matters are addressed such as indigenous youth, health, language and culture, access to justice, and violence and discrimination against indigenous peoples and individuals, in particular women.



Matthew Coon Come is the Grand Chief of the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) and the chairperson of the Cree Regional Authority. (CBC)

Only Canada questioned 'free, prior and informed consent'

The centrepiece of the document is the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In his opening remarks, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon declared, "I am proud that the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples during my first year in office ... that set minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of indigenous peoples. ... And we are joining forces with indigenous peoples to reach our common goals."

Regretfully, Canada was the only state in the world that chose to request an explanation of vote. In regard to the outcome document, Canada claimed it cannot accept the two paragraphs on "free, prior and informed consent," which is widely accepted in international law.

Canada implied consent may constitute some kind of absolute "veto," but never explained what the term means. Canada also objected to the commitment "to uphold the principles of the declaration," since it was somehow incompatible with Canada's constitution.

Arguments 'contradict own endorsement of UN declaration'

These arguments are false. They contradict **Canada's own endorsement of the UN declaration in 2010**, which concluded: "We are now confident that Canada can interpret the principles expressed in the declaration in a manner that is consistent with our constitution and legal framework."

Canada failed to disclose this conclusion to the General Assembly. In so doing, Canada has misled the General Assembly, member states and indigenous peoples globally. Canada has failed to uphold the honour of the Crown.

Such actions against the human rights of indigenous peoples betray Canada's constitution. Good governance is not possible without respect and protection for indigenous peoples' human rights.

'This repeated failure to consult violates Canada's duty under Canadian constitutional and international law.'

- Matthew Coon Come

Harmonious and cooperative relations —

which is also highlighted in the UN declaration — require no less.

For years, the Harper government has refused to consult indigenous rights-holders on crucial issues, especially when it involves international forums. This repeated failure to consult violates Canada's duty under Canadian constitutional and international law.

In his opening remarks, Ban declared to indigenous peoples from all regions of the world, "You will always have a home at the United Nations." Yet in our own home in Canada, the federal government refuses to respect democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

For thirty years, the James Bay Crees have always defended and advanced indigenous peoples' rights at the UN and other international forums. And we will continue to achieve success.



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Canada's low standards have not and cannot prevent the increasing influence of the UN declaration in Canada and worldwide.



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It seems like Stephen Harper is representing China and India's interests at the UN. When is someone in the UN going to set things straight?

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Yes Minister

Left it to the Elitist Harper Regime to stand out - well done Stevie! You have once again demonstrated how the Regime promotes Canada on the World Stage!

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.....achievement fail.....!.....";}' --'

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Martin Odber

"UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon declared,"I am proud that the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples during my first year in office ... that set minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of indigenous peoples. ... And we are joining forces with indigenous peoples to reach our common goals."

Has anyone noted that this person is of Korea, and that Korea has 0 indigenous peoples? He's all pro for the rights of peoples his country has no stake... » more

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CBC needs to go back to it's day of inception, when journalism and reporting the truth was the competitive edge... That all.

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Yngwie

If Harper is breaking the law,perhaps one of the Native lawyers can hold him accountable.If any PM breaks the law,they need to answer for it. As for the UN...who cares what they think? The integrity of the UN is questionable.

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Jethrine MacKae

... .. Canada/The Canadian Forces are totally consumed in providing the best of everything to the ga-zillion refugees that come to Canada non-stop.

Welcome to Toronto, Ontario, Canada:

http://www.sunnewsnetwork.ca/video/3628019079001#.U6K_3BjSsYI

Aboriginals play second fiddle to refugees.

I, on the other hand, am white, Christian Canadian born right here on Canadian soil, and I've been told by my MPP's Office and a few other Government Offices that I am EQUAL to all the illegals in the... » more

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Exoilersfan01

When you have the worst federal government in the history of Canada you will get bad results.

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Kootenay Coyote

Dear Matthew: I remember you from the La Tuque school. Well done, well said. We are all betrayed by our present miserable government.

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mike 1212

Harper and his corporate friends come first, then we'll worry about Canadian citizens and aboriginal rights

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