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A hateful outburst

A native leader's anti-Semitic remarks demand swift action
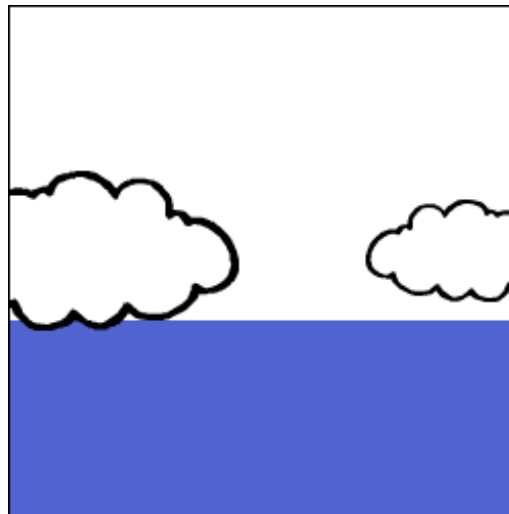
Ottawa Citizen

Tuesday, December 17, 2002

David Ahenakew's anti-Jewish diatribe was astonishing, for rarely are we confronted with such a nauseatingly graphic expression of racism -- and from a political leader, no less. Mr. Ahenakew, an Order of Canada recipient and former head of the Assembly of First Nations, called Jews a "disease" and endorsed the Nazi effort to exterminate them. "Jews would have owned the whole goddamned world," he explained.

Our astonishment also comes because Canada's aboriginal peoples know something of discrimination and ought to identify with Jews. Maurice Switzer, an official with the Union of Ontario Indians in North Bay, who has both Jewish and Indian blood, has written that the Jews were displaced from their ancestral home just as aboriginal peoples have been dispossessed in theirs. Jews lived in ghettos, aboriginals live on reserves.

So is Mr. Ahenakew simply a crackpot? He made his remarks on Friday at a Saskatoon conference on aboriginal access to health care, though what "the Jews" have to do with native health on the Prairies is not obvious. Students of prejudice will recognize that a characteristic of anti-Semitism is its hallucinatory nature. Still, Mr. Ahenakew's position as a respected, longtime community elder made his loopy outburst impossible to ignore.

Precisely because this man can't be brushed aside, the first order of business is for First Nations leaders to make clear that Mr. Ahenakew speaks for no one but himself. Every ethno-religious community, be it Jewish, Christian, Muslim or aboriginal, harbours hatemongers. The important test is how effectively the community works to marginalize those voices. The Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations should

demonstrate its contempt for Mr. Ahenakew's views by divesting him of all authority and responsibility, beginning with his removal as chairman of the organization's senate. Appropriately, Perry Bellegarde, the federation's chief, said he would recommend exactly that. Mr. Ahenakew has also been suspended from the board of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College.

Aboriginal leaders also should join the campaign, initiated by the Canadian Jewish Congress, to have Mr. Ahenakew stripped of his Order of Canada. Recipients of this honour can lose it for discreditable behaviour.

Many aboriginals already seem to understand the gravity of the offence. Matthew Coon-Come, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, yesterday came to the defence of "Jewish brothers and sisters who have in fact supported First Nations in many of our struggles." The chief of the Algon-quin People of Kitigan Zibi Anishi-nabeg issued a moving apology (see letters, page A15) and affirmed a spiritual kinship with the Jewish people whose "struggle is very similar to the fate sustained by us in our homeland." Hatred is a virus, and words of conciliation help to isolate and destroy it.

Anti-Semitism, however, as "the longest hatred," is one of the most durable of these viruses. The world has recently witnessed the desecration of synagogues across Europe, and anti-Israel rioting on university campuses. Now we have the inexplicable ravings of a native leader in Saskatoon. Something foul is in the wind. All people of goodwill need to pay attention to it.

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