



A TORTURED

speaking out to white oppressors

PEOPLE:

SPEAKING OUT TO WHITE OPPRESSORS

HOWARD ADAMS grew up in a Metis community in Saskatchewan. He attended university for three years at Berkeley, California, as the radical student movements were gaining momentum in the 1960s. There he heard Malcolm X speak, and began to apply his ideas about black nationalism to the experiences of Metis and Aboriginal oppression in Canada. In 1964, he returned to his birthplace and soon became a leader in the Red Power movement of young aboriginal people in that province. His book *Prison of Grass*, first published in 1975, became the classic expression of the politics of Red Power. The sequel to that book, *A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization*, (Theytus Books, 1995), manifests Adams's ongoing commitment to the radical politics of that period. And there is also a resonance for his ideas: within two years, the print run of 3,000 had sold out. Adams is currently working on a new edition of the book, with additional chapters on the national question and the lessons of the Zapatista movement for aboriginal peoples in Canada. What follows is an abridged chapter from *A Tortured Peoples* which describes the rise of radical aboriginal nationalism in Saskatchewan during the 1960s, reprinted by permission of the author.

When I returned to Saskatchewan in 1964, I could see that Indians and Metis were restless and ready to strike out against the hunger, oppression, and brutality created by colonization. More than twenty years had passed since I had left my ghetto, and I was now returning as a university professor. Yet, I had not forgotten the wretchedness, shame, and feelings of

inferiority that dominated my halfbreed childhood. I still harboured deeply ingrained anger against colonial subjugation. It was only natural that I joined the fight against the system that tortured my early life. I did not have to think twice about taking up the battle against our oppressors. Our defiance was long overdue.

Now that I understood my heritage and had decolonized myself, it seemed amazing that halfbreeds

had remained submissive for so many years. I appreciated why Aboriginal peoples wanted to hide from white society's mockery. We believed we were a defeated people. Our ancestors' liberation war at Batoche in 1885 was a humiliating defeat. Most of us in the St. Louis-Batoche area were descendants of Metis



warriors who fought and lost against Ottawa's mercenaries. The imperial masters brutally suppressed our right to independence, and then duped us into believing that the Metis warriors were primitive rebels and sadistic savages. Metis, like other Aboriginal groups, were crippled by a communal sense of inferiority.

Another important factor contributing to our passivity was the lack of opportunity to assemble. Our oppressors had segregated Aboriginal peoples, isolating them in widely dispersed colonies. Most communities were not near establishment institutions or centres of production and transportation. Hence, communication was extremely limited. Under these circumstances, it was almost impossible for Indians and Metis to develop a sense of group interest and feelings independent from the white man's myths that labelled us inferior and backward. Furthermore, Aboriginals did not command the resources and facilities necessary for mobilizing a political movement. The instability of poverty, of living on the edge, discouraged mobilizing. However, beginning in the 1960s, Aboriginal peoples in Canada began to summon the courage to challenge colonialism and move ahead on their own terms.

By 1967, Canada's centennial year, Aboriginal peoples were increasingly raising their voices with renewed pride and determination. In their communities, at conferences and seminars across the country, they openly talked about their plight and organized to create

change. Much of the militant political action, apart from that of the Mohawk Indians and a Kenora, Ontario group, was initially centered in Saskatchewan, where journalists covered the events and reported them to the entire nation.

As chairman of a national conference on Indian and northern education held at Saskatoon in April 1967, I opened the conference with a defiant speech. This was the first national conference in which all speakers were either Indian, Metis, or Inuit. The audience was predominantly white educators, teachers, government officials, nuns, priests, and others involved with educating Aboriginals. I began my opening remarks:

As Native people we refuse to accept the popular misconception that we, Indians, Metis, and Eskimo are the problem. It is a white problem, but more precisely, it is a Canadian problem... The schooling system of the colonizer was built to colonize and inferiorize us. It has done a very good job, and continues to do so. It rapes our children of their humanity. It destroys their psychological being so critically that they are unable to fit into either the Native or white world.

According to the agenda, the next speaker was Elijah Whitehawk, an Indian from the north, but he was missing from his seat on the platform. Finally, I addressed the audience in a troubled voice:

I am sorry and shocked to tell you that Elijah Whitehawk, our next speaker, was badly beaten up on the street by a group of punks as he was walking to the hotel. He has been rushed to the emergency hospital. We have no report on his condition yet.

The Natives were enraged. Mayor Sid Buckley quickly stepped in to save face as best he could. Together with the Chief of Police he tried to assure everyone that this "terrible incident" would be dealt with immediately, that the attackers would be brought to justice, and that Whitehawk would be given the best of care. They said they were certain the attackers were not racists. The conference resumed, but it was three weeks before Elijah was well enough to leave the hospital.

The conference created considerable controversy, generating statements that exposed the educators' racist leanings... Besides controversy, the conference also produced a number of resolutions, all of which ended up gathering dust on some bureaucrat's shelf. Nevertheless, the conference highlighted the fact that the education system was grossly inadequate and a painful experience for Native children. It also allowed natives to focus on their problem in a public

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forum, and it placed social issues in their proper context. The conference helped bolster Aboriginal pride throughout Canada. Native voices crushed, however briefly, the racist experiences that had silenced their cause for generations. Not long before, many of these same people would have probably never said a word in public.

The re-awakening of the Indians and Metis caused much public controversy as the media continued to cover our militant "Speaking Out" assemblies. In some cases, such as in Duck Lake, the media actually helped our cause by "advertising" events beforehand. The Duck Lake Pow-Wow, held June 10 and 11, was one of the largest Native celebrations of 1967. The idea for the event originated with the Indians and Metis who lived around Prince Albert, Saskatoon and Duck Lake. The weekend consisted of a five-hour talk-in featuring native and white speakers, an evening pow-wow, and the unveiling of a monument honouring five Indians and Metis who were killed in the 1885 Duck Lake battle.

The "Speaking Out" was publicized by most major newspapers, radio and TV stations. In covering the weekend, CBC reported that "Canada's Indians and Metis know where their roots are, and they're prouder of them than they've been for years. They're more conscious of themselves and their condition than at any time since the Riel Rebellion." CBC based two documentaries, Warpath of Words and The Angry Young Chiefs, on the event.

The Duck Lake event angered self-righteous Canadians throughout the na-

tion. They were startled by the Native speakers' intense anger. They were displeased with the media attention we received. The weekend symbolized a remarkable departure from the supplicant speeches of many Indian chiefs, the Uncle Tomahawks. The new generation of Native spokespersons were advocating a change in the political system and a better life of Aboriginals. The old leaders and the Indian Affairs Department were irrelevant, as far as the new voices were concerned. Young Natives were demanding Aboriginal peoples, not the white man, to govern their reserves and communities. The Duck Lake event served as a call to action.

After the massive "Speaking Out" events of 1967, Indians and Metis grew steadily more political and militant. More and more of our people were joining the movement. The Saskatchewan Native Action Committee (SNAC) represented Aboriginal youth who were aggressively demanding change. SNAC's chairman explained that: the new organization had been formed because existing Native organizations did not really represent the desires and needs of either the Indian or Metis people. The leaders of these official organizations have been brainwashed into accepting a second-class colonial status and have become Uncle Tomahawks. We know that we will never be accepted fully by the white man, so we want to build our own culture in our communities and reserves. We want our own schools, our own industries, and our own local governments with autonomy.

Nevertheless, 1967 was not the year for revolutionary upheaval. For true change to occur, the colonized must first experience a lengthy period of mobilization, and then fuel those passions and energy into political organization and class action for equality and social justice. There must also be a national political atmosphere in which the colonized masses are receptive to the idea of Aboriginal self-determination. In 1967, it was still too early; our

liberation movement was only beginning.

By late 1968, meetings, workshops, and discussion groups were springing up in Native communities across Canada. Indian and Metis youth, embittered and restless, were strong advocates for more aggressive action and "street politics." These young people were elbowing the old, safe Native leaders aside. More and more, whites could not ignore this reality.

Bitterness was perhaps one of the most significant bonds linking Canada's Natives. Bitterness made us impatient with even the most helpful whites. We did not want them speaking for us any longer. At conferences, Natives were finally asking pushy and patronizing white liberals to shut up. We insisted on keeping the Red Power movement, our liberation struggle, from being hugged to death by white liberals, who wanted to do all the speaking and lead the counter-establishment movement. Indians and Metis had at long last found their voices, and they were not about to have them drowned out by pseudo supporters. With such open determination on our side, governments began paying attention and listening to our demands.

During the formative years of the liberation movement, Native people across Canada were beginning to question old values and institutions. Our people were recognizing for the first time in a very long time that they needed to reclaim their history and economy. We began by re-assessing how colonization dehumanized us. Suddenly, we were no longer ashamed of being Aboriginal. We were fostering our own terminology and ethos, which strengthened our sense of community.

The struggle to decolonize ourselves gave our people's lives meaning, but we still had far to go, and it was clear that we would have to become increasingly political and revolutionary if we were going to succeed. As deeply colonized people we were inferiorized, timid and submissive, but we were also filled with pain and anger. We began our struggle against oppression with a roar that was heard across the nation. Shortly, the masses of Aboriginal people from coast to coast were on the march. The struggles of the 1960s had begun★

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