When Canada Says No to the UN

Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson
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Two weeks ago, Canada failed in its bid to join the UN Security Council for a two year term serving as a temporary member. Since the formation of the UN, our nation has held this seat six times. In the past, member nations have recognized our substantial contributions to the international community as a significant dues paying member of the UN, as a key, honest broker in international negotiations and disputes, and for our leadership in peacekeeping, landmine eradication and other worthy efforts.

Speculation has been rife as to why our bid for a Security Council seat failed. The government blamed Opposition political parties for back biting and half-hearted support at best. Media pundits referenced the government's outspoken advocacy of the Israeli government, the 2010 federal budget that froze its overall budget for overseas assistance for years to come, and the government's withdrawal of funding from the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) that provides aid, education and other services to Palestinian Refugees in the Near East.

Representatives of environmental organizations point to "Canada's unilateral withdrawal from the UN's legally binding Kyoto Accords treaty" (John Bennett, executive director of the Sierra Club Canada), and its "complete abnegation on climate-change policy." George Monbiot slammed Canada as a "thuggish petro-state" and the "greatest obstacle" to reaching a deal last year at the Copenhagen climate change talks. (For these quotes and a sampler of media speculation, see "Cannon blames Ignatieff for Canada's UN vote loss, CBC News, October 12, 2010. Monbiot quoted in Murray Dobbin, "Don't give Canada…", *Tyee*, September 27, 2010.) An article in the *Economist* may even have blamed our unsuccessful bid on ***doughnuts***: "[Harper], came to power in 2006 skeptical of Canada's traditional multilateralism ("a weak-nation strategy," he said) and of the U.N. itself. Last year, Harper raised eyebrows by choosing to inaugurate a [Tim

Horton's] doughnut-innovation centre rather than attend the UN General Assembly." (see Susan Delacourt, "10 reasons Canada's UN bid failed," *Toronto Star*, October 16, 2010)

Hang in there with me for a moment while to pursue this "Timbit" further. Canada's bid for the Security Council Seat can't be faulted for a lack of effort. According to media reports, "in the final days of [the bid], Canada wined and dined diplomats…[and] had a Mountie in red serge as a prop flown in so that foreign diplomats who were casting votes could get a photo with him." We offered gifts of Canadian beer, and placed these cute little maple leaf shaped bottles of syrup on the desks of diplomats in the hall of the General Assembly. And finally, the Prime Minister showed up this year and addressed the General Assembly twice (though the Hall was nearly empty. See picture http://politicsrespun.org/2010/10.) He hailed Canada as a fair minded "model global citizen," one that "hold[s] dear" the UN values of "justice and…human rights for all," and exhorted the delegates to "strive to make a significant, actual difference in the lives of the world's most disadvantaged citizens." Canada, the Prime Minister reminded the Assembly "has been a consistently reliable and responsible participant in UN initiatives around the world," and promised that Canada will "listen to [your] concerns…speak the truth, [and] act with vigour." (see Joanna Slater, John Ibbitson, PM Hails Canada…, *Globe and Mail,* September 24, 2010; "Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper addresses the 65th General Assembly...)

When casting about for the usual suspects to blame for our failure to bid successfully for a Security Council seat, there was one reason passed over without mention by political parties, pundits and in the major media. And that is Canada's refusal, three years ago, to vote in favour of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. Our nation was one of only four countries (the others were New Zealand, Australia and the United States) that opposed the non-binding declaration, which recognizes indigenous peoples' basic human rights and rights of self-determination, language, equality and land, among other rights. Since 2007, both New Zealand

and Australia have signed the treaty, and the Obama administration is reviewing the vote and working on its endorsement. That leaves us standing pretty much alone in the community of nations; alone with a government that still refuses to sign the Declaration because, in the words of Indian Affairs Minster Chuck Strahl, "we [don't] vote for things on the basis of political correctness." (see "Canada votes 'no' as UN native rights declaration passes," CBC News, September 13, 2007)

In fact, the government's "significant concerns" with the Declaration zeroed in on two treaty provisions: one that concerns lands and resources that indigenous people "have traditionally owned, occupied, or otherwise used or acquired" (from Article 26); and the second, which calls on states to obtain prior informed consent with indigenous groups before enacting new laws or administrative measures that impact those communities.

I need to tell you that work on crafting the Declaration had been underway for more than twenty years among indigenous groups and in the UN system in response to chronic discrimination and exploitation suffered by indigenous peoples around the world. And yet, just one month before the Declaration was adopted, and in total disregard for two decades of work, the "Canadian government unsuccessfully submitted a list of 30 amendments to the 46 article [text] that aimed to limit indigenous peoples' collective rights, including the rights to land and territories, and…prior and informed consent on land use," employment, health, education and other issues. Documents "released to Amnesty International under the Access to Information Act show[ed] that [our] government fought the declaration [all the way down to the wire] despite advice from its own professionals in Foreign Affairs, Indian Affairs, National Defense," all of [whom] urged the government to sign the Declaration. And I think without exception (I haven't found one yet), every First Nations and Inuit representative body in Canada, including the Assembly of First Nations, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and our own BC All Chiefs Task Force

called on our government to sign the Declaration—to no avail. (see Gale Courey Toensing, "Canada promises…," www.indiancountrytoday.com/achives/88555387.html; "UN set to adopt native rights…" *CBC News*, September 6, 2010; "Canada votes, 'no'…op. cit.; "Northern leaders slam Canada's rejection…," *CBC News*, September 13, 2007)

I have studied the official statements and debates in the General Assembly in the final lead up to the vote on the Declaration. It makes for fascinating reading. Unless I am egregiously mistaken, each of the vital concerns stated by Canada's UN representatives as reasons for voting 'no' to the Declaration were addressed and answered in the Assembly by nations as diverse as Brazil, Norway, Japan, Mexico and the United Kingdom, to name just a few; national unity and territorial integrity, the sovereignty of states, property rights, and domestic law—the Declaration would do no violence to nor impair the rights of nations to govern their own affairs.

I need to bring my remarks to a close. Just a couple of more things—and I'll end. First two quotes; here's what the delegate from Brazil said after announcing his nation's support for the Declaration: my country's indigenous people are "crucial to the development of society at every level, including the development of spiritual and cultural life for all….the State should always bear in mind its duty to protect the rights and identity of its indigenous peoples." And this from Guatemala's representative:

"the declaration…will serve as a guide for improving the living conditions of indigenous peoples. Great care has been taken to ensure that it was consistent with international law…..It does not create new rights, but reaffirms the rights of indigenous peoples, recognizing the collective right to live in freedom, peace and security….the full realization of human rights is a prerequisite for attaining peaceful and harmonious existence. The Declaration is the expression of the international community's political will…As the first instrument for the promotion and protection of indigenous peoples' human rights, it will open the door for a better future for indigenous peoples worldwide."
(see "General Assembly Adopts Declaration…," www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/ga10612.doc.htm)

In view of statements like these; in view of the care that UN delegates took to reassure Canada that its concerns had been met in the wording and intent of the Declaration; in view of this and more, our government's vaunted recent principle of "enlightened sovereignty" and our

opposition to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples begin to look and feel more like benighted exceptionalism. That is, "we're right, the rest of the world is wrong; political correctness may lead *you* to vote like a herd; but *we're* going stick to our guns and go our own way despite what you say and do; despite what our own First Nations and Inuit peoples implore us to do." When our country says 'no' to the United Nations, there will be consequences.

Today, the students from Moscrop Secondary School in Burnaby and their "UN Connections Club" have shown us an alternative to this kind of "us vs. them" attitude. I believe that they express what most Canadians feel and to which we aspire—and that is profound, positive engagement in the world as constructive international partners dedicated to achieving the principles and vision of the United Nations. I congratulate you on receiving this year's Gibbard Award; and I encourage you to keep going, not lose heart, and help this good nation of ours to regain the respect of the world, so that next time we bid for a Security Council seat we will have truly earned our place at the table.