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Advancing Canadian Foreign Policy by Addressing First Nations Issues

Canada's reputation in the world is one that envisages prosperity and equality. Yet in this dominant perspective, Canadian First Nations people as a group face similar social circumstances that developing countries face. According to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, First Nations living conditions rank 63rd in the world in the Human Development Index that was created by the United Nations (Assembly of First Nations 2010). In contrast, Canada as a whole ranked 4th in the Human Development Index (Human Development Reports 2009). First Nations people are recognizing an opportunity to project themselves and their issues to the international community. This situation is creating significant barriers to Canadian foreign policy and is tarnishing Canada's reputation in the international realm.

The desires of First Nations people are often misinterpreted in the Canadian public and this further inhibits the inclusion of First Nations elements in foreign policy. However, given that the progressive social and environmental movements many Canadians idealize are rooted in First Nations culture, the mainstream Canadian public has much to relate to

with this group. The support and recognition by Canadians of First Nations ideals can bridge its significant disconnection with current Canadian policy.

The potential breakdown in relations between Indigenous groups and the Government of Canada is illustrated by what has happened around the world. When Indigenous people are not consulted regarding issues dealing with their culture and ways of life, Canada's reputation will be weakened, as relations with other nations will be impacted as a consequence of internal political and social divisions. The H1N1 outbreak in Fall 2009 is an illustrative example. The Government of Canada sent select First Nation bands a health kit, which included body bags (BBC News 2009). The Government of Canada neglected to correspond with First Nation communities on what would be appropriate to send, a fact that only illustrates the lack of consultation with this sector of the Canadian population. This story made international headlines and created a negative image on the Government of Canada's treatment towards its Aboriginal people.

Canadian foreign policy does not incorporate First Nations perspectives, and thus the existing literature on the matter is insufficient. It would be useful to understand what policies other nations have adopted regarding their own Aboriginal population in order to fully grasp the current relationship between Aboriginal Canadians and the Canadian government. In addition, it is helpful to better understand the recognition that this demographic sector is afforded in the realm of foreign policy.

Addressing these issues would be beneficial in advancing Canadian Foreign Policy. The Canadian government recognizes that the Indigenous population in Canada is among the most advanced in relation to other Indigenous populations around the world, which totals 370 million Indigenous people (DFAIT 2008). Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT) have made efforts to integrate Indigenous relations into foreign policy through various means. These include collaborating with international organizations, wherein Canada has been engaged in efforts to improve Indigenous people's rights. Also, by strengthening the human security of Indigenous people around the world, DFAIT contributes to the protection of Indigenous peoples from conflicts. Lastly, through direct partnerships with Aboriginal communities, the Government of Canada builds opportunities for cooperation (DFAIT 2008). For example, the Indigenous Peoples Partnership Program provides opportunities for the development of partnerships and supports initiatives by both Indigenous organizations in Latin America and Caribbean region and their Canadian Aboriginal partners (Indigenous Peoples Partnership Program 2009).

Although these efforts are meaningful and have benefits to those involved, the focus is primarily on Indigenous people in other countries and they do little to effectively advance Canadian foreign policy by reducing the challenges that First Nations face. Domestically, the Government of Canada is the dominant stakeholder and thus it should focus on building partnerships with First Nations so that the barriers for their effective participation are addressed. While DFAIT has an international mandate, there is much repairing to be done within Canada, and other Canadian departments such as Indian and

Northern Affairs or Canadian Heritage are in a position to address these issues as well. It is still important to note that DFAIT's initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean are important in empowering the Indigenous people of those regions; however, the circumstances of First Nations in Canada should have priority.

First Nations groups make their presence known to the international media for various reasons which need to be understood so that resolutions can be made at the domestic level. To discuss the complete list of domestic challenges First Nations experience in their relation with the Canadian government would be too expansive and beyond the scope of this paper. Focusing on a specific challenge may set precedent for a process that the Canadian government and First Nations can adhere to in breaking down their communication barriers. One issue that is increasingly important to both parties is that of natural resources.

The Canadian Defence Security and Foreign Affairs Institute issued a report last year that described "First Nations people as a threat to the oil industry." (Digital Journal 2009) The author of the report indicated that First Nations people are likely to be a threat as a way to defend their rights. Further, he argued that these incidents will continue to happen because First Nations groups lack cooperation amongst each other. Responses by representatives of First Nations in the region indicated that the development in Northern Alberta "highlights the loss of First Nations rights in the oil industry, which includes a lack of financial compensation." (Digital Journal 2009) The impacts to health are dramatic: a First Nations representative stated in a press release that "with the entire

world now aware of the oil sands and the people of Fort Chipewyan with high rates of cancers, the oil industry and the Government are diverting attention away from the health issues” (Digital Journal 2009).

The failure to properly mitigate the various risks associated with the extraction of natural resources has contributed to these social and health problems. (Indigenous Peoples and Mining Encounters: Strategies and Tactics 2002). The corporations involved in the resource sector are a dominant stakeholder in this process and ‘sustainable empowered development’ is a concept that some corporations are recognizing as beneficial to their operations. (Indigenous Peoples and Mining Encounters: Strategies and Tactics 2002). It is issues like this that are relevant to First Nations and which they appreciate seeing the Government of Canada address.

Last summer the world watched as violent protests erupted in the Peruvian Amazon between Indigenous groups and the Peruvian military. Mining companies were granted permission to operate in a region that was claimed to be traditional territory by Indigenous Peruvians. There was no agreement or consultation with the Indigenous groups and as a result, international media reports counted more than 50 people dead and hundreds missing (Foreign Policy in Focus 2009). A foreign policy think tank by the Institute for Policy Studies pointed out that “the enormous social, political, and environmental costs of the free-trade model are no longer acceptable.” (Foreign Policy in Focus 2009) The situation in Peru illustrates the potential repercussions of what happens if Indigenous people are not consulted with on issues that deal with the management of

their traditional territory. Other countries including Canada have an opportunity to learn from these mistakes and recognize the importance of working with Indigenous peoples instead of against them. Current international markets promote the rapid exploitation of natural resources and Indigenous people are beginning to take action against these developments.

The resource sector is continually expanding and so are the possibilities for territorial disputes. Understanding some of the mutually beneficial agreements that have been established provides optimism for finding solutions to other conflicts over disputed territory.

The situation in Alaska was more progressive, as agreements were established before conflicts turned violent. As tensions rose due to the increased development of the oil industry, Indigenous Alaskans pushed the issue legally and it resulted in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971 (Indigenous People and Natural Resources 2009). The agreement gave the Indigenous people of Alaska nearly a billion dollars, which led directly to the establishment of 13 Native-owned regional corporations. These corporations, which cannot be sold and can only be inherited, were meant to expand the economic and social situations of the people, and improve their social and living conditions. The Native Corporations invested heavily in mining, which gave them the authority they wanted over their land and natural resources. This process was adopted by 27 Canadian tribes in the Northwest Territories because of its successes in giving

Indigenous people the ability to manage their resource wealth (Indigenous People and Natural Resources 2009).

The Canadian Arctic provides another effective process of how Indigenous people's role can be incorporated into foreign policy. "The Aboriginal peoples of the Arctic are no longer willing to be at the margins of political and economic life." (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2009) With new governance structures and land claim agreements in place in the Arctic, Aboriginal people are given an authoritative and effective process to participate in policy and decision making. The Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic adopted by the Inuit Circumpolar Councils made it clear that the "Inuit must be actively involved in the conduct of international relations in the Arctic." (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2009)

There is much to be learned from challenges faced by other nations with their Indigenous populations in terms of natural resources. The lack of progress in Canada in dealing with important domestic issues such as their relations with First Nations motivates this group of the population to light a shameful spotlight on the Canadian government in the international community. Many nations have dealt with challenges regarding Indigenous people in various ways. A common theme that arises from these situations is that Indigenous people want to play an active role in the management of resources on their historic territory. Canada must recognize the Arctic's active role in international relations and Canada's foreign policy and use this knowledge as a model for incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into foreign policy. The Government of Canada has an

opportunity to improve their relations with First Nations people and this could be done by incorporating this sector and their values into foreign policy for the betterment of Canada as a whole. Active participation by Aboriginal groups in the decision making process on issues that impact them is the key for gaining Aboriginal support on international issues, therefore creating solidarity with Aboriginal people on Canada's international affairs.

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