

WAHTA IDENTITY, MEMBERSHIP,
CITIZENSHIP and GOVERNANCE
CONFERENCE
FEBRUARY 24, 25 & 26, 2017

The following is a conference narrative that summarized what community participants identified as major learning from the presentations of three guest speakers.

Alisa Lomard a lawyer of Mi'kmaq ancestry gave a presentation about the Indian Act and Indigenous identity. Alisa and her colleagues Dr. Kahente Horn-Miller and Waneek Horn-Miller had previously conducted workshops in Wahta related to Membership, Citizenship, Indigenous status and Indigenous identity. Alisa and Waneek's presentations at the conference highlighted the most important points related to these topics. Kahente is a band member of Kahnawake and is a professor in the Department of Indigenous Studies at Carlton University. Joining these presenters was Rick Hill from the Mohawks of the Grand River. Rick is a well known authority on the Great Law of Peace who has lectured extensively over many years about Haudenosaunee history. Rick's presentation focused on the Great Law of Peace and its potential applications to current day governance of our communities.

On the third morning of the conference Alisa and Kahente provided an example of how one of our western communities (Carcross Tagish First Nation) located in the Yukon has over the past four decades established self governance of their community based on beliefs and values from their traditional teachings. Today they are a self sustaining First Nation who make and enforce their own laws within their territories. Since they have established self governance they have developed their resources, their membership has grown and they report that they are a more peaceful and cohesive community.

The following was developed from the comments that community members presented as key points after they had discussed Alisa's presentation and responded to their questions: What is the difference between "Indian status" and "blood quantum" for Wahta Mohawks? and what is the difference between membership and citizenship for Wahta Mohawks?

Members asked "where does blood quantum come from? Who created this method of defining who we are?" When community members realized that the government of Canada created this concept they then asked "Why is the Government of Canada telling us who we are and how to define who is a Mohawk? Why are they not allowing us to define who we are?"

Members also recognized that this issue applies to more than a definition of "Indian status" but also applies to defining community membership and who we are. Participants wondered what is the goal of "Blood Quantum?" How does it affect band membership and band citizenship? They had learned that Blood Quantum seems only to be used by Haudenosaunee communities to define membership and they questioned why this is?

Community members also recognized that in order to address these questions as a community they need to define what the commonly accepted community values are. However, participants also wondered about the Government of Canada's appetite for negotiating these issues.

In the end participants recognized there are many important questions that they believe they need to find answers to.

Following Kahente's presentation about membership, citizenship and identity community members offered the following thoughts to these questions. "What are the most important aspects of being a Mohawk from your family's perspective?" and "How can we make a stronger and more cohesive community with regards to identity and belonging?"

Community members responded to these questions by stating that they identify Wahta Mohawks as consisting of all their relations and all their family members because they want to survive into the future as a community. They warned that the guidelines for membership need to be more inclusive as opposed to exclusive.

They recognized that some interpretations of traditional laws can be more exclusive than inclusive. In order to develop guidelines and laws that will serve to strengthen and build the community we all need to learn our history and ancestry. This they believe will strengthen the individual voices and member participation in the process of building the community. Part of this will require including the voices of the youth and non-native members in strengthening the community. Some members believe that a

future governance structure might include counsellors who represent different sectors of the membership including the off community members. This appears to be the beginning of visioning a governance structure that will enable the larger membership to participate collectively in the governance of your community.

The third presentation by Rick reviewed elements of the Great Law of Peace and how this Law guided the development of the forms of governance that our ancestors had established prior to contact with Europeans. This allowed participants to compare current forms of governance that have been forced upon our communities by the Canadian Government with that of our original government structures.

Comments following this presentation from conference attendees identified that the governance we have been forced to use creates a competitive process that leads to winners and losers. Participants recognized that our traditional governance structure encouraged full community participation in governance that is cooperative and based on consensus. Many stated that 'blood quantum' should not be criteria for determining band membership. Participants identified that determining Mohawk identity and membership has to do with our connection to the land, place, language and cultural beliefs and values.

They also stated that we need to recognize all of our relations and all of our relationships. In order to achieve this, they believe that we need to develop positive and constructive dialogue and debate that will include everyone. Statements indicated that this will require creating safe environments for discussions where everyone will be respected and feel safe to express their opinions fully. This will also require that we continue to develop interpersonal skills that will enable us to develop strong leadership and governance. Through this presentation members recognized that current membership criteria can eventually lead to a dissolve of Wahta.

They believe that inclusive membership criteria will insure the continued viability of Wahta into the future. Inclusive attitudes will encourage non-native members to participate in cultural community activities so that they can teach and encourage their children to become fully participating community members. This group also envisioned that building this form of governance will empower all community members and is based on equal respectful and honest relationships that are spirit based. Decision making

processes are thorough, contemplative, patient and tolerant. Governance is tied to relationships with the land and all of our relations.

It was also noted that our current system of governance is based on competition, power and control. It tends to exploit people and is based on material profit. It also separates governance from church/spirit.

It was noted that Traditional governance in contrast is based on the Great Law which is spiritually based and is guided by values and ethics that produce cooperative and peaceful relationships.

Community members encouraged each other to become informed about community matters so that everyone can participate fully in decision making by voicing fully their opinions.

Participants identified that the colonized governance systems have been imposed on us and that we did not choose this system of governance. By in large community members have recognized that this system of governance has not served us well to create and maintain healthy communities. To the contrary these systems of governance have produced and fostered conflict and division within our communities and discouraged participation in decision making.

It was acknowledged that in contrast the Great Law and associated governance encourages community members to research issues so that we can participate in informed and respectful dialogue that eventually produces agreed to solutions. The decision making process encourages us to listen carefully to the insights of others in order to understand others perspectives deeply and broadly. These processes create relationships that are based on compassion, love, humility and forgiveness. In short, the Great Law offers a form of governance that produces more peaceful people, relationships and communities.

The final presentation provided an example of how one First Nation community in the Yukon has developed their own self governance structures that is based on their values and beliefs that formed over thousands of years preceding colonization.

This conference has provided community members with further insights into membership, leadership and governance issues that have been

previously identified during our community consultations. These were themes that community members have identified and that need to be addressed in order to create a more peaceful and sustainable community. The next steps of our community peace making process will continue to build on the foundations that have been laid to date.

In closing remarks Kevin Deer reminded us that during the constitutional debates Pierre Trudeau and Renee Levesque stated that "if you do not speak your language and practice your culture then do not demand aboriginal rights because you have been assimilated into the ruling power."