



News release
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Aboriginal Peoples and Civil Society Call for Meaningful Endorsement of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

In an Open Letter, 39 Aboriginal and civil society organizations across Canada are calling on Prime Minister Stephen Harper to endorse the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples without qualifications and in a manner consistent with international human rights law.

“Canada’s endorsement must send a clear signal that the government intends to work with Indigenous peoples to ensure that Canada’s laws, policies and practices at least live up to the minimum standards established by the international community,” says Grand Chief Edward John, First Nations Summit. “That’s why it’s very important that Canada’s endorsement of the Declaration not have limits or qualifications.”

The Declaration was adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 13, 2007 as a set of “minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world”. Like other international human rights declarations, it is considered universally applicable to all states.

Alex Neve, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada, emphasizes that “international bodies and domestic courts are increasingly relying on the Declaration to interpret Indigenous peoples’ human rights and related state obligations”. The government’s endorsement is not necessary for it to be applicable in Canada.

Canada was one of only four states to vote against the Declaration at the UN General Assembly. Since then, Australia and New Zealand have changed their positions while the United States is undertaking a public review of its position.

In the March Speech from the Throne, the government announced that it will take steps to endorse the Declaration “in a manner that is fully consistent with Canada’s Constitution and laws”.

“It’s disappointing that the federal government continues to raise the spectre of a potential conflict between the Declaration and the Canadian Constitution,” says Ellen Gabriel, President, Quebec Native Women. “The government has never been able to substantiate this claim.” Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come, Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) adds, “the Declaration is a vital tool for interpreting and implementing Aboriginal and Treaty rights in Canada’s Constitution.”

The Open Letter points out that “A central objective of any international human rights instrument is to encourage States to reform laws, policies and practices so that human rights are respected.” The letter states that limiting support for international human rights instruments to provisions that are congruent with current domestic laws “would defeat the purpose of having international standards.”

“Organizations concerned for the human rights of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and around the world want Canada to show leadership by publicly endorsing the Declaration,” says Merrill Stewart, Clerk, Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers). “At the same time, it’s in no one’s interest to have a hollow endorsement that merely confirmed an unacceptable status quo.”

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