Indian Self-Government
in the Haudenosaunee Constitution

By Chief Oren Lyons

The Haudenosaunee also known as the Six Nations by the British, and the Iroquois by the French, is a separate sovereign Nation, founded on the principles of peace, equity, and the power of the good mind.

The Confederation of the Six Nations is comprised of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Onieda, Mohawk, and Tuscarora Nations.

The Nations are divided into two houses: the Onieda, Cayuga, and Tuscaroras, are called the Younger Brothers, and the Seneca, Onondaga, and Mohawks are the Elder Brothers.

The Senecas are the Keepers of the Western Door, the Mohawks are the Keepers of the Eastern Door, and the Onondagas are the Fire Keepers of the Haudenosaunee, meaning People of the Longhouse.

The Constitution of the Haudensaunee based upon the principles mentioned before, includes the fundamental principle of representation of people in government. The Clan Chiefs, Sub-Chiefs, and Faith Keepers represent the Clans in council.

There are three principal Council Fires. The first is the Clan Council, the second is the Nation Council Fire comprised of Clan Chiefs, and finally the Grand or Great Council comprised of the Nation Councils.

The Nation Council is seated on three sides of the fire, the Well, the Younger Brothers, and the Fire Keepers. The people comprise the fourth side of the fire.

The Great Council is seated on three sides of the fire. The Mohawk and Seneca Nations are called the Well, the Cayuga, Onieda, and Tuscarora Nations are the Younger Brothers, and the Onondagas are the Fire Keepers. The people comprise the fourth side.

Decisions are reached by discussion, deliberation, and consensus. There is not a process of voting by individuals or Nations.

The selection of Chiefs is also by consensus and ratification. It is not a hereditary process but a democratic process initiated by the Clan Mother who has power of recall. The society is matriarchal thus, women's rights are institutionalized within the constitution.

The Haudenosaunee Constitution and process was a gift to our people from the Creator and is ancient beyond the land fall of Colombus. The Haudenosaunee is one of the oldest continuing democratic governments of the world.

This was symbolized by the Great Tree of Peace. The four white roots of truth reach out in the four cardinal directions of the earth. All weapons of war are buried beneath this great white pine tree, and the eagle placed on top is to warn our people of any approaching danger.

The concept of self-determination and Nation is the essence of our ancient confederacy, governed by the Great Law of Peace.

People, territory, and Nation were and are, synonymous with the Haudenosaunee.

The concepts of »inter« and »intra« Nations relations was soundly conceived in the Constitution of the Haudenosaunee. And the Great Law was at once both political and spiritual in nature. Indeed we have said that »spirituality is the highest form of politics«.

The GIANAGOWAH, the Great Law of Peace is in union with the natural or
universal law that binds all living things together. We are subject to this law, it is the process of life, and includes the mysteries of the universe. It is the great cycles of life that are perpetual and based upon the powers of the universe, sunlight, winds, rains, and the earth itself, whom we call ETENOHAH our mother, from whom all life springs and returns.

We suggest that the notions of sovereignty presented in the Frency Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen are a contradiction to freedom for human beings. The title speaks of rights of man (to us an inherent right at birth) but goes on to say that; »sovereignty resided in the Nation, no group, nor individual may exercise authority not emanating expressly there from«.

This statement shackled the universal law of freedom and right of being the creation and transferred power to the state.

We say that each individual human being is sovereign and that these sovereigns are born free as a natural right of life, and freedom begets freedom and defends freedom in the dynamic process of peace.

The French Declaration diminished man's perspective to only that of the human being, enabling him to centralize power and begin the hegenomous process of domination.

We use the term »man« advisedly because he deliberately excluded the other half of creation the woman, from his process of governmental development. Thus western law and society was perpetrated upon the principle of patriarchy.

We suggest it was at this time that the course of humanity was altered and the guidance of the natural laws were set aside for the ambitions of mankind. The great visions of our people that declared »we are responsible for the seventh generation to come«, was now being challenged by a new nationalism that aspired to riches and power at the expense of peace and tranquility for the people.

I will not attempt to mark the course of the western conceptualization of Nations, and Nation States. Suffice to say that this is a relatively new concept when compared with the human beings tenure on this earth.

Peoples became Nations, Nations became identified with territories, Nation-State developed to consolidate power, authority, and sovereignty over these territories and ideologies developed to begin hegemony over peoples' minds and territories.

Simultaneously with this development was the development and growth of Christian power, in particular the Catholic Church. Popes had enormous power, and events today are predicted upon theories and ideologies developed then.

Indigenous peoples and Nations became victims of these enormous powers coupled with the technology that enhanced military power.

Terminology was established that was used to subjugate indigenous people and Nations. Words like »civilization«, »primitive«, »tribes«, »pagans«, »savages«, »bands«, were keys in transferring information to one another, giving direction as to what style of association and governance would take place.

It was a Portuguese Pope who first used the term »enslave Allsaracens« thus uniting Christianity and the military in the colonization of the world at large.

Racism was a product of this colonization and the history of slavery need not be recounted here. But as victims we must take note and be aware of the origins of these great injustices to humanity.

Then the process of colonization took place all over the world with England and Spain leading the way. France, Holland, and Germany were also involved. Today we have only to note what language is spoken, in what new world country, to identify the colonizer.