

The Achievement of Indigenous Internationalism

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Canada's decision in 2010 to sign the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples represented much more than a change of federal government policies. The belated action, coming three years after the UN passed this historic agreement, marked the high point in the generations-long struggle for the recognition of Aboriginal rights.

The UNDRIP is a political game-changer, at a level that is under-appreciated. Under the long-standing nation state system—created under the Westphalian Treaty—Indigenous peoples found themselves embedded inside nations. While governments recognized national boundaries and agreed, short of war, not to interfere with state sovereignty, Aboriginal peoples were not recognized or acknowledged. Empires colonized Indigenous communities; national governments occupied Aboriginal lands and gave themselves legislated authority over Indigenous populations.

It is difficult, in 2012, to appreciate the degree and impact of the long-term marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Aboriginal groups had little recourse inside the nation-state, typically able only to complain to the same governments that oppressed and controlled them or to small groups of advocates or supporters. They still tried. Maori took their case directly to the Queen of England. Six Nations petitioned the League of Nations directly after World War I. Sympathetic audiences were almost impossible to find.

External non-state actors took more interest after the 1950s, joining with missionary and other church groups and a growing group of museum supporters and anthropologists who worried about the future of Indigenous peoples. The International Labor Organization provided one of the first international declarations supportive of Aboriginal peoples. In an era of growing concern for social justice, Aboriginal communities got attention as much for their systematic poverty and marginalization as for their indigeneity. This resulted in a proliferation of economic, training, housing and community-development programs, including a small number of initiatives aimed at culture preservation.

As Indigenous peoples began to organize, they found little global interest in their demands and interests. As Aboriginal questions found traction in the United Nations, few countries paid much attention or offered support. The history of the UN processes on Indigenous rights remains to be written, but the tenaciousness of Aboriginal leaders stands out. The debate over the Draft Declaration dragged on and, at times, the proposal seemed destined to die. But the remarkable collaboration between Indigenous leaders from across the planet—most of whom had had no contact before the 1980s—sustained a movement that many national governments hoped to derail.

In the case of Indigenous rights, it is becoming increasingly clear that global governance has played a major role in highlighting and sustaining Indigenous rights. Aboriginal peoples have a political prominence that seemed impossible only four years ago. Their issues have, perhaps, more international prominence than domestic resonance in many countries.

While a great deal remains to be done in Indigenous rights and life circumstances, it is important to remember that global engagement, Indigenous international activities and the United Nations played crucial roles in bringing Indigenous affairs to the political stage. It remains to be seen how Aboriginal leaders and organizations along with their main adversaries/partners and national governments will further develop from the rapidly built foundations of Indigenous internationalism.

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