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Nation-States, Indigenous Nations, and the Great Lie

In this paper I will analyse the relationship of selected indigenous nations in various parts of the world to the governments of the countries in which they are found. I have selected for analysis the United States, Canada, Chile, and Nicaragua. These countries have been selected for three reasons. One, the policies of these nation-states towards indigenous nations have all been drawn from the American governmental experience. Two, these indigenous populations share common political, economic, and social aspirations. Three, they all illustrate relationships that have resulted from what I call 'the great lie.'

In my opinion, nowhere does a *model of relations* exist between indigenous populations and nation-states that is acceptable to indigenous peoples. There are, however, hundreds of examples of nation-state and indigenous-nation relations where the dominant political and economic interests practise deception aimed at the elimination of indigenous nations. It is my intent to answer three questions in this paper: What is the great lie? How has the great lie been used by nation-states to control and then eliminate indigenous nations? Finally, what are the alternatives available to indigenous nations if they are to avoid ultimate and final destruction by nation-states?

Indian nations are made up of peoples who are the descendants of the original landlords of territories occupied for thousands of years. These Indian nations are the successor nations to great civilizations that dominated the world for thousands of years. By contrast, the nation-states within which these indigenous people are found today are political organizations that have come into existence only in the last two-hundred-year period. By various means they have sought to expand

their influence throughout the indigenous nations, surrounding indigenous peoples and establishing colonial regimes designed to confiscate indigenous lands and natural resources while suppressing and exterminating the political identity of whole indigenous nations. The contemporary reality is that indigenous nations do continue to exist, though greatly weakened, while the nation-states have grown larger, more powerful, and more threatening to the indigenous nations.

The nation-states of Canada, the United States, Nicaragua, and Chile have come to dominate and repress indigenous nations principally by means of what I call 'the great lie.' Though each of the nation-states began its existence as a politically and economically weak group of people with only a small foothold on the territory, the people of these fledgling nations used their weakness to gain help and support from the more powerful indigenous nations. Indigenous nations permitted the small and helpless nations to organize governments and even to increase their populations by allowing increased entry of political and economic refugees from other nations in Europe. During this process the great lie began to have importance as a political and economic tool for the new nations occupying indigenous territories.

As a means to gain greater concessions and aid from indigenous nations, the new European nations began the selective process of convincing indigenous peoples that it is the destiny of European nations to govern, control, and exploit the indigenous peoples, lands, and resources. The European nations, so they argued, had the right to govern the world because they were superior beings. Indigenous peoples, on the other hand, were primitive, savage, and incompetent. Indigenous peoples should be treated as non-humans. The theory was that if enough indigenous people could be convinced of their own incompetence and that their own political, economic, and cultural systems were evil, then they would reject their own indigenous nations. Once indigenous people rejected their own values and systems, they could then be drawn into the European nation and be effectively controlled.

The new European nations have worked diligently to wipe out indigenous history and intellectual thought and replace these with European history and intellectual thought. The great lie is simply this: *If indigenous peoples will only reject their own history, intellectual development, language, and culture and replace these things with European values and ideals, then indigenous people will survive.* It is from this twisted thinking that Euro-

pean nations have convinced millions of indigenous people all over the world to surrender their freedom and accept subjugation as a way of life.

Nowhere in the world has the great lie had a greater success than in the United States. After many years of writing treaties and forcing indigenous nations to agree to their contents, the United States government would systematically violate those same agreements. To excuse these violations, the United States would tell the indigenous nations that, since they were incapable of understanding the agreements in the first place, the United States would use its *own* system of justice to find a remedy for treaty conflicts – not international law or the laws of indigenous nations. Since 1831 the United States has been adjudicating disputes between itself and indigenous nations. History has demonstrated that the more dependent indigenous nations become upon American legal and political institutions, the more they experience erosion of their own governmental powers, territorial and natural-resource rights, and cultural development.

The United States did not stop at simply asserting its superiority over indigenous nations through its legal system. After 1871, when the United States unilaterally declared its intention to cease treaty-making with indigenous nations, it imposed a new concept on its relations with indigenous peoples. It asserted that the Congress of the United States would exert *plenary power* over all matters involving indigenous nations. In more direct terms, the American government declared that it would exercise absolute and unlimited political power over the internal and external affairs of indigenous nations. The United States installed a legislative dictatorship over the affairs of indigenous peoples within the newly established United States boundaries. In fact, the United States government declared indigenous governments illegal and asserted that such governments would be forcibly suppressed. Indian nations would be cut off from the world family of nations.

In 1934 the U.S. Congress enacted a law called the Indian Reorganization Act, designed effectively to replace any vestige of the original indigenous governments with governments to be designed and implemented by the United States itself. These governments would be recognized by Congress as the legitimate governments over indigenous territories. The constitutions for the American-made indigenous governments placed all of the political authority of government under the control of an appointed bureaucrat, the secretary of the Interior, and the legislative power in the

U.S. Congress. These tribal governments were granted limited powers to enact laws, but they were granted substantial powers to regulate and control tribal people on behalf of the United States. In a very real way, these tribal governments became direct extensions of the United States government, operating under U.S. laws and policies. These tribal governments in effect became colonial governments. The rules under which these colonial tribal governments operated ensured U.S. access to and control over indigenous peoples, lands, and natural resources.

Indigenous political leaders did not at first agree to the U.S.-sponsored colonial-government system. Indeed, many indigenous political leaders actively opposed U.S. intervention in indigenous political and legal affairs. Many of these leaders were able to convince their own peoples not to accept the U.S.-designed tribal-government system. Yet other political leaders within indigenous nations accepted money, guarantees of political power, and other gifts from the United States in exchange for their support of the colonial tribal-government system. While many indigenous nations retained their own government systems, a greater number did accept U.S. government authority. Now, forty-seven years later, many indigenous political leaders are questioning the wisdom of accepting U.S.-sponsored Indian governments. Indeed, many indigenous nations have discovered that under this system the rights and interests of indigenous peoples have been overwhelmingly subordinated to the interests of the United States. Tribal economies, political structures, and cultural systems have been eroded or destroyed.

Indigenous peoples in the United States have become refugees in their own land. They have become hostages to the American legal and political system. Indigenous law and political development is being vigorously suppressed. The timber, oil, coal, uranium, water, and land belonging to the indigenous nations are being used by the United States to benefit that country's goals and aspirations, while the invented tribal-government system is being used against indigenous peoples to deny them the sole use of their own property.

An American-invented educational system is being forced on indigenous populations to ensure that succeeding generations of indigenous people will have completely forgotten the existence of indigenous nations. Indigenous children are being taught that George Washington was the founding father of their nation. They are being told that their nation is the United States and that the American political system was created to

give freedom to the oppressed. They are being told that America is a beacon of freedom for all peoples. What they are not being told, however, is that the United States has sought to destroy their homeland, their history, their language, and their culture, as well as their freedom.

Deception through the great lie has permitted the United States, once a weak and defenseless nation, to become the dominant political and economic force throughout the Western Hemisphere. With their economies decimated, their governments in shambles, and their peoples in poverty, the indigenous nations now look to the United States government for help and for sustenance. The United States and its corporations say only, 'Give us your land, your minerals, your petroleum, and your water, and we will give you your freedom.' This may seem a harsh indictment of the United States, but let me remind you that if you ask about the present condition of indigenous peoples in the United States and try to explain how that condition came to be, you must conclude that it resulted from the actions of traitors among indigenous peoples, or from the actions of deceitful Europeans, or from the actions of both. I subscribe to the view that indigenous nations have been deceived by the Europeans with the help of indigenous traitors who gave their loyalty to the United States and turned against the indigenous nations.

In many ways, the situation in Canada resembles the stage of political development in the United States during the latter nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Both the nation of Canada and the nation of the United States were born of the same mother. The United States gained release from its mother over two hundred years ago. Canada has just recently severed the umbilical cord, called the British North America Act, by which it was tied to its mother. Like the United States, Canada wants to become a full-grown power able to act on its own without following the rules set down by the mother. Unlike the United States, Canada had to wait a long time before asking the royal mother if it could leave home and grow up. Everything Canada knows about conducting relations with indigenous nations it learned either from its mother or from its bigger brother, the United States. Just as the United States made agreements and broke them with indigenous nations, so has Canada. Just as the United States created a legislative dictatorship over indigenous nations, so has Canada.

Now Canada is at a crossroad. Belatedly separated from the mother, it views the indigenous nations as an obstacle. Canada cannot claim to be

an independent country unless it exercises full control over the territory within its boundaries – over, that is, all of the people, all of their land, and all of the natural resources. The indigenous nations in Canada have learned from the mistakes of their brothers to the south and they are not prepared to give Canada control over their people, lands, and natural resources. To remedy this problem, the Canadian government is now seeking to follow the example of its brother in the south by promoting the parliamentary enactment of an Indian-government act. This act is, for all practical purposes, a direct copy of the U.S. Indian Reorganization Act. In fact, the Canadian government has consulted extensively with U.S. officials over the years to learn about the model policies and approaches that Americans used so successfully in subjugating their indigenous governments.

While Canada's administrative structure is somewhat different from that of the United States, it has worked to accomplish the same goals: the elimination of indigenous nations and the substitution of Canadian-European values for indigenous values. Assimilation of indigenous populations is the essential goal. Canada will be able to achieve its goal if Canadian officials can convince the indigenous people to believe the great lie. Paradoxically, the effort to assimilate indigenous peoples politically in Canada constitutes a tacit recognition by Canada that indigenous nations are wholly outside of the Canadian federal system.

Canadian officials know that 64 per cent of the territory known as Canada belongs to the indigenous nations and not to Canada. These are unceded territories. Canada cannot exercise full national dominion without controlling indigenous people, their lands, and their resources. So what they offer in exchange is recognition of Indian governments in the Constitution and in the laws. Just as the United States instituted Indian governments for its own ends, Canada is now proposing to institute such governments. Just as the United States sought to gain control over indigenous lands, resources, and people, Canada is now seeking such control. Canada has already worked to implement the great lie by telling indigenous peoples that the Canadian Constitution can and will protect indigenous nations and prevent further erosion of aboriginal rights. But Canadian officials offer indigenous peoples no control or political power in Canada's government. Indeed, indigenous leaders must understand unequivocally that Canada cannot permit their nations to continue to exist. For, as long as they exist, they will always be a threat to Canada's sovereignty and its political integrity as a nation-state.

The Canadian government has, time and time again, officially denied that the first nations of Canada, the indigenous nations, have original claim to the vast territories that are called Canada. They have denied that the first nations have a political identity separate from that federation called Canada. Canada insists on claiming political and economic rights within indigenous territories. To admit that such rights do not exist would create a situation in which it could be argued that Canada has only an administrative responsibility towards indigenous nations. So Canada's solution is to institute the great lie. 'We will help you, brothers. Come and join us and you can be yourselves.' But look at what happened in North America to the south. Many of the brothers are not a part of the family anymore. They are part of America.

In Nicaragua, we have a very similar situation. There are three indigenous tribes in Nicaragua, the Miskito, the Rama, and the Sumu. They occupy the eastern half of the country, where they make up the majority population. Under the Somoza regime, they were told that they must 'Be Nicaraguans, not Miskitos, not Ramas, not Sumus. You must be Nicaraguans, and if you are not to be Nicaraguans, then you will be dead.' Many of the people in those tribes revolted in 1978 against the Somoza regime, even though it was sustained in power by the United States and other Western powers. It was a revolution instituted by the indigenous people against an oppressive regime.

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), Hispanic descendants, not indigenous people, who were the religious and labour leaders in Nicaragua, said, 'We will take the lead and we will save you from this madman Somoza.' So they took up the revolution against Somoza and they won in 1979, and everyone was proud, for now they were done with the oppression. The Miskitos, the Ramas, and the Sumus believed that they would now have an opportunity to have their own land and their own nations once again. But not long after the Sandinistas assumed leadership and control of Nicaragua, they went to the indigenous peoples and said, 'You are Nicaraguans. You are not Miskitos, you are not Ramas, you are not Sumus. If you are not Nicaraguans, you are dead.'

The Sandinistas offered to the Miskitos, Ramas, and Sumus a role in the new government. An organization called MISURASATA was formed to represent the more than 185,000 Indians. 'We will give you a government as a part of our government, and we will even permit you to have a representative in our government,' the Sandinistas said. They then went ahead and selected a person to represent the indigenous people in the

parliament of the Sandinistas. So, where is the indigenous nation now? In February 1981, thirty-three leaders of MISURASATA were arrested. Security forces charged that the Indians were preparing a separatist movement. The Indians want to protect their territories from exploitation, and the Sandinistas want to extract minerals and metals from Indian soils. You see, the revolution to produce an indigenous nation must continue. The same controversy exists there as exists in Canada, as exists in the United States and everywhere where nation-states and indigenous nations collide. The central issue remains: Are the goals of nation-states the same as those of indigenous nations? All we can conclude by looking through history is no, they are not. Indigenous nations and nation-states can coexist, but if indigenous nations become part of a nation-state as subordinate peoples, then indigenous nations will disappear. The nation-states' urge to exploit indigenous peoples and their resources is overpowering.

In Chile, the situation is exactly the same. The new government of Pinochet advised the Mapuche people who had occupied the territory for thousands of years, 'You must move from that territory because there is copper and tin under your ground.' The Pinochet government urged the Mapuche to become full Chilean citizens and exercise their 'equal' rights. When they would not move, the Pinochet government enacted a law that says the government has the right to take the land. All they require is that one person, not necessarily a Mapuche but one person within the indigenous territory, say: 'Yes, you can have my land,' and then the government has the authority to take it all. And so they have. One hundred indigenous communities in the last year have been devastated. Their land has been opened up for mining copper, coal, zinc, nickel, and tin to advance the interests of Chile, to advance the interests of other peoples, but not to advance the interests of the Mapuche. Even their own land cannot benefit them now. The Mapuche have never played a role in the Chilean government – they are not a part of Chile.

The proclaimed superiority of the nation-state has, in each of our examples, been used to justify the dislocation and exploitation of indigenous nations. The 'laws of nations' have been subverted by domestic rationalizations to deny whole peoples their basic rights as human beings. The myth of superiority has been used to enrich colonial populations and impoverish indigenous peoples. The patterns of oppression are essentially the same. Indigenous nations in all of our examples have been

surrounded by invading peoples leaving only tiny enclaves for indigenous homelands. Each indigenous nation seeks to secure its homeland against further invasion. Each indigenous nation is denied its right to exercise its distinct political powers. The objective of each nation-state is the same: elimination of the indigenous population as a distinct nation and the exploitation of indigenous people, lands, and resources for the benefit of the nation-state.

What can be done? The answer is simple, and perhaps that is why it is so difficult. As our elders have said over and over again, through the centuries: 'Hold on to the nation of people. Defend the nation of people against all enemies. Assert your own government; you don't have to ask for a government. You have a government. If you have no government, you have no people; then there is nothing even to argue about.' All over the world today there are indigenous populations that carry out governmental activities as separate and distinct peoples, but too many feel they must ask the nation-state to give them the power to govern themselves. The only power that exists for any people, whether it is the United States or Canada, Shuswap or Blackfoot, Miskito or Mapuche, any nation, lies in the decision of the people to take the initiative, to conjure up the strength, to assert their nationhood to the rest of the world and say, 'We are here and we do not plan to disappear. Our power comes from within and from our access to the Great Spirit.' With those two things, the indigenous nation can survive. It cannot survive by asking someone else to allow it to exist.

The great lie must be rejected and replaced by a renewed dynamic among indigenous peoples. The indigenous nations are ancient in their origins - they are the seed of humankind. They must resume their role among the family of nations to reassert the balanced values that have ensured human survival on this planet.