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Posted by ColbyTootoosis on Aug 21, 2013 in [Featured](#), [News](#)



Canadian Flag Hung Upside Down in a Powwow Grand Entry, By Colby Tootoosis

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A humble statement on the events that transpired at Manito Ahbe.

[Normally I don't write or talk about myself as far as what I do or have done in the past. Given the circumstances, I was encouraged by Last Real Indians, along with friends, to highlight a perspectives on what really happened at Manito Ahbee 2013 2nd Grand Entry - since there was speculation that what had happened was an accident... it was not. Enjoy and reflect.]

"Calling all flag carriers! Your names have been called, you know who are!" the MC announced as the arena prepared for the 2nd grand entry at 2013 Manito Ahbee powwow in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The thing about contesting powwows these days, is that they have gotten political. They have gotten political not only within the contesting of dancers and singers, but more so in grand entries being an avenue for the public speaking of political agenda's and ideals (even though I have travelled to various powwows in different territories, I can only speak from my experience of powwows close to home- the prairies north of the colonial border). Chiefs and dignitaries mostly give cliché speeches and rarely speak of nationhood,

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decolonization, and overcoming oppression. But this article is not about controversial evolvement of modern day powwows. This piece is about encouraging the utilization of every avenue possible to serve the cause of Indigenous liberation; to get Indigenous people to think critically about the relationship they have with not only oppression but reflect about themselves in who they think they are– and most importantly, to courageously take conscious action.


The reasons why we have Land (not in an in ownership sense but in a Sovereign Nation sense), Treaties, and that we are even alive is because our ancestors refused to “get with the times”. What does “get with the times” really mean, anyway? Does it mean to ignore the Consciousness of our bloodlines that is connected to our land and to identify ourselves with modern day colonial borders? Does it mean to participate with the abuse of the land by the extraction of resources and adopt same values as the colonist? Does it simply mean ignoring our indigenous values all together? Quite honestly, “getting with the times” never made sense to me when it’s used in a counter argument against those who are defending the land and following through in the inherit qualities and values of indigenous consciousness.


The reality is it is time to become the best we can possibly be and follow through with the certainty that we are Nations within a Nation. Part of that is denouncing the imposed identity that we are Canadian. My friend Jodi Kehego articulated it well when he stated “My bloodline is inherently separate from Canada in that my ancestors have been here for literally thousands and thousands of years– as apposed three or four generations”. I support this statement and also add that the Consciousness of who we are has been within our lands since the beginning of time. We can not forget this. Our young people have a political responsibility that is very likely to involve the rebelling against a strategic regime and continued agenda of oppression. Often times this rebelling evokes fear of various flavors. Fear of what ifs, what others will think, fear of being abandoned, ostracized, fear of repercussions, scolding, and oddly fear of upsetting the oppressor. In fact, it’s interesting how the oppressed always seem to apologize to the oppressor. We can connect the dots a million times within our brains and reflect on the reasons our current circumstance is the way it is. With great honor and respect to our moshums and kokums that are champions of life as they over came the genocide of residential schools– we have to step beyond the confines of our fears cross that line of comfort within ourselves.

My brother and I would tease each other when we ever we get asked to dance in the Canadian flag in grand entries, every time- not because we hate Canada or have resentment, mainly because we were taught with values and teachings of who we are in the sense of Nationhood with the Consciousness relative to the land. “Calling all flag carriers!” I walked towards the flags tying my roach ensuring it’s straight. Worst thing is to dance in the flags with a crooked roach! “I hope I get to dance in the Union Jack and not the Canadian flag,” I thought to myself as I approached the other fancy dancers. “Here!” the arena director stated, as he handed me the Canadian flag. “Aw man! Can I trade with this guy?” I said pointing to my friend who was holding the Union Jack. “Nope! Because you’ll ruin our

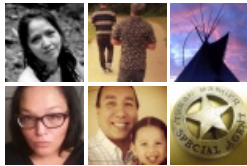
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system," he replied. Well that's why I came to the planet my friend I thought silently, "This is the most annoying flag a guy can dance in," I said. "But I'll dance it in since your giving me tobacco" I grabbed the flag and got in line.

In that moment, I decided I'm going to dance this flag in this grand entry, and I'm not going hold it high. I'm going to grip it, keep it low to the ground. In my heart and mind I thought about all the Indigenous people across the land living in struggle. I thought about the missing and murdered Indigenous women, and those who have been brutalized by the RCMP. When the song started and our line up began to move forward. An anxiety began to surface and I didn't let it faze the intention, the prayer. I danced and I danced and I danced hard right through.

Of all the times I've danced in flags the thought always came to turn the flag upside down. However with bustles, fringe everywhere, and the fact that majority of flags are tied on with strings, it always seemed to difficult to do and I never bothered. However, on this occasion on August 20th at Manito Ahbee powwow, these flags had a simple clip mechanism that can easily be clipped on and off within a few seconds. When other opportunity would I have? Without even thinking about the fact that the powwow was being live streamed or that anyone would notice, I unclipped the mechanisms and rearranged the flag in a matter of seconds with the help of my friend to my left. I kept the flag gripped till the end of the grand entry, and also during the flag song. Of course I thought about the veterans, my relatives who fought in the wars. I also remembered that Indigenous people didn't fight in the wars to protect Canada, rather to protect our Treaties with the Queen. Too often people make the mistake of believing that the numbered Treaties were created with Canada, when they are not. I can only speak in the context of Treaty six in relation to the numbered Treaties. How I've come to understand the Treaties in a deeper context is that the Treaties are not the starting point of anything new, rather the spiritual support and protection of what has always existed here. So that day I took a stand, fear came up, but I did it anyway. My heart was warm. I felt fulfilled. It was when the victory song was sung and the MC was announcing names of the staff and flag carriers to dance forward – I raised the flag. "Carrying the Canadian flag coming to us from Treaty Six Territory! Colby Tootoosis!" For the first time in all the years of carrying in that flag, I felt purposeful. Obviously I didn't think it through and I didn't think anyone would notice because everything carried on as usual. Neither did I know my friend Tim Catchaway noticed the action from the start and was taking pictures of the whole thing. Of course social media expanded the awareness of the act along with people who were watching the LIVE stream who were tweeting about it. One tweet by twitter handle @otcimaw stated "CND flag was hanging appropriately this evening, my family was chuckling..". A facebook comment stated, "I heard that long ago during treaty negotiations, if people were unhappy, they would fly the flag upside down. Maybe someone knows that story". Personally I haven't heard that story and strongly believe that people simply need to take their own conscious actions. In their own way the best way they know how. We need to expand beyond the fear that keeps us tied to the behaviors of an oppressed people.

A few hours later the powwow committee redid the flag song and victory song. "When there is a wrong we need to make it right!" the announcer declared. It's funny because I agree with that statement strongly, which is why I did what I did. The action wasn't to get attention; it was simply listening to my heart and felt like the proper appropriate action in that moment. Especially considering the current circumstances Indigenous people around the world are going through. We need to think critically about our circumstances as Indigenous people.

How can a person decide to "be the change they want to see in the world" when their perception of the world remains the same? If we want to create and be part of transformations within our Nations, we need change our perception of them. Remember the prayers of our old people go way back, the Consciousness of who we are goes back to the beginning of time. It's those prayers that continue to support us, guide us in all the goodness that we do. I feel if we all truly knew what stood next to us during times of the struggle and during the times of joy, fear would dissolve into itself and only faith will be revealed.

In Love,

Colby Tootoosis

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