

## New Politics, New Tasks: Education for Self-Government and Nation Building

Stephen Cornell\*

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Good morning, and thank you for involving me in this important event. I am not an Indigenous person, and I consider it a privilege to have been asked to speak to you this morning and to share this event with the First Peoples of this continent and, in particular, with the Dene Nation.

I am speaking to you from south-central Montana in the United States, from the traditional lands of the Apsaalooke Nation (the Crow Tribe). I want to acknowledge them and the privilege of being in their traditional homeland today. I also want to acknowledge Chief Norman Yakeleya and the Dene Nation who have made this summit happen. It is your shared concern for the future of your peoples and the future of your lands that have given this summit purpose and urgency. Thank you for including me.

I believe my job this morning is to offer some context for the discussions that you will be having about education. What I have to offer is a professional career spent working closely with Indigenous nations and organizations in North America and beyond on self-determination, governance, development, and related issues. I and my colleagues have been extraordinarily fortunate in being able to learn from a diverse group of Native nations over the years, nations that are in the process, as you are, of reclaiming their right to govern themselves and their lands in ways of their own choosing. I want to share some of what we've learned in the course of those collaborations. It seems to me that your job is to search in what I have to say for things that might be useful to you as you consider the challenge of education for new times.

I lack the history in Indigenous education that many of you have, and it would be not only inappropriate but arrogant of me to think I could tell you much about how to do the work you do. You are the experts. But please bear with me, even if some of what I have to say seems a little far afield at times, as I think my job in part is to push the envelope a bit.

I want to begin by looking broadly at what is happening today among Indigenous nations. I want to step back here from the immediate crisis of the pandemic that already has devastated many Native communities in your country and in mine and has led to tragedy for thousands of Native families. I want to acknowledge that impact but look instead this morning at some broader trends that were underway long before COVID-19 and that are already reshaping the Indigenous world in ways that are likely to persist through this crisis and beyond.

I'm going to focus on two revolutions in the Indigenous world that have been underway over the last few decades. Calling them revolutions may seem overly dramatic—they've not happened

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\* Stephen Cornell is Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Emeritus Director, Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy, at the University of Arizona where he also serves as a Faculty Associate with the Native Nations Institute and Affiliate Faculty in the James E. Rogers College of Law. He co-founded and continues today to co-direct the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development.

suddenly. They have been emerging and evolving since at least the 1970s, sometimes making progress, sometimes not. But I call them revolutions because I think they are having transformative effects in the lives of Indigenous peoples, and they have changed much of the landscape of Indigenous life.

The first is a revolution in the field that this summit is about: an education revolution. Many of you know far more about this than I do because you have been part of it. It's the reclaiming, by Indigenous peoples, of a prominent place in education for Indigenous knowledge, experience, ideas, culture, history, and aspirations, and the realization of that claim in altered curricula, more Native teachers, Native controlled schools, greater community engagement in education, vastly expanded language learning, and much, much more.

The examples are legion, from the Freedom School of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, designed explicitly to "reverse the assimilation process" through the teaching of Mohawk culture and language, to the successful effort by the Listuguj Mi'gmaq in Quebec to bring the schooling of their children fully under their control. We can see it in the effort, still underway, by the government and people of Nunavut to reconstruct an educational system that serves the purposes, not of Canada nor even, necessarily, of the central government of Nunavut, but of local communities themselves. We can see it in immersion classrooms and the efforts by growing numbers of First Nations to reverse the loss of language. There are dozens of other examples, in your country and in mine, including ones that many of you are involved in.

This revolution has not been problem-free, as you very well know. Perhaps most obvious are funding issues. Everywhere I look, Native educational budgets are stressed. There's also the task of training and retaining skilled Native teachers. Even within Native controlled systems, as in Nunavut, there's the issue of centralized vs. local control of how education is delivered, with large nations or governing units still searching for the right balance. In my country, the national shift in the 2000s toward evaluating schools based on student performance on standardized national tests has undermined years of progress in this revolution, placing many Native educators on the defensive as schools encourage teachers to abandon creative curricula and "teach to the test" so as to secure high scores and protect funding. And in both our countries there's the possibility that in some places the revolution may change who controls education but won't change much about education itself, so that you take over the system but you keep doing the same things the system has been doing for years—a revolution in form but not in content, raising the possibility that, as Frank Ettawageshik, a leader of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa, puts it, "If we're not careful, we'll end up assimilating ourselves."

But if we can step back from these issues and take the long view, the change has been substantial. What had been a story of seemingly endless, relentless damage and loss under the colonial educational system—loss of language, of culture, of confidence, of pride, of connection to kin and to the land itself—is being at least partly rewritten as Native nations reclaim control over the education of their children. That is transformative, and we owe an enormous debt to all those who have made it happen: an education revolution.

But there's a second revolution, happening alongside the first. This one is a political revolution, and I turn to that revolution now. I think it should be clear to most people that the last few decades have witnessed a significant change in the political arena as that arena involves Indigenous peoples in North America. For a long time, Indigenous politics was focused primarily on fighting for recognition and asserting rights: rights to land, to self-government, to welfare, to the maintenance of traditional cultural practices, and so forth. That politics, in many ways, centers central governments. Fundamentally, it is a politics about *them*, those decision-makers in Ottawa and Washington or in the provinces, territories, and states. It's about what *they* do an effort to get *them* to change. Even in the most politically turbulent years of the 1960s and 1970s, Indigenous action in both our countries was concerned largely with changing rights regimes and government policy. Protest, marches, land occupations, litigation—much of it was about getting *them* to recognize you and the rights you believe are yours.

In the 1980s and especially the 1990s, that began to change. It is still changing today. I don't mean to suggest that the battle for rights and recognition is over—far from it. But we've been seeing a shift over the last few decades as a lot of Indigenous energy has begun to turn away from what central governments do toward what Native nations themselves do or want to do. As Satsan, Herb George, of the Wet'suet'en Nation in British Columbia has said, more than once and in various ways, it's time to stop waiting for *them* to change things, time to get on with your own agenda.

A number of factors have been involved in this shift, but a simplified version is that it resulted from the relative success of the rights struggle, leading in Canada to a series of major Supreme Court decisions—Sparrow, Delgamuukw, Haida, Tsilhqot'in, and others—and in the United States to changes in federal policy that, in one way or another in both countries, have moved significant decision-making power into your hands. Of course the rights battle, as I say isn't over. There are still critical restraints on what you do, and the gains of these decades have to be protected. We have to be vigilant. But this ain't the 1950s and 1960s anymore. It's a new era.

There are a number of significant dimensions to this change. I want to highlight four of them.

- First, this change is shifting attention toward Indigenous visions and actions. Instead of asking “what do we want Ottawa or Washington to do” or “how should we respond to government's latest intervention?” Indigenous nations are asking “what are we going to do, how should we organize, how can we advance our goals here at home?” We're seeing less listening to Ottawa or Washington, more listening to yourselves. The emphasis on getting other governments to recognize your rights is being replaced, in many cases, by an assumption that you have these rights. Instead of waiting for them to agree, just put those rights to work, including rights that you believe you have *even if central governments disagree and even in the absence of explicit recognition*.
- Second, this is moving a good deal of Indigenous politics from national to local arenas. Those politics are less and less about some undifferentiated mass of Indigenous persons and increasingly about distinct Indigenous peoples, nations, groups, or communities

developing their own strategies for power and change. While there are obvious exceptions to this—the “Idle No More” movement is one—we’re seeing a lot of nations paying less attention to overall patterns of Indigenous rights and more attention to how they can and assert decision-making power locally in the areas that matter most to them and build the local relationships they need. That leads to diversity of actions. In short, what the Blood Tribe of Alberta does may be very different from what Kahnawà:ke Mohawk does, even as both assert new powers.

- Third, these developments are shifting emphasis from self-determination to self-government. Self-determination in the Indigenous case is about the right and authority of Indigenous nations or communities to determine their own futures. Self-government is the exercise of that right, recognized or not. Self-government, in a sense, is *doing* it. This shift, in other words, is partly a shift from claiming to doing. Increasingly, Indigenous nations are not just claiming the right to make decisions for themselves; they are exercising that right. They are calling the shots. They are insisting on deciding what’s important, how to govern, how things will be done, which programs matter, how to make things happen, regardless of what the Canadian or US governments think—and then putting their decisions to work.
- Finally, this last transition—the shift to self-government—is directing increased attention to a set of critical questions. If you are going to take on fully the tasks of governing, *what tools will you need?* For example, is the Indian Act an adequate tool for governing—for truly governing? Most people, I think, would say no, it’s someone else’s idea of how Indigenous people should govern, it isn’t yours, and it’s a poor substitute for genuine governing. But if so, then what tools do you need? Think of government as a set of tools that you use to accomplish your purposes as a nation. That’s all it is. It’s an instrument that a community, a nation, a country puts together to try to achieve its goals. What tools are up to the job? If you’re going to move into the governing role, how should you do it? How should you govern? How should you organize yourselves? How should you make law? How should you make decisions? How should you resolve conflicts among you? How will you exercise the responsibility or authority that you say are yours? And can you draw on tools from your own past, from your own long tradition of successful governing before Europeans invaded your lands? Are some of those tools still useful today? What can you learn from others, from other First Nations, or from non-Native peoples, from Canada, from others, about how best to govern in contemporary times? What do you need to invent or create for the new challenges you face? Those are the kinds of questions we’re seeing more and more First Nations wrestling with as this new era of self-government unfolds.

This is the nation building revolution. It is happening most clearly in the political arena, but it is about much more than that. It is about Native nations reclaiming their place on the land, their voice and authority in their own affairs, and their right to be themselves.

So we have this new era, filled with both new tasks and new opportunities. But it's also a time of uncertainty. It's fragile. All it takes is one new national election, one major court decision that goes the other way, one critical policy shift, to undermine much of your progress. So you have to seize the moment and do the nation rebuilding work that can protect you from that fragility and deal with that uncertainty, and turn self-government into a lasting reality.

These two revolutions—education and nation building—are what interest me this morning, and the question I want to raise is this: how can they work together? They are happening at more or less the same time across the landscape of First Nations in your country and in mine. And they are natural partners; a nation's investment in education, after all, is an investment in its own future. So how can they work together? What might "working together" mean?

I'm going to put forward four themes that I think offer at least a starting point for thinking about how the education revolution can support the nation building revolution, and vice-versa. These aren't the only possible themes at all, but they strike me as important.

- **Theme 1: Maintaining clarity of purpose**

The political revolution, empowering Native nations, has been critical, and it has made enormous strides in North America and a few other places. But it can lose sight of its purpose. Power is seductive. Success can breed arrogance. Money can deflect you. I'll give you a brief story to illustrate what I'm talking about.

Over the last two decades I've done quite a bit of work with some Maori organizations and tribes—they're called iwi—in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Maori are the Indigenous people of New Zealand, that nation of islands in the southern Pacific Ocean, east of Australia. Their experience of British colonialism has been much the same as yours: stolen lands, imposed schooling, suppressed culture and language, declining health and welfare—it's a familiar story. But since the mid-1990s, a number of Maori iwi, or tribes, have reached significant settlements with the Crown for lost lands and other injuries. One of those tribes is Ngai Tahu, the large iwi on the South Island of New Zealand, who in the mid-1990s reached a major settlement of their claims against the Crown. Sir Tipene O'Regan is a Ngai Tahu leader (today an elder) who spent years leading the fight for that settlement, a man of very substantial accomplishment for his people. Today, Ngai Tahu has turned that settlement from the 1990s into major economic power. The tribe has become a major player in the New Zealand economy in sectors such as forestry and dairy, and they have turned those settlement dollars into massive financial assets. It's a story of major success.

But a few years ago, Tipene O'Regan, now an honored elder of his people and a national Maori leader, began to express some unease with the focus of some Maori tribes on simply growing these assets. Don't get me wrong: He wasn't against growing the assets, and he values the economic power that Maori today exercise. But he began to wonder if some tribes were losing sight of the larger purpose that motivated their original claims. A few years ago he spoke to a class that I was guest teaching in New Zealand at a Maori college, a class of

Maori business students. And he asked them to think about the purpose of economic development, of reaching settlements, of negotiating with the Crown. What is it all for, he asked them. Why are we doing it? And then he asked them, point blank, “Do we just want to be rich pakehas—” that’s a Maori term for white people—“Do we just want to be rich pakehas with a sun tan?... Or is our purpose,” he said, “*the intergenerational transmission of heritage and identity?*”

His words really struck me. “The intergenerational transmission of heritage and identity.” And by heritage he meant the land, the language, the culture, the way people are with each other—the works. That, he was saying, is what really matters. We should be judging our actions by that criterion. Are we advancing that purpose?

I tell this story because it seems to me that “the intergenerational transmission of heritage and identity” is exactly what the Indigenous educational revolution in Canada and the US has been about. That revolution has been pretty clear about its own purpose—seeing to it that Indigenous language, culture, and identity not only survive from one generation to the next but thrive, strengthen, and grow.

What we need to be sure of is that the political revolution—the nation building revolution—also keeps its eye on that particular ball and doesn’t get distracted by the power and other resources that the revolution can produce. And one way to maintain that clarity of purpose is through the education of the next generation of leaders, being sure they know what service to the nation means, what it requires of them, and what the purpose of self-government should be. This requires forms of education that aren’t simply about improving the capabilities of individual citizens of your nations, as critical as that work is. It’s also about improving the ability of those nations to thrive as nations, and keeping those national purposes and the core values of the nation front and center in the rebuilding process.

#### ▪ **Theme 2: Reconceiving Native nation government**

I think we need a reconception of government for Native nations. One of the many unfortunate things that Canada and the United States have done to Indigenous peoples, I think, is to give them an impoverished idea of what government is and what it is about. The attitude has too often been, “Oh, you want to govern yourselves? Okay, here are a few social programs. You can run those.” Or, “okay, here are a few municipal activities that we’ll let you take over and run.” Combine that attitude with the dependence of Native communities on external funds, and pretty soon you’ll get the idea that First Nation government is little more than program management or asset management or municipal services, and the big questions at election time are “okay, who’s going to get the jobs? Who’s going to get the housing? Who’s going to get the money?” It’s all about the goodies.

But that’s not self-government. That’s self-administration or self-management. A lot of the time it’s pure patronage, handing out the goodies to relatives or supporters. The problem arises when, over time, that becomes the community’s notion of what government is—a

boxing ring in which families or factions battle for control of the goodies. Eventually that breeds, in the community, cynicism about your own government, anger, and apathy.

We need to return the idea of governing to the core activities involved. What about making law—your law, Dene law—and the fair enforcement of that law? Isn't that a core piece of governing? What about dispute resolution, dealing with conflict in ways that don't tear the community apart, and that don't leave you subject to the interventions or decisions of outsiders, such as federal agencies or a provincial court? What about decisions affecting the land and relations with the animals that share it with you? Or what about managing relations with other governments—the province or territory, the Crown, other Indigenous nations? What about coming up with development strategies that reflect Indigenous needs, priorities, and concerns as well as the realities of the marketplace? And so forth... This, it seems to me, is the stuff of governing.

Education can play a critical role in changing the conception of government that Canadian and US policies, perhaps inadvertently but unfortunately, have fostered. I remember a conversation years ago with the leader of an American Indian nation in the southwestern US who said to a colleague and me, "my kids go to the public schools. They can tell you the capital of every state in the US. They can talk a bit about the US constitution. But they have no idea what government involves in our own nation." He felt they weren't learning what they needed to know to be part of his nation's future."

Frank Ettawageshik, the Odawa leader whom I've mentioned before and who thinks a lot about these things, says we need what he calls a "tribal civics" curriculum, or what here in Canada might be called a "First Nations civics" curriculum. It might include, for example, how you used to govern yourselves, and for what purpose, and with what results. It might include what happened when the colonizers showed up, the Indian Act, and what you lost in the way of governing your lands and your affairs. It might include the current effort to reclaim that right to govern yourselves, and why that's important. Because the world has changed, it might also include the need to think carefully about how you should govern now, in current times, the tasks that you need to accomplish, and the skills you'll need. It might also include a discussion of constitutions, those sets of rules that a nation uses to guide behavior and decision-making and tell you who has responsibility for what.

I once had an elder say to me, "wolves have a constitution." I have to admit, I had no idea what he meant. But he went on. "Think about it," he said. "Wolves thrive in packs. They depend on each other. Each wolf knows its place, its role in the community. In effect, they have a set of rules governing interactions with each other and with other beings. *When they follow the rules, the pack succeeds.*"

That's a constitution, an architecture for governing. For many nations, that architecture is embedded in their cultures, but some nations today, who have operated for years under the Indian Act or some other piece of externally imposed governmental structure, may need to

think about what a constitution of their own might look like, and make it happen. And that's going to require a lot of community education and work.

In short, a First Nations civics curriculum would be designed to support nationhood, to support a more robust and comprehensive idea of government, to support the effort by First Nations to rethink how they govern, explore the options, and support a changed relationship with the Crown.

### ▪ **Theme 3: Reconceiving citizenship**

But if you're going to teach a changed conception of what Indigenous government is, perhaps you also need to rethink what citizenship means.

I had an interesting conversation some years ago with Oren Lyons. Some of you may be familiar with Oren, elder and traditional faithkeeper of the Onondaga Nation, part of the Iroquois Confederacy, and a lifelong, fierce defender of the self-determination and self-government rights of Indigenous peoples.

We were talking one morning about First Nations governance, and I happened to mention the relationship between First Nations governments and their membership. Oren paused for a moment, and then he asked me, "are you a member of the United States?" His question caught me by surprise, but I answered, "No, I'm not." "Right," he said. And then he went on: "At Onondaga, we're not a club. We don't have members. We're a nation. We have citizens."

In recent years I've noticed more and more Native nations talking that way, laying claim to government-to-government, nation-to-nation relationships with the United States, or Canada, or Australia, or Aotearoa New Zealand, talking about what their citizens need. They're talking the language of nationhood.

But what do we mean by "citizens"? When Oren Lyons and I talked that morning, he pointed out that when you're a member of something, you're usually entitled to stuff. Maybe you get the monthly newsletter or a discount on certain things on the organization's website. There are benefits to membership, and it's often the bennies that get you the members. He argued that citizenship is different. It carries rights, yes, but it also carries obligations, responsibilities. There's a balance involved. To be a citizen is to take on some degree of responsibility for the nation, for expressing the nation's values in your own life and behavior. To be a citizen is to accept certain duties that come with that relationship.

I would imagine that First Nations would want citizens who have that sense of responsibility to the nation, who recognize their obligations to the collective, to the whole. Isn't one of the tasks of education to create citizens in that sense: to foster, in the minds and hearts of your people, that relationship, that knowledge of what nationhood means, of the core values of your people, of how to enact those core values in daily life and relationships, of how to be a responsible citizen of the nation? That, to me, is a fundamental part of nation building:

making citizens, creating the citizens that the nation needs if it is going to survive and thrive. Surely education is key to that project. And shouldn't citizenship and what it means in the Indigenous context be part of a First Nations civics curriculum?

- **Theme 4: Reconceiving the nation**

Finally, in some cases we may need to rethink our conception of the nation itself. Canada has a devastating history in this regard, fragmenting peoples and then building that fragmentation into the structure of Indigenous affairs. Satsan tells how his own people, the Wet'suet'en, in BC, more than a century ago were divided by Canada into separate First Nations that now have become the administrative units of Indian affairs. "They shredded us," he says, undermining the sense of peoplehood, of nationhood, that was born out of many generations of shared experience, shared culture, kinship ties, and a distinctive relationship to the land.

Some nations today are addressing that fragmentation. As we sit here talking, the Ktunaxa Nation in southern BC is engaged in a constitutional process in which they are linking together four Ktunaxa First Nations in a Ktunaxa Nation government. It's a difficult task, complicated by the effects of a century or more of Canada telling you, no, you're not one people; you're four First Nations and we see you as separate and distinct and we're going to deal with you that way. In situations like that, many citizens may have grown up with only a limited sense of the nation that was. But today the Ktunaxa are determined to bring that sense of nationhood back. "We're all Ktunaxa," says Sophie Pierre, former Chief of the St. Mary's Band and an architect of this effort. "That is where our strength comes from." Kathryn Teneese, chair of the Ktunaxa Nation Council, caught in the flawed British Columbia treaty process, once said, "We may not get a treaty out of this, but we're going to get a government out of it, and it's going to be a Ktunaxa government."

You've seen this closer to home with what Tlicho has done, creating the Tlicho Government, and we're seeing it in other nations as well – I think, for example, of the Grand Council of the Crees, nine communities who realized that to protect their lands and their ways of life they needed to organize together and learn to act, for certain purposes, as one. These are nations who are determined to be who *they* say they are, who *they* believe they should be, not who Canada says they are. And there are signs of this kind of rethinking going on in other countries as well, where Indigenous nations are reclaiming the right to be themselves.

The considerations are many: Who were we before colonialism redefined us? What have been the costs of that redefinition? Is there a basis for reconnection? Do we still share culture, language, a common understanding of who we are? What might we gain from reconnection? And what might we lose? What would it take, in terms of time, leadership, vision, sacrifice, to make it happen?

Education has a huge potential role to play in that process, in nations that are considering such issues. Who should be the collective self in self-determination, in self-government, and

what should you be thinking about as you try to answer that question? And whose experience can you learn from? Where do you look for models, options, possibilities, cautions, experience? Without a substantial educational component in that process, you could be lost.

I raise these four themes—clarity of purpose, the conception of government, the meaning of citizenship, the definition of the nation—because these are among the key issues that the political revolution of the last few decades has thrown into stark relief. They are core issues in nation building, or rebuilding, as the case may be. The long-term success of that revolution is going to depend, in part, on how First Nations answer those questions.

As for what the answers should be, I cannot tell you, and it would be inappropriate for me to try. The answers will have to come from communities like yours that are engaged in reclaiming control over their own futures.

But my hope is that the educational revolution of the last few decades, which has already accomplished so much in the lives of Native peoples, can add these issues and others like them to the daunting tasks Native educators already carry—because all of these issues or questions are at one and the same time political and educational issues.

Furthermore, I believe neither of the two revolutions that I've discussed—neither the educational one nor the political one—can succeed over the long run on its own. The educational revolution needs the home and the strategic direction that come from viable, empowered First Nations who know who they are, know what they are trying to accomplish, can capably govern, and care about the future of their children. And the nation building revolution needs the knowledge that education can provide to point the way toward strategies and solutions that work in the service of genuine, lasting, Indigenous self-determination.

Despite your current difficulties and the uncertainties that surround you, I believe these two revolutions, working hand-in-hand, both of them made by Indigenous peoples, offer enormous hope for the future. And I want to close by thanking you for the work that you are doing, for the work you will do over these three days, and for allowing me to speak to you today.