REFLECTION

Xelhs t'u7 Lil'wat/St'at'yem'c on the Constitution Expresses to Ottawa and Europe

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This article focuses on establishing the protest and assertion of Indigenous Rights in one community. Mount Currie is a part of the Lil'wat/St'at'yem'c First Nations made up of thirteen communities, seven of which – Anderson Lake, Bridge River, Cayoose Creek, Lillooet, Pavilion, and Mount Currie – were involved with both Constitution Expresses. These are their English names as they were recorded in the letter to the co-chairs of the Constitution committee.[1] About sixty-seven people from Mount Currie went to Ottawa in 1980. Fifty-five were on the train, and twelve went by plane. About half that number went on the Constitution Express to London in 1981. This is a story of one community, similar to the story of all the other First Nations communities that participated in the Constitution Expresses of 1980 and 1981. It was only two decades from the time when the ban that prevented First Nations from gathering in groups and raising funds without going to jail had ended. George Manuel was instrumental in bringing First Nations together not only in British Columbia but across Canada and around the world.

This is the story I remember, with the help of family and community members who were involved with the actions at that time. I am grateful to those who shared their stories and photographs with me to help me remember. Those who stayed home were just as involved in the journey as those who went. My sister Mary Louise Williams, who was the primary organizer of both Constitutional Expresses in our community and was on the organizing team at the UBCIC, remembers holding meetings every Sunday through the year, talking about the issues, making sure the people understood issues such as sovereignty, the Constitution,

[1] Linda Jordan, letter to co-chairmen of the Special Joint Committee on the Constitution, 24 November 1980, https://historyofrights.ca/wp-content/uploads/SJC/ICE.pdf.

land rights, citizenship, protecting the land, protecting our identity as Lil'watul, and planning what could be done to get Canadians and politicians to hear our concerns about the patriation of the Constitution from England to Canada. Finally, our mother stood up at a meeting and said, "Xelhs t'u7" – just do it. It is a common term in our language, used when anyone is uncertain about an action and at times when there has been lots of input from everyone on a concern and it is time to act and move on.

The Lil'wat/St'at'yem'c First Nations have been active in the protection of their rights, and their responsibility for the care of the land and all that live on that land – the plants, animals, water, people, birds, insects, ancestors, descendants. These actions are recorded in the songs, dances, and stories passed on from generation to generation. Historian Wendy Wickwire describes and includes photos of the Chiefs of Mount Currie involved in meetings both in Victoria and Ottawa to assert their rights in the late 1800s and early 1900s,[2] including the *Lillooet Declaration* of 1911, which the seventeen Chiefs stated and signed. It reads: "In early days we considered the white chiefs like a superior race that never lied nor stole, and always acted wisely, and honourably. We expected they would lay claim to what belonged to themselves only. In these considerations we have been mistaken and gradually have learned how cunning, cruel, untruthful, and thieving some of them can be. We have felt keenly the stealing of our lands by the B.C. government, but we could never learn how to get redress. We felt helpless and dejected; but lately we begin to hope. We think that perhaps after all we may get redress from the greater white chiefs away in the King's country, or in Ottawa."[3]

As a child in the 1950s, I remember meetings in our community. I remember them because my mother was one of the primary organizers and we were all called upon to help with preparing food and places to sleep, taking notes, setting up tables and chairs, singing, dancing, and quietly listening to all the talk. In the 1960s, with the pressure to close the federal day school in the community and bus all young people to the public school in the neighbouring white community, people in the Mount Currie community began to hold discussions about taking over the school operations. The community started by beginning classes for students who refused to attend public school and for high school students,

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[2] Wendy Wickwire, *At the Bridge: James Teit and an Anthropology of Belonging* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).

[3] *Declaration of the Lillooet Tribe (May 10, 1911)*, District of Lillooet (website), http://lillooet.ca/Recreation-Activities/Golden-Miles-of-History/Declaration-of-the-Lillooet-Tribe-(May-10,-1911).aspx.

many of whom had dropped out of public school. So in 1972, when the federal government passed the *Indian Control of Indian Education Policy*,[4] the community was ready, and it had the first school in British Columbia (and the second in Canada) to take advantage of this new policy. The school was committed to preparing the young people of the community to thrive in both worlds, to continue to speak Lil'wat and to learn English; to maintain a healthy relationship with the land; to figure out how to continue a relationship with a land that was confined and limited for use; to learn our history and to make a commitment not to continue to colonize the Lil'wat through education.

In the 1970s, Mount Currie was also involved in restoring the families broken by separation due to residential schools; trying to stop Family Services from removing children and putting them into foster care or out for adoption; trying to deal with the incarceration of our people – both men and women – because of alcohol, because of leaving the community without permission, or because of picking foods in traditional lands that were now designated as parks. Mount Currie also fought in the courts and with all levels of governments to protect our lands and the rivers affected by extraction industries and service industries (such as hydro and road construction) that went through the heart of our communities without our consent. Mount Currie is a small community – at times consisting of fewer than two thousand people – and it had to actively uphold, recover, and protect its rights on a number of fronts. We worked tirelessly to recover from disruptive and destructive government policies. The people of Mount Currie still spoke the Lil'wat language and harvested foods and medicine from the land. We fished, hunted, practised traditional ceremonies, and held community gatherings. These activities kept us strong and healthy.

When the call came to join the Constitution Express to Ottawa, the people were ready to be part of the movement. The people didn't have lots of money, but they immediately began fundraising in the community and preparing. They packed dried salmon and meat as well as canned salmon and meats and vegetables to take and to share with one another. My mother made a beautiful beaded buckskin jacket for the Chief to wear, following our tradition of supporting our leadership. It was decided that eleven of the Elders would fly to Ottawa; they would meet those on the train at the station when they arrived. My role was to accompany the Elders on their flight and to get them settled when we

[4] National Indian Brotherhood, *Indian Control of Indian Education: Policy Paper*, 1972, https://oneca.com/IndianControlofIndianEducation.pdf.

arrived. I brought my five-year-old daughter with me. Our experience on the flight provided a good example of what it was like to be "Native" in Canada at that time. I was checking in everyone at the flight counter and noticed that our bags were being set aside. I asked about this and was told that they would be taken to the plane as a group. Nothing I tried got them onto the baggage belt. When we got to Ottawa our bags didn't arrive. On the plane, when it was time to serve dinner, everyone was offered a selection except for the Elders – the server, in such a rude way, practically threw the dishes on their laps. The news media were filled with the Constitution Express, and the day we were flying was the day when the train was sidetracked to be checked for explosives. Canadians were angry and afraid. I sat at the back of the plane and watched how our Elders were treated, and I felt so helpless and angry. But as I watched I noticed that the old people never responded with anger: they retained their respectful and dignified presence, thanking the servers in both English and Lil'wat. As a young woman that was a big lesson for me. The return trip was completely different. The servers were respectful and they asked about the Constitution, wanting to learn. Reflecting on the change, I realized that Canadians didn't know about the Indigenous Peoples of Canada and our history in this developing country. They only knew about Indigenous Peoples from the media and movies. The stories in newspapers at the time were generally negative – stories of our poverty and disadvantages or stories that instilled fear.

When we arrived in Ottawa, we were busy with getting settled into our billets; people met us at the airport and helped get our bags, which were on the next flight. We were treated with such care and kindness. I learned about the actions of the mayor of Ottawa, Marion Dewer, who asked the people of Ottawa to welcome us. This public gesture made such a difference. I learned the importance of allies and the importance of teaching. A single person can shift the tone of an environment. There was hope that we were being heard. But it didn't take long to realize that, although individual Canadians could learn, the government was entrenched in keeping us as wards of the state. On our return home the stories about our efforts to be participants in the patriation of the Constitution to Canada dwindled, only appearing occasionally in the back pages of newspapers.

One day my sister came home from a meeting of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs and told me that the Constitution Express would go on to England and that it would travel through five countries. An advance team would go over to prepare by raising funds for the buses and arranging accommodation for one hundred people. It would also prepare

the media, arrange for meetings with government officials, and organize speaking forums in each country. She told me that I would go and that Gaye, her daughter, would come with me to organize in the Netherlands, while Terri Williams, a younger sister, and her partner Frank Rivers (Xuxumis) would organize in France. People from Nuxal'k, Haudenosaunee, Wet'suwet'en, and Secwépemc were the other organizers. Without any questions we began getting ourselves ready to go to Europe. I had no idea how to organize media interviews or how to organize outside our communities, but I would figure it out.

CEREMONY

A group would go to England to work to get our case heard in its Parliament. Two people would do the work in Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Belgium, though, would mainly involve holding a ceremony for the Indigenous people who had fought in the First and Second World Wars and were buried there. Albert Lightening, a Medicine Man from Alberta, would travel with the Constitution Express and conduct the ceremonies in Belgium and help us act in a good way in all our activities. The ceremonies, the gathering of our community on the land where our relatives were buried, so far away from their homelands, reminded us of our responsibility to our ancestors and to those coming after us. The ceremonies were powerful reminders that we were honouring and remembering those who fought for a country that treated us as aliens on our own lands. But those lands continued to be an integral part of our history and future, those lands continued to nurture us, and we continued to be responsible for the health of those lands.

ALLIES, FRIENDS, AND COLLABORATORS

In each of the countries we found people who were ready to help us, and most of the advance team had a prior connection to the country in which we would be working. For example, the connection for those who went to Germany was that fact that an anthropologist who had studied and written about their people was German, and that team was happy to find out more about him. For those of us who went to the Netherlands, we knew a Dutch linguistics student who was working on our language, and his parents opened their home to the three of us. They helped us by interpreting their culture for us, assisting with translation, and helping us figure out the Dutch political structure, media, and transportation system. They also helped care for my daughter so that I could travel to

other cities to do what I needed to do. In Germany, shortly after we arrived, there was a huge march of 400,000 people, the point of which was to bring attention to the environment and climate changes. Some of our team participated in this and met with politicians to present our concerns and to ask them to call the political leaders in Canada and ask them to hear our case. In each of the countries there were organization ready to work with us. People from the Union of BC Indian Chiefs had been making contacts in these countries based on George Manuel's advance work, which involved reaching out to Indigenous Peoples around the world and to allies in the colonizing countries. Citizens in these countries had far more knowledge about Indigenous Peoples than the average Canadian. Greenpeace in the Netherlands was a strong advocate, as was the Workgroup for Indigenous Peoples. One of the people who organized billets near Amsterdam was a Moluccan man. He was a critical ally because his people, like ours, had been dislocated due to Holland's having colonized his country. Making that connection – people who are colonized helping each other – was a powerful force.

SHARING, TEACHING, AND LEARNING

Recently, I met with people from my community to talk about what they remembered about the Constitution Express. One of them said, "It was the first time I didn't feel racism when I was with white people." That statement was surprising to me, but, in thinking about it, I realized that we met so many people in our travels through Europe who were genuinely interested in our stories, people who were ready to listen. That was new to us. We gave talks at community halls, universities, municipal halls, and schools. A common statement from the audience was: "I'm Canadian, I went to school in Canada, I went to university in Canada, why don't I know what you are telling us?" We were community people telling the stories of our experiences with colonialism and laying out our hopes for redress on the part of the Canadian governments. We were able to share in a way that was new to us. We were trying to describe our situation from our point of view. We lived in a world seen only through the lens of the colonist. Everywhere we went, the Lil'wat brought the strength of their songs and drums. Drumming and singing always played an integrating role in the community, and the community members brought this to the world.

SONGS AND SINGING

One of our community's strengths has always been our songs and singing. There are many genres of songs. Individuals own some songs that come to them from the spirit world, and these are usually sung in community gatherings and in nature. They can only be sung by the owner or with the permission of the owner. There are songs that are called the bone game (Lehal) songs. These songs are used to rally teams involved in the competition and to attempt to undermine the other team through humour and playful deflation. There are the sq'uta songs, the songs used for dancing and to bring the community together to share song/stories of historical events. There are ceremonial songs for both winter and summer ceremonies. In the 1950s, a group in the community held painstaking meetings to decide on the songs that would be "performed" outside the community at Euro-Western–oriented performance events. These songs served as rallying songs during the road blockades of the mid-1970s. Supporters from other communities learned these songs, and they are still heard today during protests. They were learned by those on both the Canada and Europe Constitution Expresses. They sang the songs while travelling on buses and trains. They sang them at the rallies and speech events. They kept their spirits up and brought strength to the group when what they were doing – trying to change hearts and minds – seemed impossible. The beat of the drums and those songs not only kept people connected to the lands but also communicated the spirit of people's resolve to the public, who were unfamiliar with both First Nations sounds and First Nations issues.

MEDIA

In the Netherlands we organized and conducted fifty-six interviews for newspapers, journals, radio, and TV, ranging in all political positions from far left to far right. During one interview, which was held in a cafeteria in Rotterdam with an editor of a very conservative paper, my daughter was colouring at the table while we had coffee. I kept trying to discuss the reason we were in Europe to rally support for our cause in Canada, but the editor wasn't listening and he was not serious. When he was interrupted by someone, my niece Gaye said, "This is a waste of time, he is just playing with us, let's go." I agreed and told my daughter to pack up her crayons and colouring. When the editor came back and saw us packing up he was surprised and asked what we were doing. I told him, "You are not listening, you are playing with us because you think

we are stupid and Native, and we came to meet with you to tell our story for your readers." He looked surprised and asked me to stay, saying that he would get more coffee and we would have a frank discussion. We talked for a couple of hours and he took lots of notes. At the end he said, "You know that I will be getting in touch with our contacts in Canada about what you just told me here." I told him to go ahead to do what he needed to do, only to remember that, when he listened to the views of his contacts, if they were Canadian, then their knowledge of our history would be limited and one-sided, and, if they were Dutch journalists, they probably would only have heard the white Canadian view of our history. As it turned out, he wrote one of the clearest editorials on Canada/Indigenous relations regarding the patriation of the Constitution. We had so many requests for interviews and speaking engagements, we had to send groups in different directions. I realized that we employed the same strategies and strengths, which included observing, listening, analyzing, trusting in our inner voice, and accepting guidance from the ancestors – all of which we used when we were on the land – in this new role we were playing. We also used the community force of humour, storytelling, caring for one another, and empathy. Furthermore, we respected each person's story and her/his/their unique way of sharing the story of our history. So each person was able to share the story of what had happened to us in Canada in her/his/their own way, thus enabling the unfolding of a broad and deep picture.

We all gathered in London after having travelled through Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. A small group had also travelled to Norway to support the Saami in their quest to save their waterways from being dammed. In turn, the Saami joined us in London. We held a ceremony in Westminster Abbey. While in London we were also busy on the phones soliciting support from other Fourth World governments around the world. Although we didn't achieve what we wanted and weren't able to present our case in the British Parliament, we couldn't be left out of the plans and discussions in patriating Canada's Constitution.[5]

When we returned home, we were met by our communities, and it was clear that they were as engaged in the Constitution Express experiences as those of us who had travelled. We were greeted with expressions of gratitude and happiness that we were home safe and in good spirits. In order to have our cases heard we need the skills of politicians and journalists, but we also need the true-to-the-heart stories from the communities whose lives are deeply affected by Canada's decisions.

[5] *The Indian Nations and the Federal Government's View on the Constitution,* Union of BC Indian Chiefs Constitution Express Digital Collection, n.d., http://constitution.ubcic.bc.ca/node/145.