



**Prepared for the
Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development ~
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Bill C-292, Kelowna Accord Implementation Act

**Submission by the
Native Women's Association of Canada**

Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC)
Six Nations of the Grand River
P.O. Box 331
Ohsweken, ON
N0A 1M0

1292 Wellington Street West
Ottawa, Ontario
K1Y 3A9

Preface

Beverley Jacobs, President of the Native Women's Association of Canada humbly sends her apologies for not being able to present on Bill C-292 in person on November 23rd, 2006 due to her serious scheduling conflicts. She trusts that all Standing Committee members will review this written submission and consider it for the tabling of Bill C-292.

The following brief summarizes the Native Women's Association of Canada's position on Paul Martin's private members bill, Bill C-292. Clear rationale has been presented in support of this Bill; we will endeavour to supplement that rationale through the use of a culturally relevant, gender-based argument making for a more balanced, holistic approach to the issues at hand.

Introduction

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is a nationally representative political organization comprised of thirteen Provincial Territorial Member Associations (PTMA's). Our goal is to enhance, promote and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well being of Aboriginal women within First Nations, Métis and Canadian societies. The founding of the Native Women's Association of Canada in 1974 was closely tied to Aboriginal women's struggle to overcome discriminations inherent in the Indian Act.

NWAC works collaboratively with other Aboriginal women's organizations to empower Aboriginal women by facilitating their participation in legislative and policy reforms that promote equal opportunity. We engage with National Aboriginal Organizations to ensure a balanced approach to issues, such as that which is occurring with Bill C-292. These organizations have voiced their positions on this bill and identified implications of it remaining dormant.

We are mandated by Assembly resolution to ensure Aboriginal women's unique needs are addressed throughout all processes at the national level. Aboriginal

women and children continue to be the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society, having the highest poverty rates and the highest vulnerabilities to acts of violence. NWAC is committed to ensuring these issues remain a priority within political decision-making circles, and that any and all legislative and policy directives impacting the lives of Aboriginal women appropriately reflect these higher needs.

Background

Beginning in early 2004 NWAC participated in the Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable discussions. Our unprecedented role at this and the subsequent Sectoral Follow-up Sessions were 'history in the making'. Our presence at these preparatory meetings represented a pivotal first step in achieving a level of recognition that Aboriginal women have been struggling for years to attain.

Our main objective is to ensure Aboriginal women and their representative organizations continue to be valued contributors in the joint development of balanced, holistic solutions to the severe discrepancies in standards of living between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada.

Months of preparation and negotiation led up to the November 2005 meeting in Kelowna, British Columbia. Canada's First Ministers and National Aboriginal leaders met to ratify an historic agreement that day – The Kelowna Accord. For the first time in history, consensus was reached. A plan of action was established that would address, once and for all, what has become a crisis situation.

NWAC made significant strides toward achieving recognition within these national circles. The Kelowna Accord was not simply a political ploy by then Prime Minister Martin to gain the Aboriginal vote. And it was not written "on the back of a napkin". Many of us take exception to these words, and to those who seek to destroy all that we've gained.

Although the Accord remains out of reach today, we are resolved to acknowledge our success in the relationships forged throughout that process. NWAC is honoured to have been included, to have played a role. These relationships have united us as Aboriginal peoples, and NWAC is committed to continue working towards achieving our common goals and moving forward on a positive path to improve the lives of all Aboriginal peoples in Canada. We have a shared vision that will not be forgotten or easily cast aside by naysayer's.

Following the election in early 2006 and the lack of commitment to Aboriginal issues in the federal budget shortly thereafter, there was some optimism created by the Western Premiers meetings. We commend the Premiers for their continued support for the spirit and intent of the Kelowna Accord. It provides us optimism for the future.

These follow-up meetings (in Gimli, Manitoba, and Corner Brook, Newfoundland) provided National Aboriginal leaders with an avenue to connect with the new Prime Minister, and to negotiate and advocate for support for the Accord. Prime Minister Harper would be advised to honour commitments of the previous government and implement the Accord through both these Premiers meetings and this Bill tabled here today.

Bill C-292

Long before he became Prime Minister, Mr. Paul Martin identified Aboriginal issues as a top priority. We are also aware that he continues in this priority. He described the Kelowna Accord as "an unprecedented step forward." The Accord would have gone a long way to repairing the strained relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the federal government.

The current political environment presents certain barriers and opportunities to improving relationships. On the surface, political will represents a barrier; and conversely, Bill C-292 represents opportunity. The challenge for the future is

compromise: If Kelowna cannot be implemented in its entirety; its principles and plans of actions must be implemented at least in part.

We support the positions presented by the other National Aboriginal Organizations, rightfully urging the federal government to honour crown commitments. The Assembly of First Nations argues that without swift, concerted action directed at closing the socio-economic gap, our children will continue to suffer in poverty and hopelessness. As human beings, we all carry certain responsibilities to act on these injustices; to protect those most vulnerable, those who have essentially become “casualties of war”. As Aboriginal people, we carry added commitment to ensure a safe secure environment for our children’s children: For the next seven generations. These children are the leaders of the future and unless we act now and implement Bill C-292 immediately, our children’s anger, fear and distrust will compound, and future relationships will be severely compromised.

Bill C-292 is an opportunity to stop the cycle of abuse created by extreme, long term poverty; the added bonus would be improved relations.

Our Perspective

NWAC works towards reconciling and reclaiming our ways of being. In traditional law it is the responsibility of women to ensure healthy communities. And prior to colonization, our societies were truly healthy, vibrant and successful in their own right. Each and every community member played a vital role in sustaining the community. Traditional governance models allowed for a balanced, holistic approach to all aspects of local policy development and decision making. With colonization and assimilation came the systematic breakdown of our societies. Connections to the land were severed through the implementation of legislation intended to ‘civilize’ our people. Aboriginal women in particular experienced the most devastating affects. Traditional roles

and matriarchical ways of being were denigrated and ultimately abolished. We lost vital connections to the land and to our communities.

We experienced and continue to tolerate discrimination, shame, and violence. In looking toward the future, all peoples must acknowledge these past injustices. Only in understanding the history of Aboriginal peoples and the impacts of colonization can we effectively envision our rightful place for the future, within our family structure, our communities and society as a whole.

We possess unique needs related to housing, health, education, and economic development. Our perspectives on these issues, as provided through the preparations for Kelowna, created for a more comprehensive representation of “need”. This includes both statistical and empirical evidence: Over half of Aboriginal women live in core housing need (female single parent households); more Aboriginal women live in poverty than ever before (40%); our health status falls far below that of Our non-Aboriginal counterparts (as evidenced by high rates of chronic illness, lower life expectancies, increasing rates of suicide, violence, abuse, and incarceration). The implications for Aboriginal women through the continued lack of attention to the issues are predictably devastating.

Aboriginal women represent 52% of the total Aboriginal population. NWAC identified violence as one of the major causal effects to our continued oppression and marginalized status. Violence against Aboriginal women is occurring at epidemic proportions: We are five times more likely to die as a result of violence than a non-Aboriginal woman. Aboriginal women in Canada are three times more likely to experience violence in their lifetime than non-Aboriginal women. We estimate that over 500 Aboriginal women are missing or were murdered in Canada in the last 15 years.

The linkages between violence and poverty cannot be denied. Poverty is one underlying cause that would be addressed with the implementation of the

Kelowna Accord. We cannot continue to take band-aid approaches to issues that have become ingrained.

In our assessment of Bill C-292, it is not enough to simply consider the implications on women and children; rather, we must target this segment of the Aboriginal population for change. By raising their socioeconomic status, we can more effectively address the satellite issues (housing, health, education). NWAC continues to keep Aboriginal women and children issues in the public eye, and it is our firm belief that when Aboriginal women are safe and healthy, their children, families, communities and Nations are healthy. Likewise, what is good for Aboriginal peoples is good for Canada, because these issues are not Aboriginal-issues, they are Canadian-issues.

Conclusion

Although the Kelowna Accord was not flawless, from our perspective, it was clearly more about renewing and rebuilding relationships. The Accord speaks to our ability to collectively set an agenda and itemize a plan of action. It was the culmination of months of discussion, dialogue, and negotiation with consensus as the objective. The relationships created throughout reflect the type of partnerships Aboriginal peoples envisioned when we entered into treaty negotiations with the Crown hundreds of years ago. NWAC would like to hold this up as an example of what we are capable of, so that our children might look back on this time and learn from it.

NWAC was challenged in our efforts to ensure Aboriginal women's specific issues were adequately accommodated within the Accord. We would have preferred more emphasis on the development of options to addressing the alarming rates of violence against Aboriginal women both in our communities and Canadian society. We believe this issue, above all others, underpins the crisis poverty levels. Addressing violence against Aboriginal women is one of the most critical elements to closing the gap in quality of life for Aboriginal peoples.

NWAC lobbied hard to get to the Kelowna table; it was a thirty year struggle to sit as equals. We fought equally hard to ensure Aboriginal women's issues were at the forefront of discussions.

The commitment to focus the next First Minister's Meeting on Aboriginal women was an achievement in itself; a pivotal moment for Aboriginal women and children across Canada.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The challenge for the future is compromise: We recommend that if the Kelowna Accord cannot be implemented in its entirety, it must be implemented at least in part.
2. We recommend that the federal government acknowledge, respect and honour the integrity of Crown commitments for the betterment of relations between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society.
3. We recommend that all members of this committee consider the principles found in the Federal Accountability Act and vote in favour of passing Bill C-292.