

National chief talks transparency

Congress of Aboriginal Peoples National Chief Patrick Brazeau to speak at Queen's Oct. 31

BY KERRI MACDONALD, FEATURES EDITOR

When it comes to issues regarding aboriginal peoples in Canada, Patrick Brazeau isn't afraid to stir the pot.

Brazeau is national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, an organization devoted to the rights of aboriginal people living off-reserve. Next week he's making a speech at Queen's called "Re-engineering Canada's Aboriginal Affairs," which he said is focused on two main issues: the lack of accountability and the need for increased governance, both of which stem from the Indian Act.

"Right now the Indian Act is a recipe for corruption," Brazeau said. "Certainly we know that many communities are in financial difficulty, are corrupt ... and unfortunately it's the people that have to pay the price."

The Act—enacted by Parliament in 1876—allows the federal government to pass legislation regarding First Nations communities. Brazeau said he's working to have it altered, if not eliminated.

"Since I was 10 years old I was always interested in bringing about increased transparency, and in a perfect world eliminating the Indian Act," he said.

"A hundred and thirty years after the fact there hasn't been all that much progress in terms of people's living conditions and socioeconomic conditions for people living both on and off-reserve," he said, adding that he often quotes a former superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs who said the Indian Act was intended to "assimilate and get rid of the Indian problem."

Brazeau—an Algonquin Indian from just outside the Kitigan Zibi reserve near Maniwaki, Quebec—studied civil law at the University of Ottawa and received a diploma in social sciences in 2001. The same year, he started working in research for the Congress, where he was elected National Chief in 2006.

Although he has considered getting into federal politics, he said for now he's devoted to his position within the Congress and plans to run for re-election in mid-November.

"I'm committed to staying here for the time being because there's some unfinished business that I would certainly like to continue working on," he said.

Living off-reserve growing up, Brazeau said he endured judgment both from his reserve community and from the non-aboriginal community.

"I went to a non-aboriginal school and to my friends who were not aboriginal, they always viewed me as being too much aboriginal, and the reserve community, which was about 1,000 meters from where I was living, they saw me as being not aboriginal enough just because of the fact that I lived off reserve," he said.



Patrick Brazeau, national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, says he was disappointed by Canada's recent election campaigns. (Supplied)

A 33-year-old father of three, Brazeau is Canada's youngest aboriginal leader—but he said he's been a natural leader since he was much younger.

"Even growing up playing hockey ... I was either captain or assistant captain of a team, so I've never had any real problems in assisting to lead," he said. "I remember I started to question the role of chiefs across the country because year after year I kept hearing rhetoric. I decided at a very young age that I wasn't going to be an individual like that and I was going to try to invoke change."

Brazeau said the belief that the Indian Act gives rights to aboriginal peoples is a myth. The government has made various attempts to amend certain portions of the Act, but there has always been some resistance by aboriginal leaders, he said.

"Let's face it—that's where they get the power and control over the people," he said.

"They might be quoted in the newspaper saying we should move beyond the Indian Act, but at the same time, if the Indian Act is dismantled these very same chiefs are the ones that are going to be losing their jobs."

The Congress is often publically at odds with the Assembly of First Nations, a body of Canadian aboriginal leaders headed by Chief Phil Fontaine.

"Obviously we're at loggerheads sometimes with the Assembly of First Nations," Brazeau said, adding that it's important for people to be able to hear different positions on issues.

"Far too often we hear the Assembly talk about one thing and because people don't hear a diverging message or position ... they think every aboriginal person believes what the Assembly is saying."

Brazeau said he tries to interact with aboriginal people from across the country, some of whom have a fear of retribution and aren't able to speak out for themselves.

"My role is to speak for those that have no voice," he said. "We can talk about all the problems until the cows come home but until we actually offer some solutions no change will be made."

Brazeau said that, although the Congress includes every off-reserve Canadian aboriginal person, the Assembly of First Nations is made up only of chiefs.

"I view the Assembly as an elitist group which supports the status quo and unfortunately are not accountable to their members," he said. "Some of their messages, certainly in the last little while, I see their messaging being against everything that the federal government is proposing."

But Brazeau said the contradictions between the two groups raise important issues.

"It's only when you raise that level of debate that change comes about," he said.

Last January, the Congress issued a report called "Where Did the Money Go?"

The report—which took six months to compile—looked at federal funding devoted to aboriginal people. Brazeau said of the \$10.1 billion that's spent, only 67 per cent goes to the reserve communities.

"We don't know where the rest goes," he said. "The question we were asking was, well, 'If \$5.6 billion is being spent directly toward reserve communities, why are they still living in poverty?'"

Brazeau is also focused on improving leadership within the aboriginal community. In 1999 a Supreme Court decision—known as the Corbiere Decision—ruled that off-reserve band members should have the right to vote in band elections, he said. Previously, under the Indian Act, only those living on reserves could vote. But since the Corbiere decision was made, he said, over half of Canada's aboriginal communities have reverted to what's known as the "custom" method of leader selection.

"Many of these custom codes are carbon copies of the election process that is prescribed under the Indian Act," Brazeau said.

“It’s just not right for communities to deny their off-reserve band members from the right to vote.”

Brazeau said he’s looking for the federal government’s assistance in amending various sections of the Indian Act to bring about increased accountability. Although the Congress endorsed the Conservative Party in the 2006 election, Brazeau said he wasn’t impressed with any of the parties’ platforms in this fall’s election.

“There’s been a total lack of discussion around what needs to be done,” he said. “Nothing new, nothing earth-shattering, nothing in my opinion worth even debating or discussing.”

He said he was especially disappointed in light of the federal government’s June 13 apology to former students of residential schools.

“We were looking forward to at least seeing the political parties try to build momentum ... but every party fell short of doing that,” he said.

He said the apology, for which he was present at the House of Commons, was a surprise.

“It’s something that the aboriginal community has been asking for for a very long time now,” he said. “Obviously some people will view this as empty words, but I think it’s going to have some huge applications perhaps 10 or 15 years down the road when younger people see the prime minister of Canada standing up and apologizing to the peoples themselves in the House of Commons.”

But there’s still a lot of ignorance in Canada surrounding aboriginal peoples, Brazeau said. Last week, for example, the Globe and Mail reported that in August, Canadian International Olympic Committee representative Dick Pound called 17th century Canada “a land of savages.”

Brazeau said aboriginal leaders have to do a better job educating the non-aboriginal population on some of the issues they face on a day-to-day basis, because some of the changes he’s working for need support from the non-aboriginal population, as well.

“I view this country as being obviously a multicultural country—it was built on multiculturalism. But unfortunately there’s still some racism, discrimination and ignorant individuals out there.”

Patrick Brazeau will be speaking at Queen’s next Friday as part of the Policy Studies Speaker Series. The talk begins at 12 p.m. in the Policy Studies building, room 202.

A long overdue apology

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a formal apology in the House of Commons to former residential school students. Here is an excerpt from his speech: “On behalf of the government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to aboriginal peoples for Canada’s role in the Indian residential schools system. To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the Government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow, and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that, far too often, these institutions gave rise to abuse or neglect and were inadequately controlled, and we apologize for failing to protect you. Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, and for this we are sorry. The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long.”

—Kerri MacDonald and Mike Woods