



Kahnawà:ke Ratítsénhaiens

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Tsi Nahóten Karihwanákere No'nenk News Release

Aboriginal Affairs Minister Valcourt's comments irresponsible, insidious

For immediate release

(Kahnawake – 15, Onerahtohkó:wa/May 2015) The Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke (MCK) wishes to advise the public that it takes great offense to comments made by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada Minister Bernard Valcourt in regard to Kahnawà:ke's internal Membership issues.

In comments provided to Montreal's *Le Devoir* newspaper on May 6th, Mr. Valcourt said that the rules governing Membership are "racist and unacceptable in this country."

"It is difficult to articulate just how irresponsible and insidious his comments are," said Grand Chief Michael Ahríhron Delisle, Jr. in a statement (see attached document). "Because he is the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, most Canadians will assume that he is speaking from a position of intimate knowledge of Kahnawà:ke. The truth is a whole different matter."

"By wading into a situation that he knows very little of, he is giving Canadians a very skewed picture – one painted with the broad strokes of ignorance rather than one respecting the subtleties and intricacies that are demanded" of a man in his position, continued Grand Chief Delisle.

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Statement regarding Minister's accusations of 'Racist Rules' in Kahnawake

It is with great alarm that the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke learns of Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Bernard Valcourt's comments published in an article printed in Le Devoir newspaper. In the article, Mr. Valcourt says that, "*The rules governing membership in Kahnawake are racist and unacceptable in this country. We ask community leaders to adopt a policy governing membership and residence that is more inclusive, one that respects the spirit of Canadian values of equality and freedom.*" Mr. Valcourt's remarks were made in reference to a May 2nd demonstration held as a reminder to respect Kahnawà:ke's residency laws.

It is difficult to articulate just how irresponsible and insidious his comments are. In the grand scheme of things, most readers will glide past his quote and mumble something along the lines of 'how horrible those Mohawks are.' Because he is the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, most Canadians will assume that he is speaking from a position of intimate knowledge of Kahnawà:ke. Many will assume that he has met with community leaders and tried in vain to 'talk sense into those stubborn Mohawks.' And most will assume that he has picked up the phone and contacted Kahnawà:ke to give the Grand Chief a piece of his mind on the issue.

Of course, the truth is a whole different matter. For the record, we have been attempting to meet with the Minister since he was appointed to his position in early 2013, with no success. While we understand that he may be upset with Kahnawà:ke's position on the proposed *First Nations Education Act* fiasco, there is no excuse for someone in his position to think that, by simply ignoring us, we will go away. By wading into a situation that he knows very little of, he is giving Canadians a very skewed picture – one painted with the broad strokes of ignorance rather than one respecting the subtleties and intricacies that is demanded.

In Kahnawà:ke the leadership responds to the directives of the people, not the other way around. This isn't something new – it has been this way since time immemorial. The community has been clear in its support for the residency requirements of the *Kahnawà:ke Membership Law*. Though the written Kahnawà:ke laws on Membership were only created beginning in 1981, there was unwritten understanding on these matters throughout our history. The only reason a written law was made was because Canada's *Indian Act (imposed in 1876)* allowed non-Native women married to Native men to acquire Indian Status and live on reserve, while Native women who married non-Native men could not – and lost their Indian Status. It is ironic that the Minister calls our laws 'racist' since they were created as a frustrated response to the clearly discriminatory nature of those sections of the *Indian Act*.

Kahnawà:ke, as a Mohawk community, has long been guided by the philosophy that the needs of the collective supersede the needs of the individual. No one has ever said that people cannot have relationships with non-Indigenous persons; simply, they are required to live off the Territory. The collective has spoken many times on this issue. Mr. Valcourt could have gained some insight into this had he ever bothered to speak to us.

There is a long-held understanding that the Minister holds a challenging position that includes finding a balance between the needs of the First Nations and the realities of the government and its policies. By his actions (and inactions) this minister has thrown any pretense of fairness out the window, which is a poor reflection on both Mr. Valcourt and the government that installed him. We do not expect a 'kumbaya' relationship but we do demand that we be heard. When frustrations boil over into something else, we will undoubtedly be painted as the villains once again. Kahnawà:ke is not Hamas, and Canada is not Israel – there is no excuse to refuse to sit and discuss issues of mutual concern face-to-face in an honest and forthright manner. We would prefer to meet as friends but, first, we have to actually meet.

In regard to Mr. Valcourt's demand that we act in a manner "that respects the spirit of Canadian values of equality and freedom," the Minister needs to be reminded that we have and always will be Mohawks first and foremost. There is no hatred, prejudice or disdain in this statement. It is simply fact. And, yes, we are quite familiar with some of Canada's historical values in matters related to First Nations: may we remind everyone that the *Indian Act* itself was created with the express intent of assimilating Canada's Native peoples? Let's add a few other direct impacts: the residential schools era, and the expropriations of our lands for Hydro lines, the St. Lawrence Seaway, bridges, railways and major highways. And let's not forget the fact that we are coming up on the 25th anniversary on a series of events in which Canada sent its army against our people, and where Canadian people stoned our women and elders. Yet, we're the one being labelled as racists. When you put it all together, perhaps Canadians can begin to gain some understanding of our distrust and disappointment in some of Canada's values when it comes to their treatment of First Nations.

For the record, non-Natives who married before 1981 continue to reside here and have not and are not being asked to leave. It's also important to note that our collective law-making process allows for and encourages amendments. Our people can always change their minds about the residency requirements in our law. Importantly, we are currently in an amendment process, though it appears that the community is not ready to support a liberalization of the residency requirements at this time. Perhaps if Canada gave back the land they stole from us, we'd have more of it to share and consider more liberal residency laws. Perhaps if Canada simply respected the Two Row Wampum Treaty – the agreement where we agreed to live in parallel worlds, travelling the same waters together but neither trying to steer the other's canoe – we wouldn't even be discussing this.

It is never too late to right a wrong. This Minister needs to deal with the issues. After all, that is his job. We've been, and are, prepared to meet. But we are growing tired of waiting by the phone.

**ON BEHALF OF THE OFFICE OF THE COUNCIL OF CHIEFS
MOHAWK COUNCIL OF KAHNAWÀ:KE**



Grand Chief Michael Ahríhron Delisle Jr