



Algonquins of Ontario

A Message to the Mayor and City Councillors of Ottawa

The Algonquins of Ontario are “Real” Algonquins

February 10, 2021

Mayor Watson and Members of City Council,

The rhetoric that advances Indian status or federal recognition as the only true markers of Indigeneity is tired, archaic and perpetuates colonialism. Non-status Algonquins are “real” Algonquins. Many of our people, including my own father, rejected the notions of Indian status, and did not require Canada, the *Indian Act* or anyone else to tell him who he was. He, and many other Algonquins, lived on the land and resisted the many pressures to relocate and assimilate. Others were disenfranchised through gender discrimination, education, military service, or the two-generation cut-off that still threatens to disconnect future generations of Algonquins if we rely on Indian Status to determine who is a “real” Algonquin.

In fact, our petitions to Canada and subsequent promises for four additional reserves throughout Algonquin territory on the Ontario side are a testament to the Algonquin presence and legitimacy. Algonquins in Ontario were not, and are not, confined to the tiny 1,840 acres of reserve land at Golden Lake. In comparison, it would be like suggesting that the only ‘real’ Algonquins in Quebec are those who settled at Kitigan Zibi. There are eight other Algonquin reserves in Quebec, and if historical circumstances were different, perhaps they too would have been denied additional reserve lands. Canada tried very hard to convince all Algonquins, including those in Ontario, to relocate to Kitigan Zibi. The Algonquins within Ontario petitioned incessantly for recognition and reserve land in Ontario, resisting these pressures for decades and generations. If it were not for the increased pressure of settlement, resource extraction and the creation of Algonquin Park on the Ontario side, we too would have additional reserve lands. This is a significant colonial injustice that we are now seeking to reconcile through the Algonquins of Ontario treaty negotiations with the Government of Ontario and Canada, Pikwakanagan’s self-government and economic development; self-determination through every avenue available to us.

Rather than undermining our self-determination and perpetuating colonial divisions, the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan have taken an inclusive, nation-building, and reconciliatory approach to our present and future. In addition to the broken promises for reserve land allocations in Ontario, we have also had to work to restore our nation in the context of the intergenerational effects and ongoing pressures of assimilation. Many of our citizens attended Indian day school or residential schools, many were apprehended during the sixties scoop, or excluded through gender discrimination, and through these traumas, our families have been disrupted and damaged; our culture, language, and governance structures have been nearly lost; and the integrity and independence of our economies have been damaged. Those of us who have survived, owe it to our ancestors to rise above these notions that Indigenous identity and belonging are determined by a piece of legislation designed to eradicate and assimilate us. We owe it to those still living as

well, such as Lynn Gehl and Cindy Blackstock to name only two in a sea of advocates and activists, and to countless others who continue to dedicate themselves entirely to the fight for justice and equity.

The recent media attention on the subject of “pretendians” or race-shifters, those who exploit a distant and tenuous indigenous ancestry for personal gain, has brought more attention to an issue that many Indigenous communities have been battling for many years. Countless hours have been dedicated to addressing this issue for the Algonquins in Ontario. Many individuals have been removed from the AOO list over the years as the AOO has taken steps to identify anyone who has a tenuous or mistaken claim to Algonquin identity. We have worked very diligently to strengthen the criteria for enrolment, requiring anyone who wishes to register to demonstrate a sustained connection to the original historical collectives. It is not possible to be enrolled in the Algonquins of Ontario with only distant heritage as has been suggested.

Many AOO members who have satisfied the criteria are status Indians under the *Indian Act*. They include both on-Reserve and off-Reserve Pikwakanagan members and many others who have status under the *Indian Act*. The AOO has made a commitment to be inclusive and not to confine their membership to the dictates of the piece of repressive colonial legislation that is the *Indian Act*.

The Algonquins of Ontario are the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan and vice versa. “Real” Algonquins, as they say, are in control of the negotiation of our Treaty, self-government, and other expressions of self-determination.

All identity politics aside, we are real and true partners in the Tewin development project, and we are proud to be part of an environmentally conscious, sustainable urban development. Rather than be relegated to the far reaches or to the reserve lands, we are taking our rightful place in Ottawa, Canada, and the global community.

It is quite disappointing to receive such ardent criticism from the Quebec Algonquins when there have been many sincere efforts to rebuild the Algonquin Nation throughout the watershed, rejecting the geographical colonial division of the Ottawa-Quebec border. We have welcomed the Quebec Algonquins to the Algonquins of Ontario negotiation table to address their concerns head-on (an invitation that was ignored or rejected). We have supported the assertion of Algonquin control over 100 Wellington Street, issued several letters of support for their projects and initiatives, and jointly expressed concern on many issues in Ottawa. These recent public statements by Quebec Algonquin Chiefs are contrary to the spirit and momentum of nation building that I believed we were engaged in. We do owe it to our ancestors to rise above this divisive non-status nonsense and focus on decolonization and reconciliation with willing and able partners in the City of Ottawa and beyond.

We have been able to build relationships and opportunities as the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation and as the Algonquins of Ontario by offering a sense of continuity and inclusivity in our approach to rebuilding the Algonquin Nation. We hear gratitude and commendation from all sides for the intention of Mayor Jim Watson and the City of Ottawa to make reconciliation a priority, and for taking action on that priority. However, we seem to differ on the approach we must take to achieve this. We are doing our best given the circumstances, given the history and ongoing challenges, and we recognize that we may not achieve the perfect or the ideal. We are open to

adjustment, adaptations, and collaborations across the river. Though, we will not confound well intentioned efforts or stagnate in our pursuits of a just and prosperous future. We have five living Chiefs of Pikwakanagan, previous councillors, administrators, professionals, academics, our ancestors, and our decedents yet to be, all making up the collective wisdom of our people, ensuring that we carve our best possible paths forward. While we are part of the broader Algonquin Nation, we maintain an element of autonomy and independence as well. We hope our respect for community level wisdom, autonomy, and authority is reciprocated by other Algonquin First Nations. The reality is that we need everyone, every Algonquin citizen, empowered individually and collectively, to build the nation and our shared futures. We cannot achieve this through exclusion and division. We must remember and embrace our Seven Grandfather teachings: Courage, Respect, Humility, Love, Truth, Wisdom, and Honesty in all of our dealings.

It is important to state that our approach does not, and nor has it ever, prohibited or excluded the Quebec Algonquins from pursuing development opportunities or asserting their presence and jurisdiction in Ottawa in any way. Personally, I would love to see the day that there are sustainable, prosperous developments owned and controlled fully and jointly by the Algonquins in Ontario and Quebec. Even with these recent tensions, I will not allow this to be stricken from the realm of the possible.

Wendy Jocko is Chief of the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation and Algonquin Negotiation Representative with the Algonquins of Ontario.