

The Nisga'a and their right to self-government

By RANDY MCDONALD

Earlier this month, the provincial government of British Columbia finally — after a century of protests by the Nisga'a and their assorted Native and non-Native supporters — decided to return to the Nisga'a a degree of autonomy.

After a century-long hiatus, the Nisga'a are regaining control over two thousand square kilometers of their traditional land, along with a democratically-elected governing council and full control of, among other things, education and land management. With luck, this agreement will not only return to the Nisga'a the power that they need to stop the collapse of their society into poverty, but it will be a model for other self-government agreements for other Native Canadian peoples.

Not surprisingly, quite a few people, all of them Euro-Canadian, oppose the return of self-rule to the Nisga'a.

Some even suggest that to give the Nisga'a self-government is the equivalent of setting up a system of South African-style apartheid — never mind that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms fully applies to the Nisga'a district, and there hasn't been any hint that the Nisga'a might turn the tables around and discriminate against the Euro-Canadian population.

In short, the Euro-Canadian opponents of Nisga'a self-government are afraid that to let the Nisga'a decide that they don't want to be made over into English Canadians. They want to define who belongs to the English Canadian nation.

For the Frenchman Ernest Renan, in the 1880's, it was equally important to define who belonged to the French nation.

After all, just a decade before he wrote, France had been conquered by the emerging German empire, and the province of Alsace-Lorraine — a province where the vernacular was much closer to French than German — was annexed by Germany. The German supporters of the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine said that since the Alsatians spoke a German dialect, Alsace should be a

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German province, not French.

Renan pointed out, though, that in no country was language, ancestry, or geography by themselves enough to define who belonged to the nation. He demonstrated that the Alsatians never wanted to become German citizens, even though they spoke a German dialect; they freely chose to be French, and resisted the German conquest.

Thus, Renan concluded, the Alsatians had been denied their right to self-determination — they had been denied their right to be French.

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The sophisticated cultures of the Pacific Northwest coast certainly had an idea of tribal and village property; in fact, the Tlingit of Alaska challenged the Russian sale of Alaska to the United States on the grounds that the Russians had no title to Tlingit lands. The Nisga'a didn't make a similar protest when British Columbia joined Confederation, mainly because they hadn't been informed of it.

Only when missionaries came to gut Nisga'a culture and spirituality, and immigrants took over many of the Nisga'a

lands did the Nisga'a protest.

•In 1887, they sent a delegation to Victoria demanding that their land rights be recognized. The British Columbian government refused.

•In the 1920's, the Nisga'a sued the Federal government for recognition of their self-government. Their case was turned down on the lack of supporting evidence.

•And, beginning in the 1960's, Nisga'a leaders began to organize another case that would hopefully reestablish their self-government; this culminated in the current agreement.

The Nisga'a are doing better than most of the other Native nations in Canada — their language is still widely used, their traditions are relatively intact, and unlike nearly all of the other Native cultures of British Columbia, their homeland hasn't been inundated by Euro-Canadian settlers.

Anyone who suggests that the Nisga'a population — 1,800 people in the lands of the lower Nass valley to be given over to the three thousand in neighboring cities — is too small to be self-governing apparently hasn't heard tell of the pre-contact system of chiefdoms throughout the Pacific coast of North America, with a history stretching back thousands of years and many fewer resources than the Nisga'a control now.

The Nisga'a do not want now, and have not ever wanted, to be assimilated into the Canadian population. The Nisga'a have never consented to be taken over, to have their culture destroyed and the survivors made over into English-speaking, Maple Leaf-waving, unequivocally *Canadian* people.

The Nisga'a have simply wanted to remain Nisga'a. Canada, as a nation governed by the rule of law, has no choice but to acknowledge this fact. It's that simple.



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