

The Oka coral: what now?

Commentary by Pat Brethour *The Cord*

I've always taken a certain pride in my fellow Canadians. Always thought that we were different than most--more tolerant, slow to anger and quick to forgive. In a smug sort of way, I thought we were better than the bigots of the world. Until this summer.

Starting off with the Meech Lake fiasco, and the wonderful, wacky antics of the Alliance for the Preservation of English in Canada (you know--the group that drew a parallel between AIDS and French), my perception of Canadians ran into the brick wall of a brutal reality--Canadian bigotry.

You may scoff, and attribute APEC's actions to the acts of the fatical fringe. And I suppose you could have dismissed these actions as exceptions to the general rule of Canadian tolerance.

But then came Oka. If you saw the pictures of Mohawk families being stoned by a bloodthirsty mob, you could no longer dismiss anything. Because when push came to shove, when being tolerant took more than mealy-mouthed platitudes, we copped out. For far, far worse than the mob in, and around Oka, was the witch hunt atmosphere that pervaded the rest of the country. "Send the army in--kick some Indian ass!" Such was the cry of not just the lunatic fringe, but of almost the entire country.

It's easy enough to look at the CBC footage of menacing Mohawk Warriors standing toe-to-toe with Canadian soldiers, and condemn the natives' actions. What you didn't see on the tube on Saturday and Sunday, were the years of broken promises and broken dreams suffered by Canada's natives.

You didn't see a proud independent people's culture twisted and degraded, with a commentary by Peter Mansbridge. None of this will ever be shown on **The Journal**.

For too long we were all too content to let the natives fester in the squalor we had constructed for them. And then, when they had had enough lies,

enough hydro projects flooding their hunting grounds, enough golf courses being built on their burial grounds, they drew the line in the only way that could work. Force. Where reason and patience could not prevail, perhaps the barrel of a gun could.

Of course the powers-that-be could not let the natives' challenge go unanswered. So in went the Québec police force (an organization not particularly noted for its compassion) to teach the uppity natives a lesson. Instead of fleeing, the natives stood firm, and in the resulting melée, a Québec police officer died.

The outcry was immediate and predictable: The Indians are out of control. Break them down. Bring the 'murderers' to justice.

Of course, the fact that it may well have been a police bullet that killed the man was inconsequential. All that mattered was that the majority was threatened and needed to strike back at that threat.

So in went the Canadian army (ordered in by a provincial premier!), to douse the flames of native defiance. The past week has seen the inexorable tightening of the noose around the necks of the Mohawks. The barriers at Chateaugay have been dismantled, and those at Oka are sure to come down soon. All that remains is the Mohawk Warriors' angry vows to protect their land and people. I doubt if that will be enough to prevent them from being screwed yet again.

One of my friends said to me, "Oka was inevitable". In a way, that's true. Not the actual event itself--a smattering of common sense could have prevented that easily enough. What was inevitable was the bitter lesson Oka taught me, and I think, a lot of other Canadians. The lesson was this: we have no cause for smugness, no reason for quiet pride in our 'tolerance'.

The physical barriers may be down at Oka, but the barriers of prejudice and bigotry are only beginning to go up in Canada. And it will be a long time before any of us can ever be smug again.