

## **Update to Chapter 19, *Canada: Face of a Nation***

### **New Leader of the Canadian Assembly of First Nations Elected**

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) is Canada's largest Aboriginal organization, representing over 630 First Nations communities in Canada. Each community is represented by a chief, and every three years these chiefs (Chiefs-in-Assembly) meet to elect a National Chief to lead the AFN. They met in Ottawa on July 11–13, 2000 and listened to the speeches of candidates who wanted the job. Phil Fontaine, the current National Chief, was widely expected to win re-election. He was a moderate, and during his term had worked with the government to obtain greater justice for the First Nations people. Among his accomplishments was the elimination of a multimillion-dollar debt of the AFN, and obtaining an apology from the federal government for the past abuses of Aboriginal children at residential schools, including payment of \$350 million as a healing fund. In Fontaine's speech to the Chiefs-in-Assembly he reminded his audience that during his three-year term, he had raised the profile and influence of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and had been responsible for obtaining more than \$2 billion in programs.

However, at the convention, there emerged a serious challenger to Phil Fontaine and his quest for a second term in office. Matthew Coon Come captured the imagination of his audience with his speech, despite being viewed by many as an activist and as someone who resorted to confrontation rather than negotiation and compromise. Despite his reputation as being somewhat of a radical he brought with him an impressive set of credentials.

- He was elected four times as Grand Chief of the Grand Council of Crees.
- He attended university at Trent and McGill.
- He participated and was successful in court cases involving Aboriginal rights.
- He helped to halt a \$13 billion hydro-electric project on Cree land in northern Québec.
- He obtained a revenue-sharing deal with the Québec government on future projects involving natural resources on Cree lands.
- He supported the federalist side in the 1995 Québec referendum and indicated that if Québec separated, the Cree would be a sovereign people who would remain in the country of Canada.

Coon Come is a complex individual. He describes himself as "... a Cree ... a Christian ... a leader." His name, "Matthew," reflects the fact that he is a devout Roman Catholic while his middle name, "Coon," is a Cree word meaning "snow." He has been married for 24 years and has five children. Despite his family responsibilities and the pressures of his job, he spends weeks in the bush living off the land as his ancestors have always done. He is extremely proud of his Cree heritage and is determined to preserve it and to

obtain justice not only for Canadian Aboriginal peoples, but for indigenous peoples all over the world. He has a reputation for being combative and aggressive in obtaining his goals.

In his speech to the Chiefs-in-Assembly, Coon Come stated, “Behaving like good little Indians never got us anywhere.... The only time the government moves is when you embarrass them, when you push them against the wall.”

The assembled chiefs liked what they heard and many were surprised when the first vote showed that he had received 50.3% of the vote. Fontaine had received 41.6%, Marilyn Buffalo — the first woman to run for the position of Chief of First Nations — received 2.6%, and Lawrence Martin, 5.3%. A second vote was held, as the winning candidate must receive a minimum of 60% of the votes cast. The last two candidates were eliminated from this vote. The second vote results showed that Coon Come had received 58.1% and Fontaine, 41.9% of the votes. Fontaine decided not to run on a third ballot and Coon Come was elected.

His election has raised the hopes of many Aboriginal peoples that he will take a stronger stand against the federal government to obtain land and resources. Coon Come has indicated that he will go to the United Nations to publicize the conditions and injustices suffered by the First Nations people, and force the Canadian government to take action to correct them. Two weeks after his election, he spoke at the United Nations to support the creation of a Permanent United Nations Forum on Indigenous Peoples. If created, this forum would investigate the situations and claims of indigenous peoples around the world and make recommendations to address them.

### **Suggested Activities**

1. Research the background and qualifications of each of the candidates. Who would you vote for and why?
2. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of confrontation in solving issues.
3. Compare your own style of solving problems and issues with those of Coon Come. How are they similar or different?
4. Select and research an Aboriginal issue such as self-government; preservation of culture, land and compensation claims; past treatment; alcoholism; and suicide rates. Develop and debate proposed solutions to these issues.