Taiaiake Alfred, A Critical Reflection on "From Bad to Worse: Internal Politics in the 1990 Crisis at Kahnawake," *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec, Vol. L, No. 3, 2020-2021, 137-139.*

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The reaction I had in reading my 1991 article, "From Bad to Worse: Internal Politics in the 1990 Crisis at Kahnawà:ke[1]," for the first time in many years was not an intellectual one. My reaction was emotional. Hard feelings flowed through me again, sharp words that I had heard and spoke echoed through time, and I felt the heaviness of the psychic burden of a nation in turmoil raging against our enemies real and perceived, angry, and untrusting of each other too, once again. These were feelings that had been buried for thirty years, but which for me, like every other Mohawk who lived through the 1990 conflict, have always been there. I had sublimated them; they were useful to me, they were the driving force of my life's work, and they fueled the fire of my intellectualism, my oratory, and my political actions all these years too. Reading the article caused a bodily resurgence of those feelings and brought the searing heat of that historical moment of internecine turmoil to the surface once again.

The article was my first scholarly publication, and when I wrote it in 1991, I was a twenty-seven-year-old graduate student at Cornell University, fresh out of the fire of that hot summer, and a novice at both academics and politics. I had at that point only four years work experience at the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke, as an aide to Grand Chief Joe Tokwiro Norton and Chief Billy Two Rivers, and I was in the second year of my master's program in political science and philosophy. My people at home in Kahnawà:ke were living under the burden of a siege that lasted for two years, occupied by an armoured battalion of Canadian Forces troops, and still facing constant threats of harassment by the Sûreté du Québec as well as constant assaults by racist Québécois.

Now, as I write this reflection, I am a fifty-six-year-old senior scholar and consultant in governance, and I bring to the task of critically engaging with work that I created 30 years ago a perspective formed by a journey of personal decolonization and dedicated work to advance Indigenous nationhood in many ways and in many institutional settings, in my own community and other First Nations', and having engaged in many different roles at all levels of government in Canada, the United States and internationally. Since I wrote the article in 1991, I've been shaped as a person and a thinker in crucial ways by my exposure to the global literature on colonization and decolonization. I have expanded my sense of what it means to be a Mohawk and an Indigenous person by dedicating myself to traditional land-based practices, involvement in the ceremonies of my own and other Indigenous nations' cultural and spiritual life, and involvement in militant arms of the Indigenous nationhood movement. The frustration, anger, and resentment I channeled as I wrote the original article, and which are evident in the voice and tone of the piece, have been tempered by these deep and wide-ranging experiences and learnings.

[1] "From Bad to Worse: Internal Politics in the 1990 Crisis at Kahnawake" was originally published in English by *Northeast Indian Quarterly* 8(1): 23-31, and in French as « De mal en pis: la politique interne à Kahnawake dans la crise de 1990 » *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec*, 1991, 21(3): 29-38.

The thing that makes me uncomfortable about the article is my participation in and furtherance of the divisiveness that afflicted our community, and the Haudenosaunee peoples as a whole, for so many years and my use of sharp words towards members of my own community. I'm not proud of this aspect of the piece, and I have a mind to use the opportunity writing this reflection offers me to disavow this part of my own intellectual history; but perhaps I shouldn't. Isn't the article, discomforting as it is to read over, yet a truthful artifact of that time and place in the history of the Mohawk Nation, and isn't it right to let it stand as it was written? I think so. And it is the anchor point for the trace of my trajectory as a thinker and writer, of the development of my own oeuvre and political identity as an intellectual and activist whose evolution – for anyone who may be interested now or in the future - is represented and well-explicated in the three books, the many articles, and the hundreds of speeches and media appearances that I have produced since then. Whatever the verdict is on this point in anyone's mind, for myself, I reread the article and with clear(er) eyes I saw the objectives and passions of that young(er) Mohawk on the page and was proud to claim its analysis and argumentation.

After taking some time to reflect on the piece, the thing that impresses me is its conveyance of the strong and proud stand that we took that summer and in the years that followed. Here I am not referring to the actual blockades, because there was then and there still is division within our community on whether taking such action was a good idea, and on the tactics and strategic choices that were made by leaders of both the traditional and elected governments. What I am referring to is the stand we took as Mohawks together to protect ourselves and our families and our land, the unity of purpose we demonstrated, and solidarity of the line we held, together, in spite of the differences of opinion and outlook and what seem now such small and petty grievances between us.

I was working for the elected council that summer and had serious disagreements with decisions that were made by our leaders, I remember that vividly. I also remember that when word went out that a mob of Quèbècois was trying to break through police barriers and rush our defenders on the borderline between Kahnawà:ke and Châteauguay, I biked out to the front line with my cousin Ron with a bat in my hands, ready to do battle. This is how we Mohawks are when we are threatened; we stand together as one and fight. The article I wrote in 1991 certainly documents this fact. But in documenting this *crisis solidarity* the article, from my perspective thirty years later, points to the unfortunate and frustrating fact that there seems to be solidarity among our people only in crisis situations. It shed light on a weakness of our political culture that persists today in that this is also how we Mohawks are when we are *not* threatened and when there are no barbarians at our gates; we too easily turn on each other and fight among ourselves.

The article explained the pronounced conflict between the Longhouse (the traditional government and its supporters) and the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke (the elected government and its supporters), and the minor conflicts that manifested in the realm of politics, but which were rooted in personal and family rivalries and animosities. These were all subsumed in the interest of crisis solidarity for a time at the start of the summer of 1990, but they eventually rose to undermine the unity we had achieved and by the end of the summer derailed the negotiation of a just end to the conflict that could have enhanced the power of the Mohawk Nation vis-à-vis Québec and Canada. The main point of the article was to show how this happened and to provide a useful analysis of the situation.

Beyond describing the political dynamics at play in Kahnawà:ke that summer, the article was an attempt to draw out lessons from the experience and to lay out an agenda for reforming our political culture and strengthening our community's governance: that the crisis was a catalyst that should have forced us to address the factionalism weakening our Nation; that the crisis exposed weaknesses in the capacity and competency of the community's leadership and governing institutions; that the failure of the elected chiefs to move on a mandate they received in 1979 to restore the traditional Haudenosaunee form of government was a serious problem; and, that Kahnawa'kehró:ron needed an internal reconciliation process to generate a unified sense of identity and solidify the community's commitment to a shared vision of nationhood. What can be said thirty years later about the validity of the article's conclusions and the relevancy of its framing of the problems facing Kahnawà:ke, and where are we now on the work of addressing the political fault lines that I exposed?

We have come a long way since 1991 in addressing factionalism in our community. The results of the hard work that has been done in the cultural, political, and spiritual realms by many different people from all segments of our society to reconcile their differences were evident in the response of the community in the winter of 2020 when solidarity blockades arose in support of the Wet'suwet'en people's stand to protect their lands. As in 1990, there were difference of opinion in the community, but for the first time since 1990, and even more so than then, there was practical cooperation and a respectful working relationship among people in leadership in both the traditional and elected systems. The work that has been put into self-reflection and strengthening our sense of identity through language and cultural practice has changed the political culture, and now there are horizons of solidarity this generation of decolonizing young leaders see that previous generations were not able to.

Starting in 2019, led by a younger generation of elected chiefs, the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke initiated a project focused on reviewing and strengthening their own accountability and transparency, and to work on the skills and strengths of leadership within the elected system with the longer-term vision of initiating a community dialogue to bridge the institutions of the traditional and the elected systems. There is a renewed commitment and – more importantly – an action plan under development by the leadership of the elected system to enact the 1979 mandate to restore the traditional form of government in Kahnawà:ke. This is an important shift to be sure, but it is *how* the work is being done that signals the most significant change in the community's political culture.

The confrontational style and old competitive idea of displacing the Longhouse or replacing the Band Council no longer hold sway, and people are now looking at how to create working relationships grounded in respect and to create unity among people while not forcing them to give up their belief or their commitments or practical allegiances to one or the other systems. Reconciling differences among our people has begun in earnest in recent years, led by people who are trained in traditional ways, who know how to listen, who know the wisdoms coded in our language and whose perspective is trauma-informed and decolonized. Collectively, we have come to realize that there are deep issues affecting our mental and physical health and our happiness, and that reconciling the political differences among our people means understanding them as multi-generational reflections of the soul pain and sense of loss that is deeply rooted in our collective past and in the ancestral struggle lived and experiences we have endured in struggling to survive as a Nation and hold onto the place on the earth that is ours inherently.

We Mohawks have fought throughout history to assert our nationhood and in defense of our homeland. The stand we took in the summer of 1990 was one of those historic moments of collective resistance against the colonial state's constant attempts to erase us as a Nation and as a presence in our homeland. We will no doubt have more battles to fight in future years. I am proud that the article I wrote reflected honestly on the situation and the challenges we faced at that time as a community, because I know that since that time the insights it contributed to the dialogue in our Nation have helped to strengthen our next generations' minds so that they may be better prepared to create the unity and solidarity it will take to defend our nationhood and lands when their time comes to do so.

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