

The Canadian Bahá'í Community
Submission to the
Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

1993

Preface

The Canadian Bahá'í Community is pleased to participate in the final round of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. We wish the Commission all possible success in the development of recommendations. It is clear from the reports of the first three Rounds that the Commission is examining extremely crucial issues facing Canadian society. After studying those reports we have been moved to bring to the attention of the Commission a perspective, along with a few specific observations, which we ask the Commission to consider before preparing its final report.

Before detailing our comments, we want to express the Bahá'í community's appreciation of the impressive efforts which Canada's people and the governing institutions of this land have made over many decades to create a society based on principles of justice. This Commission is but one of the most recent examples of those efforts. Bahá'ís understand many of the complex problems of society to be inevitable features of an historical process which the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith foresaw more than a century ago. Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the eventual integration of humankind and the emergence of a global society has been confirmed by the events of this century. While there is an enormous amount of work to be done in Canada to right the wrongs and injustices of the past, and to heal the sorrow and pain of the present, our international experience prompts us to draw the attention of the Commission to the great encouragement to peoples of other lands that has been provided by Canada in its struggles to find solutions to the difficult problems of this exceptional period in the history of human affairs.

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1. Spiritual Principles

Our comments address the mandate given your Commission “to investigate the evolution of the relationship among Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian government and Canadian society as a whole.” As your Terms of Reference note recommendations rooted in concrete experience can generate specific solutions. Our contribution is based on experience which the Bahá’í International Community has had over one hundred years of applying spiritual principles to challenges of community development.

Dating from the earliest years of this century the Canadian Bahá’í Community has been fortunate to have grown and developed in a more favourable social climate than many of its sister communities around the world. We have faced neither persecution nor widespread prejudice. Through the past several decades the Canadian Bahá’í Community has been grateful to the federal and provincial governments for granting our community important legal status by recognizing the incorporations of many of our 385 local governing councils, by granting Bahá’í marriage legal status in all provinces and territories, and, in an unusual step, through the incorporation of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada by an Act of Parliament passed in the House of Commons in 1949. In more recent years, the Canadian government has been generous in welcoming to this country a large group of Iranian Bahá’í refugees, and Canada has been among those nations of the world that have taken the lead in international councils in defence of the large Bahá’í community in Iran as it faces continued and severe persecution.

Beyond such governmental recognition of our community, however, it has been Canada’s Aboriginal peoples who have been perhaps the most encouraging sector of Canada’s population in lending us their support and encouragement. The Canadian Bahá’í community today counts among its 20,000 members more than 3,000 of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples, 15% of our total numbers. This reflects a worldwide feature of the Bahá’í community. A disproportionate number of the five to six million Bahá’ís are indigenous people.

This fact is of relevance to the Commission’s work for our experience provides ample evidence of the appeal which universal spiritual principles hold for Aboriginal peoples. The significance of spiritual principles, not as empty ideals, but as the surest route to community development and the establishment and maintenance of human dignity and honour, is evident in the worldwide development of our own community, just as it is in a diversity of other communities around the world, and, indeed, in the history of the Aboriginal peoples themselves. Spiritual principles are practical and effective elements in sustaining healthy communities. When such principles are not respected social disaster results. When relationships between different cultures follow patterns which do not embody respect, honesty, fairness and a sense of humility between peoples, suffering is an unavoidable consequence.

The appeal to Aboriginal peoples in Bahá’í principles begins with the Bahá’í conception of human nature as fundamentally spiritual, and moral standards as the primary laws through which society can advance and progress. It includes a vision of social and economic development that sees human society itself as spiritual and progressive. Human civilization has throughout all centuries and all cultures drawn breath from the divine impulse periodically manifested in the words and actions of spiritual prophets and leaders, and reflected both in nature and in the talents and capacities of human beings. The sacred and the spiritual represent universal phenomena not restricted to one particular culture or tradition, nor to one time period and not others.

As an introduction to our comments, and as the most important point we wish to put before the Commission, we want to dwell a little on the very direct significance of spiritual principles to the work of the Commission, and, beyond your work, to the challenges facing Canada's governments and leaders.

Only by addressing the spiritual conditions of communities can profound and lasting social change occur. Human societies and communities are organic. They exist in and through values and patterns of life and meaning that are spiritual. Social development and growth requires the creation of new conditions based on spiritual principles, or what some might call human values, which enhance and facilitate the development of the community. Solutions so often seen as concrete or direct can very often amount to either a mechanical kind of intervention that produces little lasting results in the attitudes and practices of a people, or they result in superficial programs which may provide jobs for social workers, teachers, or civil servants but do not lead to lasting social transformation. Enough is understood about the development of the human child to know that human development requires more than "add-on" programs. The same is perhaps more true for the human community, organic as its nature is. A shopping list of "solutions" which are not integrated in a unified program based securely on fundamental principles will do little to really change society. The first step, therefore, in community development and healing is to recognize that solutions to social problems must be based on principles.

When programs or legislation lack a basis in explicitly articulated principles, they also lack the vision and coherence which on their own they can never have. Without the vision and clarity provided by fundamental principles the motivation and collective resolve to accomplish desired objectives falters and fails. Spiritual principles represent the most practical and effective basis for the generation of policy and programs capable of achieving justice and social well-being. We believe that there is no greater barrier to progress in achieving social justice and the well-being of Canada's Aboriginal peoples, not to mention Canadian society as a whole, than an ideology of materialism and the absence in that ideology of consistent and viable principles.

Social, economic and political theories and practices of western Europe and North America for the past two to three hundred years have been driven by an excessive and socially corrosive materialism. That ideology has infected approaches to governance and economic and social development. In order to effect genuine changes in attitudes and policy, and to devise enduring solutions we are convinced that it is timely to adopt an orientation and approach fundamentally different from the methods generated by the failed assumptions of secularism and materialism. Material and human conditions reflect spiritual conditions and reality. Hoping to create social transformation through traditional secular methods will only produce cosmetic change. For these reasons we emphasize again that only by addressing spiritual conditions can human communities genuinely change.

Although Aboriginal peoples and colonists to North America have lived side by side for several hundred years, for the most part they still do not understand each other. Aboriginal cultures have been distinguished by a worldview best characterized as spiritual in nature. It is significant that Aboriginal leaders and members of Aboriginal communities at the grass roots refer so frequently to the Creator and to the human spirit when they approach the discussion of social problems. Failure to appreciate the gap between this approach to social reality and that of the dominant culture explains much of the misunderstanding and injustice between the Aboriginal peoples of this country and the dominant majority culture.

While acknowledging the many positive contributions which ingenuity and free inquiry, industrial productivity and material success have made to human civilization in the last two hundred years, it is nonetheless essential that Canadians be given every opportunity to recognize the serious nature of the gap in understanding and worldview between the dominant culture of Canada and that of the Aboriginal peoples. Failure to come to grips with the implications of that gap imposes serious liabilities on any sound analysis of the current situation and any adequate formulation of solutions.

The morals and values of those who came to North America as colonists were rooted in a Judaic-Christian tradition. However, the leading forces of that culture were as thoroughly secular as the Aboriginal culture which it encountered was not. The methods employed by those who saw themselves as representatives of the Christian tradition were as instrumental and coercive in advancing their beliefs as the economic, political, and cultural forces of that society which swept over the North American continent. The religious element present in the wave of settlement that first intruded on, and then largely displaced the cultures and societies which were living on this continent, denied the universality of the spirit and the genuine, divine source for the spiritual inspiration which formed the basis of Aboriginal society. Thus, a sense of superiority characterized not only the economic, political and social forces of the advancing culture, but also coloured the religious belief accompanying the predominantly secular and materialistic society pushing across North America.

The sense of superiority inherent in any culture of materialism lies at the heart of the unhappy relationship between Canada's Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canadian society. Fundamental to genuine spirituality is the recognition of the equality of all human beings, that all are created by the same God, that all have rights before God. Material wealth or might, secular rank or status, do not guarantee moral and spiritual worth. Only on the basis of a universal spiritual orientation can we begin to re-establish the sense of self-worth, dignity and nobility which materialism and the secular social experimentation of the past two to three hundred years has eroded. Only with that sense of self-worth, and the dignity and mutual respect engendered by spiritual values of human nobility and compassion, can relationships be healed between sectors of Canadian society. Only through spiritual values can injustice and disrespect, prejudice and discrimination, denial and neglect be replaced. Programs attacking injustice and racism will simply not succeed when pursued in isolation from a fundamental renewal of our understanding of the spiritual nature which all human beings share as creatures of one God.

The Aboriginal peoples have been among the most intensely affected victims of the dominant social forces operating in ignorance, or in systematic neglect, of spiritual principles fundamental to human happiness and the common weal. The social catastrophe which has resulted from several centuries of social experimentation with secular approaches to the governance and conduct of human affairs, including the way in which the colonists to North America set about establishing themselves on this continent, ought to convince the Commission of the futility of pursuing political and economic plans that are merely the latest version of that same philosophy of social change. Those methods have been pragmatic, not principled, short-term, not visionary. They have been and are still reactive, pushed this way and that by special interests because we have not tried to identify the general interests of society as an organic whole. They lack the integrity which a coherent set of spiritual principles alone makes possible.

Standards of morality applied on the personal level, but more significantly on the level where peoples and cultures meet, should receive formal emphasis in whatever recommendations about legislation and governing arrangements are made by the Commission. It has been the failure to apply spiritual principles and moral standards to the relationship between Canada's Aboriginal peoples and the population of the immigrants and their descendants that lies at the heart of the most disturbing problems now faced by our country. And moral standards take their authority from God, the Creator.

Furthermore, the existence in Aboriginal communities of strong systems of religious belief and practice represent important resources for social development that must not be overlooked. The survival among Aboriginal peoples of an evident religious inclination and spiritual aspiration must be supported and encouraged at official as well as informal levels in whatever programs and policies are recommended by the Commission.

We recommend that the Commission assert with courage and conviction a new set of assumptions and orientations in which the sacred or spiritual replaces the secular as the basis for social, economic and political action that can genuinely penetrate and heal Canadian society. The generation of policies and legislation which put in place processes of genuine social transformation can only come, we believe, out of a recognition of the spiritual nature of the human being and human society.

The Canadian Bahá'í Community would be happy to participate with others in further work to identify universal spiritual principles and to demonstrate their practicality and effectiveness in community development.

2. Relationships Among Peoples and the Oneness of Humanity

As this century draws to a close it is now obvious what Bahá'u'lláh pointed out so clearly a century ago. Humanity as a whole is passing through a period of major historical transition from one stage of human civilization to another. To ignore either the unique transitional character of the present point in history or the global scope of this phenomena by focusing exclusively on problems and social patterns which we conceive of as Canadian would be a mistake.

Bahá'ís view the current phase of rapidly changing world conditions in a hopeful way, aware of the severe suffering current chaotic social dislocations are creating, but seeing them as part of a long-term process of adjustment. The pain of that adjustment can best be alleviated if we become conscious of its nature and direction. Bahá'ís understand the current period of human history as one of those axial periods of history understood best in terms of the coming of age of humanity. The period of relative isolation of various peoples of the world has ended. We have now collectively entered a new world where boundaries, if they exist at all any more, are no longer impenetrable. The interdependence of humanity with all its diversity of cultures, nations and peoples will continue to increase. No one people is any longer independent of the whole, nor of each other. No longer are exclusive sovereignties possible.

Whether we are conscious of the process or not, humanity is moving towards a condition of greater unity that will culminate in some form of an integrated world economy and political structure in which all of us will feel as much a part of world society as we feel a part of our own community. This is not a hope or a wish. It is a reality of current trends and directions. Human society is interdependent and integrated whether we wish it so or not. However, if we understand this process and act consciously we will be in a much better position than if we remain unaware of its implications. In that regard, it is important to understand nationalism as a stage of history on the way to a more mature set of human relations on this planet. Nationalism and its cultural variants may be viewed as features important to humanity's adolescence, but far less important to humanity's maturity than an overriding consciousness of the oneness of humanity.

The present wave of nationalism in the world is the final culmination of a process born in the nineteenth century. It aggressively asserts the dominance and frequently the uniformity of the nation-state, and it also gives rise to immoderate, often extreme, ethnic and cultural affirmation. It checks the necessary development today of local government and blocks the establishment of international institutions and practices. Governance need not emulate the negative aspects of nationalism. Those aspects that are insistent and immoderate can dominate the thinking of both the leaders of nation-states as well as the leaders of oppressed peoples in their attempts to devise a form of government and human organization that failed to solve the problems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

To face adequately the challenges of the twenty-first century, Bahá'ís see the principle of the oneness of humanity as the most essential. This principle is the pivotal social, economic and political tenet of our age. However, it is a principle of unity conceived of as unity in diversity. Unity is essential if the diversity of all peoples and cultures is to flourish in place of the dominance of any particular culture or way of life. So linked are unity and diversity that the enhancement of diversity is itself a direct measure of unity; and genuine unity is promoted as differences are recognized and embraced - be they differences of culture, race, temperament, education, all the categories of human differences. Unity does not result from conformism or uniformity, both, it is useful to note, consequences of materialism and nationalism.

If the future of the human race is to witness an increase in justice, humankind will have to establish institutions of governance that respect this principle of unity in diversity, and that honour and protect cultural diversity. Such institutions will need to come under the umbrella of a more comprehensive and less centralized federal system operating at the level of the planet as a whole. Canada can provide models of such federalism in the steps taken here to protect cultures, and to guarantee sufficient levels of autonomy and independence for different peoples in ways which enhance unity and harmony among all sectors of society. Only by embracing the diversity of distinct peoples in Canada will we be able to achieve unity; and only by reinforcing our unity across the whole of the country will we be able to avoid the unwitting and unwanted dominance of one kind of culture or way of life.

Achieving a federal system of this kind must also take into account the rapidity and unpredictability of the historical and social processes currently at work so that newly conceived social and political arrangements are as flexible as possible. If properly understood, like unity and diversity, unity and flexibility are prerequisites for each other.

What is striking in the Bahá'í experience in Canada, and around the world, is that Aboriginal peoples have a keen desire to encounter and enter into relationships with other peoples. Of course, the kind of relationships that Aboriginal peoples are seeking are just and equitable relationships. Aboriginal peoples find in the Bahá'í emphasis on unity in diversity an ideal that matches their own aspirations. The drive to self-government and the impetus for self-reliance may be partly understood as a desire for Aboriginal peoples to enter into relationships directly with other peoples throughout the world without the filter of a dominant culture or government that makes their participation in the global village indirect and secondary.

Unity among the Aboriginal peoples, unity with the rest of Canadian society and unity with all other peoples of the world is vital if justice and social well-being are to be assured. We should not minimize the importance of achieving unity within the borders of Canada. The extent to which new governmental arrangements and structures increase unity at all levels is the surest measure of the viability and usefulness of those structures over the longer term. Unity must be considered at the outset of deliberations and planning. Unity is the only foundation on which problems can be solved. It is a pre-requisite if problems are to be adequately addressed at the very beginning of any process of healing and social development.

We, therefore, ask that the Commission make recommendations relative to new governing structures that increase both the flexibility and the unity of Canadian federalism, a model to which the world as a whole can look, accommodating the aspirations of Aboriginal peoples and their sense of world citizenship.

3. Self-Government and the Local Community

Perhaps the most powerful motivation behind the interest in self-government is the understandable desire to see greater local control over Aboriginal lives and communities. The lack of local control is obviously more dramatic for Aboriginal peoples than for society generally. The kind of society which Bahá'ís see emerging from the upheaval of contemporary society is one in which local government will have a far greater role than it does today. That all members of society should have a say in how they are governed is a principle that today surely very few would deny. Unfortunately, it is frequently overlooked that the most effective and important way in which such widespread participation can be realized is at the local level, not the national level. A sense of local community, and of local control and local development is absolutely vital. The level of government which is closest to day-to-day life must have at its disposal an adequate share of the material resources of a country.

Since the development of regional and national levels of governance among Aboriginal peoples in Canada would necessarily involve geographically dispersed people across areas already governed by other geographically defined jurisdictions, it may be of interest to the Commission to examine the historical development of the administration of the six million member Bahá'í International community. Rather than establishing international and national administrative levels at the outset of its growth as an international community, Bahá'ís adopted early on the strategy of first concentrating on the development of strong local executive bodies adding national administrative agencies when enough of these local institutions came to be established. In 1963 these agencies of the Bahá'í International Community were strong enough to support the first election of our international executive.

When people are satisfied with local government structures the attention should turn to amending the larger regional and national organizations. Concepts which begin at the national level and work down may well be the least efficient way of addressing appropriately the problems which, first and foremost, exist at the concrete level of the family and community. Such a top-down process of development would also be the least flexible.

While the right to self-determination of all peoples is most effectively carried forward at the local level, such local development - and the enhancement of the autonomy enjoyed by distinctive, diverse cultures which that development implies - requires a global context if parochial and narrow hegemonies are to be avoided. Thus, we reiterate the Bahá'í conviction of the equally essential challenge of establishing international and world-wide institutions of governance, both legislative and executive, in order to ensure harmonious and cooperative relationships among all the nations and all the distinct cultures and peoples of the world.

There exist universal spiritual principles to which all peoples can assent, and laws and constitutions can be developed based on those principles. Thus, an international, global framework can, and must, be established while the actual form and processes by which local governments operate remains a challenge of application and interpretation of universal principles, of concrete decisions based on conditions and cultural predilections particular to distinct localities and distinct peoples.

The actual processes of making such local, community decisions and of organizing and developing a community is one of the most important aspects of self-government. However, municipal governments can remain as impervious to widespread participation as provincial and national governments. They can also be as factional and divisive. A process which the Commission and which both the Canadian government and Aboriginal leaders may want to consider in detail has received considerable experimentation and application in the Bahá'í community over many decades and in many cultures and settings. This process involves the manner in which community-wide consultation and discussion is pursued, and the way in which decision-making bodies resolve disputes and plan strategies and programs of community development. Bahá'is call this process consultation.

Canada's political institutions, including the Canadian parliamentary system, were conceived for the needs of an earlier and very different age. Little wonder that we have moved increasingly to a supplementary system of ad hoc arrangements, parliamentary committees, commissions, citizen consultations, all designed to function in a consultative rather than adversarial mode. We think governance and the administration of human affairs should be carried on through the principle of consultation in which all peoples have a say in how decisions affect them.

This principle lies at the heart of the functioning of our own community. Our Founder Bahá'u'lláh declared that, together, consultation and compassion form the 'law' of the age of humanity's maturity. We cannot here describe in detail the several principles of how our community consults, nor explain fully just how effective and far-reaching it is. However, some of its guiding principles may be of immediate interest to you:

- The prohibition of factionalism or partisanship
- The provision of opportunities for all to participate in the consultative process that leads to decision-making.
- The encouragement to all to speak freely on the basis of their own conscience.
- The responsibility for all participating to exercise courtesy and moderation in the expression of their views.
- The moral obligation to be detached from one's own contribution so that the group or collective itself can come to own that contribution.
- The interests of the group or community override individual interests even though the individual freedom of expression is absolutely safeguarded.
- A clear distinction between this broad form of consultation and the deliberations of a democratically elected body or governing council takes the responsibility for decisions.
- Once a decision is taken the requirement that both the majority favouring it and those originally opposed respect, support and carry out the decision in unity. Such unanimous and community-wide support ensures decisions are not subverted and sabotaged. Only through such support can a decision be properly evaluated and changed if genuine deficiencies in the decision itself are detected.

- The obligation of all decision-making bodies to constantly evaluate their work, along with ongoing consultation with the wider community to assess, and, if necessary, revise their decisions.
- The value of unity is emphasized. Other essential values - such as freedom of expression, honesty and courage in stating one's own views, moderation of expression, courtesy and listening to different views - are critical to community development and progress, but unity is the most important value of all.

We recommend to the Commission that projects be undertaken at the local level in which new models and practices of community consultation and executive decision-making are developed. The Canadian Bahá'í Community would be pleased to participate in such initiatives. We would also like to invite the Commission and others to meet with us to examine our experience with consultation, and consider both the challenges we have encountered and the successes we have achieved.

A Note about Economic Development

While we are in no position to make particular recommendations about economic development, we think it crucial to add a specific comment about this pressing issue beyond our general view that economic questions, as much as social and political questions, have a direct relationship to spiritual conditions and values existing in the local community and in the wider society. In the context of the discussion of self-government and the local community, however, it is especially important to consider the matter of economic development in the light of principles which are to our mind essential to the well-being and advancement of a people.

It is at the local community level that the effects of material deprivation and poverty are most acutely felt. It is there that Bahá'u'lláh's admonition to eliminate existing extremes of wealth and poverty in human society is most readily appreciated. The social devastation, to which current extremes of wealth and poverty contribute, are at once visible when one examines the dramatic differences in material well-being between communities frequently only a few miles apart in Canada. Tragically, many Aboriginal communities vividly illustrate the consequences of the lack of justice and sensible moderation inherent in existing economic practices and patterns.

Economic development challenges entrepreneurs, workers, local government councils and labour representatives to learn new ways of cooperating, using the opportunities and resources particular to each local community and region - without overlooking existing Aboriginal interests and traditional land-based skills. There exists a diversity of paths of economic development depending on the nature of resources and opportunities available to each locality and each particular region. No universal economic plan exists. Rather the resources of consultation outlined above, complemented by the renewal of those centuries-old virtues of honesty, trustworthiness, courage and a spirit of service to the community, all must combine to create locally tested economic ventures. At the same time it must be emphasized that, just as with the development of local governance, self-determination in the economic area requires a global economic framework properly adjusted to allow for the survival and economic productivity of the local community. An international economy requires universally acceptable laws and a global framework in which communities, no less than individuals, are protected from being sacrificed to some widespread, popular concept of increasing material efficiencies and material consumption without limit or moderation.

Furthermore, as self-determination within a global and national framework are important features of community development, so too the individual right to gainful employment must be accepted as a universal spiritual or human right. Accepting unemployment as an unavoidable feature of an economic system, and a feature about which we can do very little amounts to an unacceptable admission of human impotency. Employment is a God-given right and responsibility: "It is made incumbent on everyone to engage in some occupation... We have made this, your occupation, identical with the worship of God." Economic security is also a God-given responsibility of any society: "Know ye that the poor in your midst are God's trust... Ye will most certainly be called upon to answer for His trust." Our governing institutions, acting on our behalf, must redirect social and economic resources in order to ensure that all peoples are not deprived of either employment opportunities or their basic living needs.

Since international forces do indeed play a considerable and increasing role in the economy the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples would surely be working within its mandate if it was to recommend to the Government of Canada that it is time, not only to consider new arrangements of governance and sovereignty within Canada, but that, equally important, it is time to be more forthright and creative in the development of new arrangements of governance at the international level. The international economy, and the environmental resources and land-base on which all economic activity ultimately depends, calls for much stronger institutions of international governance with levels of sovereignty appropriate to a new global society and global economy. The voices of all peoples must be allowed some reasonable say in the direction in which such international agencies might take the world economy. Here, Canada, as a country, and the Aboriginal peoples, as distinctive cultures, might well take the lead in identifying more publicly and on the international stage those principles or objectives which a new economy based on sustainable development must be based. Such work needs to complement efforts at self-government and economic development if the latter is to have any chance of success.

4. Healing

The Importance of Women's Advancement, the Family, Affirmative Action, and New Laws and Legislation

We note that Aboriginal leaders and spokespeople repeat frequently the crucial importance of addressing the healing of families and communities with resources dedicated to this stage in the overall process of Aboriginal development. Without such healing other developmental processes of governance, economic development, and education will not succeed. Current social ills rob Aboriginal communities of the opportunities which Aboriginal youth should have in order to grow and provide leadership. We need not repeat the virtually endless stories of tragedy and heartbreak in Aboriginal communities and families. Dedication and commitment to a process of healing, undertaken by the Canadian government and the entire Canadian population, is essential.

Among the several important issues that bear on the matter of healing, our own experiences and convictions prompt us to highlight the equality of women and men and the central place of the family as two of the most pressing areas of concern. The importance of legal and political evolution to redress inadequacies and injustice of past laws is also essential.

The Equality of Women and Men

Whatever new arrangements and new directions are taken in Canada, the principle of the equality of women and men requires explicit recognition. The moral authority of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on this point makes it clear to us that God makes no distinction between the worth of the soul of a woman or man. Gender does not decide value in the spiritual world. As we come out of an era of history in which physical strength or material considerations impeded women's full participation in society, the full emancipation of women remains a significant challenge. Canadians, whatever their culture or tradition, must give their unequivocal support for the principle of the equality of women and men.

As women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour, the moral and psychological climate will be changed in Canada and among Aboriginal peoples as much as the rest of Canadian society. That change will help in the generation of suitable social and political arrangements. This forces on all of us, men and women alike, the responsibility to act with courage, fairness and humility, so that this principle becomes a reality.

Not merely will society in a general way become healthier, but the economy and political life of society will as well once women gain their rightful place alongside men. Such issues as the provision of social, economic and political measures to enhance the lives of children and the family, and measures for safer, less violent communities, will become more central on our various agenda. If we continue to neglect or marginalize the principle of full and absolute equality of women and men, mothers and children will continue to suffer disproportionately. There is a direct relationship between the predominance of men in positions of social, economic and political leadership and the lack of support given mothers during those critical months and years when they give birth, nurse their children, and first educate the very young. The absence and inattention, of fathers and a patriarchal society, to mothers and the lack of support for the best possible conditions for mothers, for children and for the family, have contributed to social disintegration. So, too, the absence of women in leadership roles throughout all levels of society has prevented progress towards a more peaceful and productive economy and civil life. Indeed, the two conditions are directly linked.

The Family

We feel it critical that a great deal more of Canada's resources, not merely financial resources but resources of time on the national agenda, be given to supporting the family. We mean by family that fundamental building block of society in which children are born, nurtured and raised.

The health of the family forms the basis of the health of a people, of a nation and ultimately of the world itself, and to prosper it must have greater support from all the institutions of society. The family and society need education and laws that will support parenting instead of allowing competition for the resources of time and energy that should be devoted to parenting. Following on the heels of the International Year of Indigenous Peoples 1993 comes the International Year of the Family 1994, a celebration of and acknowledgement for the family unit which has been a cherished and prized element in the community and social life of Aboriginal peoples around the world.

The Year of the Family in 1994 offers Canada the chance to put in motion specific processes of education, support and assistance for families. It offers Canadians a chance to give first priority to Aboriginal families as a way of signalling respect and redress of past injustices visited on the Aboriginal family. The education and training of children occurs best through united and healthy families. Children's rights are most effectively protected if the family itself becomes much more central in the programs of all levels of governments and in whatever new institutions and arrangements are made with respect to Aboriginal governance. We cannot overstate the importance of this issue.

The Canadian Bahá'í community will be establishing a Bahá'í Family Institute in the coming year in which we aim to bring together the extensive range of Bahá'í concepts with contemporary science and practice. We look forward to contributing what we can in both Aboriginal communities and in the rest of Canadian society so that families do indeed receive a greater measure of love and attention.

Affirmative Action

"If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favour of the minority, be it racial or otherwise." This is a Bahá'í principle which our community's administrative practice tries to uphold. Justice demands such a principle, often translated as "affirmative action". Without it, social change will be too slow and the privileges of members of dominant and majority peoples will continue to eclipse the rights of those from minority or oppressed sectors of society.

It is sometimes argued that affirmative action deprives members of the majority of their just rights. It is our understanding, however, that affirmative action programs more correctly results in a rearrangement of privilege by members of a majority. Such rearrangement can be felt as loss, and bring strong reactions. The transformation of relationships amongst people will come about when society undertakes an educational process that explains and upholds the inherent fairness of affirmative actions and policies.

Programs of affirmative action, as temporary measures to balance the ills which contemporary society and a history of injustice have produced, are not mere wishes or utopian ideals. If action is not taken then our economic and our social well-being will be among the first elements of society to suffer and deteriorate, for the economy of tomorrow, like the economy of the past, benefits most if all its members are healthy, well educated, and contributing to the wealth and productivity of everyone else.

The Evolution of Law, Legislation and Political Structures

We believe that the material world is a reflection of the spiritual, and that laws and political structures must evolve commensurate with the ever evolving needs of the human species. Genuine social transformation occurs through changes in the spiritual conditions of society. However, this also implies that social reality is in constant evolution as the spirit moves and evolves. Thus, the rapid evolution in our laws and administrative structures is as necessary as the creation of new spiritual understandings and conditions.

It is apparent that Canada and the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are now at a new stage of maturity requiring new forms of government, and social and economic participation which are universal and inclusive. The Canadian Bahá'í Community endorses the Commission's work on this aspect of Canadian life and society, and supports efforts to translate into the legal and constitutional framework of the country whatever may be required to protect both collective and fundamental human rights.

The legitimacy of collective rights - that the well-being of an entire community may at times require specific attention and legal safeguards - must receive wider discussion and exposure in programs of public education. Whatever merits a liberal philosophy may entail, it has consistently overlooked the organic nature of human society and the necessity, even for the ultimate well-being of the individual, to protect the rights and unity of the community as a whole.

We believe that with sufficient consultation collective and individual rights are not contradictory but complementary. That they remain apart only means that we have not talked together long enough or with enough humility, moderation, courtesy and courage. Society as a whole, and collective segments within society, need protection as much as individuals do. From the Bahá'í perspective, it is, after all, the unity of society that is the best measure of justice and the surest indicator of the effectiveness of how well rights are enacted in law and legislation. In this context, we reiterate the point, made earlier in discussing the local community, that if universal principles are identified on which laws can be constructed, a unity of law can be achieved which can allow for the proper diversity of application and interpretation in policies and decisions at the local level. Unity in diversity is as important here as elsewhere.

Without access to all the detailed information and acquaintance with the full range of interests, we are not obviously in any position to comment on particular points of legislation or constitutional change beyond asserting principles - especially that of unity as the underlying measure - on which detailed changes must be based. The process of developing legislation is itself an important community-building process and one in which the legitimate representatives of peoples and the country as a whole must engage with unceasing energy and commitment. Such detailed work requires the best that government and legal experts, and ultimately the nation's elected representatives, can manage.

All segments of Canadian society, our community included, must then be educated to support the rule of law and encourage the government at each level in Canadian society. Without such respect for law and support for our leaders even the wisest law, most effective administrative practice, and most inspired leadership cannot bring well-being to a society. We talk much about having our leaders listen to the people, but we have a great deal to learn in Canada about encouraging and supporting our leaders in their difficult work.

5. Education

As important as legislation and government are, the most important way in which the relationships among Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canadian society can be transformed is through education. Education provides the means through which identity and self-esteem can be secured and protected, and by which healing and justice can be promoted. It is incumbent on society to concentrate its resources and attention on education.

Education is here conceived in very broad terms to include both the processes and populations outside as well as inside our current education systems. It includes Aboriginal peoples and all other people in Canada. Greater investment in education must be made in Aboriginal communities and in the schools attended by the children and young people from all other segments of Canadian society. School curriculum and educational programs - whether they are on race unity, on morality and religion, on history or literature - must see in the value of the principle of unity in diversity a central, core concept in the mental make-up of our young people.

It is noteworthy that the Bahá'í Community of Iran, now numbering more than 350,000, endured more than a century of persecution and human rights abuses while reaching literacy levels of 90% in three generations (compared to 40% for the rest of Iranian society). That community produced many of that country's most educated leaders in technical, social and professional fields. That achievement was due to the underlying emphasis on unity. It was a reliance on universal spiritual principles which allowed the Iranian Bahá'í community to achieve the success it did before it was once again set upon in 1979 by those segments of Iranian society intent on returning Iran to an age of ignorance and darkness. Thousands of other Bahá'í social and economic development projects throughout the world demonstrate again and again the practicality and power of unity as a social value of preeminent importance.

Much reflection and consultation focusing on unity as a core theme, and spiritual and moral values as principal elements in educational programs, are required in order to generate specific recommendations. However, it may be worthwhile to consider one possible program as an illustration of how such principles can generate new ideas. Education in human suffering and sacrifice is not limited to any one culture on this planet. If there is greater unity among these cultures, healing on all sides can be facilitated. Canada has the bounty of welcoming members of many of the world's peoples who have gone through the harshest of human dramas. There may well be a connection here which we have not exploited adequately in our society. Certainly, we in the Canadian Bahá'í Community feel challenged and excited by the prospects of a fuller relationship between our members of different cultures who have similarly survived tragedy on a wide scale. We have noticed, for instance, that recent Bahá'í immigrants from Iran have established close rapport and understanding with members of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. We believe not enough is being done to bring recent immigrants from all backgrounds into close contact with the Aboriginal peoples of this land. The mutual benefits of such encounters could be enormous.

Whatever programs emerge through discussion and widespread consultation, new and creative educational programs must be devised. We should set aside a mindset which seems determined to combat every existing evil of society instead of building curricula and programs with an emphasis on positive goals. For instance, let there be programs on race unity instead of anti-racism, on personal and social development instead of anti-drug programs, on universal spiritual and religious education instead of expelling religious education from the schools because of a few extremist or fundamentalist elements. Too often the current approach to social problems isolates the problems and deficiencies of society, and then turns to the school to redress them, one by one, instead of conceiving of school programs with a

focus on themes of unity and integration, inclusion, health and development. We must create educational curricula in which subject matter is not so intensely cut up and parceled out, but is built on an educational approach that seeks out relationships between people, between subject areas, between different sectors of life, and that seeks unity in diversity.

Whatever educational programs are conceived, it must be explicitly acknowledged, in any proposed solutions, that knowledge is essential in order to motivate the necessary development of will and resolve required for action. If longstanding social patterns are to change, the knowledge of people needs to be increased for only through understanding is human will and energy set in motion. If they do nothing to increase the knowledge of people, laws and new structures of government will accomplish little.

A great deal of work must be done to right wrongs, to create justice, and to educate a new generation. The Canadian Bahá'í Community would like to express the caution, no doubt very much on the minds of the members of the Commission, that instant solutions are not possible. We would like to offer our assistance should the Commission or Canada's leaders, Aboriginal leaders or others, wish our help. We are a small community, but we are committed to working towards the creation of justice and unity, healing and well-being.

We offer our most heartfelt prayers to the Creator that your efforts will be blessed with success. We firmly believe that, in the course of time and in conditions of prosperity and well-being, the Aboriginal peoples of Canada will make even greater contributions to the happiness, the progress and the spiritual illumination of the entire human family than they have already made through suffering and sacrifice.

That belief in the capacity and character of the Aboriginal peoples of this land lies enshrined in the sacred writings of our religion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, visited Canada in 1912 and called attention to the spiritual destiny of Canada and the importance of the Aboriginal peoples. Returning to Palestine, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote during the years of the Great War in Europe:

“You must attach great importance to the Indians, the original inhabitants of America. For these souls may be likened unto the ancient inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula... When the Muhammadan Light shone forth in their midst, they became so enkindled that they shed illumination upon the world. Likewise, should these Indians be educated and properly guided, there can be no doubt that through the Divine teachings they will become so enlightened that the whole earth will be illumined.”

'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1916, Palestine