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Negotiation key to end conflict

HAGERSVILLE — Just six months ago Manitoba MLA Elijah Harper sprang to centre stage of Canadian politics when he single handedly squashed the Meech Lake Accord.

Harper has since been using his new found notoriety to further the needs of Canada's aboriginal people.

Saturday afternoon Harper addressed a large crowd at the Hagersville Secondary School. The information forum was sponsored by the Centre for Peace Studies at McMaster University.

He started out his hour-long address by saying it was good to come and sit with his brothers, and to come to an NDP province. But the tired looking Harper added he has only spent a few days in Winnipeg in the last four months.

Harper's topic was one which is on the minds of several Canadians — Oka. "It's a disgrace to have this situation exist in Canada. It should never have happened, it should have been resolved years ago.

"I often say we should be the most well off people in this country, but unfortunately we're not," he said. "Who has paid the price? The Aboriginal People have."

Harper said Oka situation is a symptom of the problem facing aboriginal people across Canada. He blamed the federal government for leaving native people out of the democratic process. "It surprises people when I tell them we were only given the right to vote 30 years ago. It was the aboriginal people that stood up and said no to Meech Lake. When we said no to the Meech Lake we were saying no to the neglect of the federal government."

"We are at a crossroads in Canadian history," said Harper. "We as aboriginal people certainly made history when saying no to Meech Lake."

Harper said in protecting the future of aboriginal people the future of all Canadians would also be protected. "The government has tried to assimilate us, to integrate us, hoping some day we'd go away — but let me tell you we will not go away."



Elijah Harper

The first step to start easing tensions between Canada and its native people, according to Harper, is to recognize them as founders of this country. "We are the people who welcomed the Europeans. They would have starved."

The next step is for Canada to recognize native land claims. "It's about time the aboriginal people got stirred up," said Harper. "It's about time the Canadian people told the government to honor these treaties."

Harper again expressed his view that the solution to any problem should be a non-violent one. "I tell my people we don't use violence, we don't use guns, because when we do this we speak louder, with honor, dignity and respect. Any fool can fight back or react — any madman."

"It is shameful because the world is watching," said Harper of the way the federal government treats native people. The Canadian government can go around the world preaching democracy but in their own back yard there are Third World conditions on reserves and worse."

Harper said aboriginal people have to take a look at where to go from here. He warned that the use of violence could jeopardize what ground they had gained. He said they must proceed peacefully, slowly making gains.

He laid the blame of the Oka situation at the doorstep of the federal government. "I feel the federal government has totally washed its hands of the aboriginal people." But he reminded the people that the only way to resolve this conflict was through political negotiations.

He said it was the government which walked away from the negotiating table, not the Mohawks, because they complained of having to wait a few days. "A few days are not too long for aboriginal people who have been waiting hundreds of years."

Harper ended his address saying there is a need for more public forums to get aboriginal people and other Canadians together. "It's not what you acquire that makes you a great nation, it's what you share."