



Elijah Harper: "We have been left out of this country since the Europeans arrived."

# Harper in Hagersville: 'We want to control our lives, our future'

By Anne Jarvis  
Expositor Staff

*Sept 28/90*

HAGERSVILLE — Native people are ready to stand up for their rights, Elijah Harper told more than 300 people who gave him two standing ovations at Hagersville Secondary School on Saturday.

"We want to control our lives, our future," he said during a moving one-hour speech to the rapt crowd of natives and non-natives filling the school's cafeteria and spilling into the hall. "That's what this fight is all about."

Mr. Harper, the first treaty Indian to be elected to the Manitoba legislature, became a national figure when he voted against introducing the Meech Lake Ac-

cord into the legislature on June 22. His vote prevented the Manitoba government from voting on — and probably ratifying — the accord. The constitutional deal needed ratification by all 10 provinces by June 23 to become law.

He spoke in Hagersville at the Oka Crisis Forum, organized by McMaster University in Hamilton and the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy to discuss the standoff between Mohawks and the army at Oka, Que. The standoff started over a proposal to expand a golf course onto land the Mohawks say is theirs.

"We have been left out of this country since the Europeans arrived," said Mr. Harper, a 41-year-old Ojibway from Red

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Sucker Lake. "The relationship of the federal government with aboriginal people is disgraceful."

Native people did not even receive the right to vote until only 30 years ago, he said.

"So when I said no to Meech Lake, it was saying no to the benign neglect of the federal government," said Mr. Harper, his long black hair in a ponytail.

"The government has tried to assimilate us, hoping we will go away. But let me tell you, we will be here for generations, and we have to live together."

Native people are at a "crossroads," he said.

by the Quebec government on Saturday. The army has been ordered to talk about surrender only.

There should be more forums like the one in Hagersville "so we (natives and non-natives) can understand each other," Mr. Harper said.

He urged native people not to use weapons, saying they could speak louder, and with honor and respect, with their voices.

Mr. Harper received standing ovations when he entered the room and when he finished speaking. People took pictures of him, taped his speech and lined up to shake his hand and get his autograph. One person wore a sweatshirt with Mr. Harper's picture on it. Others wore "Oka Standoff" and "Battle of Oka" shirts and caps.

"I got his autograph," Alva Martin of Six Nations told her friends.

Mr. Harper is a hero to her, she said. "(What he did) makes the government acknowledge I'm alive."

She cut out all the stories about him in her newspaper and is making a scrapbook.

Mr. Harper was presented with a painting of an eagle and an eagle feather by Six Nations artist Arnold Jacobs. He was holding an eagle feather for strength when he cast his historic vote in the Manitoba legislature.

"Aboriginal people are prepared to stand up for their rights, to gain their rightful place in Canadian society. We're asking for equality, for justice. We're not asking for anything more — or less."

Mr. Harper said he has received support from native people across Canada.

"The pride of Indian people is there. The solidarity is there. As leaders, we need that support to be able to speak with confidence. We can be a powerful force in this country if we're together."

He told non-native people in the audience to tell their governments to honor treaties made with natives.

The standoff at Oka is another example of the government "failing to deal with native people," Mr. Harper said.

"It should never have happened. It should have been resolved years ago."

The provincial and federal governments said they were frustrated after a month and a half of negotiations, he noted. But that's not long compared to the hundreds of years that native people have been waiting to be listened to, he said.

The governments should continue negotiating with the Mohawks, said Mr. Harper.

The latest agreement drafted with Quebec Indian Affairs Minister John Ciaccia was rejected