

# Ellen Gabriel: Canadian laws still oppress indigenous people

By Bob Mitchell

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BRANTFORD – Canada's laws continue to be based on racist doctrines that oppress its Indigenous People, says Ellen Gabriel, an artist from Kanehsatà:ke Nation - Turtle Clan and a well-known Mohawk activist during the 1990s Oka Crisis in Quebec.

Speaking to more than 100 Laurier-Brantford law students on Thursday night as part of the university's Aboriginal Week, Gabriel chastised Canada for not living up to the United Nations decrees on human rights.

"No offence to Mr. Trudeau or the new Liberal government because we're still assessing whether they mean what they say," Gabriel, 56, said.

International law prohibits racial and gender discrimination and genocide, Gabriel said "and yet in Canada that's exactly what exists and what Indigenous

People are living under."

Gabriel was heartened to see the Liberals intention to have an inquiry into the murdered and missing Indigenous women but wondered whether anything would actually be achieved.

"An inquiry doesn't actually obligate Canada to do anything. It's just an inquiry," she said. "...There needs to be a bigger lens... We are dealing with a corrupt system..."

During her lecture, Gabriel asked where were all of the signs in Brantford that indicated it was Indigenous Peoples' territory.

"Where are the markers of signifiers? Throughout Canada we don't see any such signifiers," Gabriel said. "You can't even name bridges or towns after our people because there is this Colonial amnesia. It is intentional... to actually forget and wipe out Indigenous People in order to make us living museum pieces in institutions that are created by the



Ellen Gabriel

Colonists."

Until today's youth teach their children the Colonial History of Canada, Indigenous Peoples will "continue to spin their wheels in the mud" on the issue of reconciliation and on the issue of justice for our people, Gabriel said.

"The settlers who first came here were the ones who weren't wanted in Europe," Gabriel said. "They were the criminals, the poor and some of the blue bloods

with bad reputations.

"They brought their trauma here....It's estimated that after one century of contact with Europeans that three quarters of Indigenous People were dead from either war or disease."

In her wide-ranging lecture, Gabriel said it was absolutely crucial for Indigenous Peoples to not let their languages die by only speaking English or French.

"We need to emphasize our languages to help us re-interpret and talk about the colonialization of our people," Gabriel said.

Gabriel revealed how Indian Residential Schools did everything they could to kill the Indigenous Peoples languages.

"Children as young as 5 or 6 years old came directly from their communities not speaking any English or French but they were severely punished if they spoke their own language," Gabriel said. "Their hands would be held over a hot

flame and there are stories of needles going through their tongues."

She told the packed lecture hall that Indigenous languages "are most threatened" in Canada despite being one of the richest countries in the world.

"Our education system promotes colonial languages...so our youth aren't speaking our language," Gabriel said. "If our youth and children don't speak their language then our language cannot live and survive. It's not enough to hear it on videos or tape recorders.

"A language is like a spirit that lives. It has a life of its own and it's given life by the people who speak it."

During and after the War of 1812 Indigenous People were forced into poverty by the Colonialists despite the fact that many fought side by side with the British against the Americans, she said.

It also wasn't so long ago when the Mohawk were considered terrorists in Quebec during the Oka crisis. It developed from a land dispute between a group of Mohawk people from the community of Kanesatake and the town of Oka over a planned golf course that included an ancestral burial ground. The crisis made international headlines and continued from July 11, 1990 and lasted until September 26, 1990.

"We were the enemy to the public," she said. "It didn't matter whether you were a Mohawk child or elder or in between, you were an enemy of the state."

The negative impact of Colonialization still affects Indigenous People today, said Gabriel, citing the high rates of suicide and poverty

among Native Canadians.

"We're reduced to living in these tiny postage stamp communities...where we're supposed to be happy and accept all of the things the colonialists brought us," Gabriel said.

"After the War of 1812 we were put on reserves that were created to protect the settlers not for our protection," Gabriel said.

Gabriel asked those attending her lectures to consider how they would feel if the tables were turned.

"What if we decided to kidnap your children," Gabriel asked. "What if we put you in camps and forced you to live near toxic waste dumps? What if when you got sick we chose which medicine to provide and who would get it? What if we beat you for speaking your language? What if we impoverished you to the point where your children were committing suicide?"

"That's exactly what happened."

Gabriel urged students, many of whom were Aboriginal, to re-educate themselves about their history.

She said it was up to today's generation to correct the wrongs of the past, recalling how during the Oka Crisis, the Minister of Indian Affairs said they were "17th century immigrants with no rights to the land" – a complete fallacy considering how ancient artifacts suggest Indigenous People were living in Canada as far back as 4000 BC.

"We have a Constitution that pre-dates European arrival," Gabriel said. "We had a sophisticated form of democracy that was inclusive and based on clans where the women played a huge role in decision making."