**The Oka Crisis**

The Oka Crisis or Mohawk Resistance was a 78-day standoff between Mohawk protestors, Quebec police, the RCMP, and the Canadian Army.

OPINION

Did Canada learn anything from the Oka Crisis?

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July 11 marks the 30th anniversary of what is commonly known as the Oka Crisis. In the summer of 1990, a 78-day standoff (July 11 to Sept. 26) occurred between the Kanien’keha:ka (Mohawks) of Kanesatake and the Quebec provincial police and Canadian military. For many Canadians, armed police officers and soldiers facing off with Indigenous land defenders appeared to be a crisis. But for the Mohawks of Kanesatake, the standoff was simply the most recent event in a 270-year struggle for their land rights.

The clash at Kanesatake was supposed to be a turning point in Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. In the years after, the Canadian government promised to never again let land disputes develop into costly conflicts. In the 30 years since, however, Canada has not delivered on that promise. The 30th anniversary of the Oka Crisis is an opportunity to reflect on the past and also take stock of the current state of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada to envision a better future.

Early in the morning of July 11, 1990, Quebec’s provincial police raided a peaceful barricade erected by Mohawks in Kanesatake. Mohawk citizens had set up the blockade to protest the Municipality of Oka’s encroachment on their unceded land, including the expansion of a golf course over a sacred forest and local cemetery. Mohawks resisted the police siege and gunfire was exchanged. When the dust settled, a police officer was dead and the standoff escalated. The federal government eventually intervened and spent $200-million to deploy 2,500 troops as a show of force. The standoff eventually ended in a stalemate. The troops and tanks left and development in Kanesatake stopped temporarily, but the land was not returned to the Mohawks.

In the immediate aftermath, many Canadians were outraged by the federal government’s “might is right” approach of sending in the military rather than engaging in diplomacy to return land to the Mohawks and resolve the dispute. Feeling the pressure, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney established a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1991. The commission’s report, released in 1996, included 440 recommendations and argued that Canada had a responsibility to reckon with the legacies of colonization and rebuild nation-to-nation relations with Indigenous peoples to avoid future conflict. The RCAP report offered a blueprint for reconciliation, but like most royal commissions, its findings and calls for change were (and still are) mostly ignored.

One important outcome of RCAP, however, was its research on residential schooling, which led to the Government of Canada’s official apology and the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in 2008. Nevertheless, recent revelations that Paul Bunner, who was Stephen Harper’s speechwriter at the time, considered residential schooling to be a “bogus genocide” and admitted the Government of Canada’s apology to residential school survivors was made in an effort to “kill the story,” shows that at least some people in Mr. Harper’s inner circle may not have had a genuine commitment to meaningfully improve Canada’s nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples. Moreover, the failure of the current government to act decisively during the recent Wet’suwet’en dispute and resulting rail blockades demonstrated Canada’s preference for symbolic change rather than resolving land claims and addressing the root issues of colonialism.

For the Mohawks of Kanesatake, Canada’s unwillingness to acknowledge Indigenous land rights and engage in nation-to-nation negotiations means their struggle continues today. Rather than seeing their land returned, the Mohawks have actually lost more land since 1990. The golf course expansion project was abandoned, but the Canadian government has refused to negotiate with the traditional government – the Rotinonhsesha:ka, or People of the Longhouse – to return the land. Instead, as in the case of the Wet’suwet’en, different levels of government have worked with the **imposed band council** to approve more development, including the construction of new homes on unceded territory. Ellen Gabriel, who served as the Mohawk spokesperson during the 1990 conflict at Kanesatake, continues to raise awareness about the injustice of continuing loss of land that has been going on in her community for more than 300 years. For Ms. Gabriel and other Mohawks fighting for their land rights, little has changed since 1990.

The world is currently reckoning with colonial history in unprecedented ways. People are toppling statues of colonizers such as Christopher Columbus and throwing them into the sea, while others are targeting memorials to imperialists and enslavers, such as Mount Rushmore, for demolition. This reckoning, though, must also grapple with the more recent colonial past such as the conflict at Kanesatake in 1990. In the 30 years since the Oka Crisis, there have been many government apologies and promises to improve Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. These are important first steps, but they must be backed up by meaningful reconciliation, namely, the return of land stolen during colonization. The future of Indigenous-settler relations depends on Canada’s ability to resolve land struggles such as the one in Kanesatake, which has been going on for 300 years too long.

Questions:

1. What is the primary issue in the Wet’suwet’en territory?
2. How should the government, in the 21st Century, interact with Indigenous communities related to development within territorial lands?