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Canada's Mohawks

Get out of our canoe

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When a Canadian is not a Canadian

THE dozen chiefs who make up the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake expected criticism when they began presenting eviction notices this month to 25 non-natives living on their 13,000-acre (5,260-hectare) reserve just south of Montreal. They hoped Canadians would understand their desire to protect a threatened language and culture, and refrain from interfering in internal Mohawk affairs. But many saw their action as a racist and illegal denial of Canada's constitutional Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Despite centuries of coexistence, the First Nations, as Canada's indigenous people call themselves, and other Canadians still live in mutual incomprehension. For a start the Mohawks do not see themselves as Canadians.

The council passed a bylaw in 1984, supported by the majority of the reservation's 8,000 residents, which stipulated that a person must have at least four Mohawk great grandparents to live or own property there. Any Mohawk who marries a non-native must leave. "Everyone knows the law: if you marry out, you stay out," says Joe Delaronde, a spokesman for the council. "If we don't protect who we are, we will become Canadian citizens."

Not such a terrible fate, you might think. But the leaders of many First Nations have been fighting assimilation for centuries. The Kahnawake reserve was originally set up by the French in 1716, when the Mohawks were their allies against the British. Shortly afterwards, some French traders were asked to leave. There have been many evictions since. A more prosaic reason is that First Nations receive federal money for social services only for officially registered natives. Yet there has also been a long history of intermarriage and adoption of non-natives. "Everyone in the community has mixed ancestry," says Matthieu Sossoyan, an anthropologist.

Canada's minister of Indian affairs admits the evictions make him "uncomfortable" but says he can do nothing because First Nations have the right to say who lives on reserves. The chiefs say that rather than the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, their relations with non-natives are governed by the Two-Row Wampum Treaty, agreed with Dutch traders in the 17th century. (The wampum, or beaded belt, showed two parallel lines on a pale background.) This called for mutual non-interference. "We stay in our canoe and you steer yours," says Mr Delaronde.

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