

Introduction to the Thunderwater Movement and the “Thunderwater Council” Part 1

Background:

For the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, Council elections mandated by federal legislation, started in 1870. Right from the start there was opposition to this system. In the 19th century there were at least two attempts (maybe more) to return the community to a traditional, hereditary council.

Dissatisfaction with the elected council continued into the early twentieth century. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that the Indian Act was now so invasive in the lives of community members. It structured lives ‘cradle to grave’.

It is not a surprise that those opposed to the Indian Act system were drawn to a movement, the Thunderwater movement, as a way to express their dissatisfaction, to organize themselves politically, and to try to make changes in their own lives.

Chief Thunderwater and the Council of Tribes:

Chief Thunderwater founded an organization called the Council of Tribes. The goal was to assist First Nations people in Canada and the United States and to organize them. Also known as “Oghema Niagara”, he was born with the name of Palmer and was from Cleveland, Ohio. His ancestry was a mix of “Sauk, Seneca and African-American”.
[Source: “To Renew Our Fire’: Canadian Indian Policy and the Development of Haudenosaunee Nationalism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” [Draft paper by Gerald R. Reid (Sacred Heart University) 2009 p.22]

The Indian Act and Canadian government policies affected every aspect of life for First Nations People in Canada: economically, politically, socially and culturally. The Council of Tribes was a way to organize, to voice grievances and pursue change.

The Council of Tribes “sought to provide legal assistance” to First Nations communities “with grievances against the government”, strongly supported education for advancement, argued for temperance, championed modernization of farming and encouraged “resistance to the sale of reserve lands”. *[Source: “To Renew Our Fire’: Canadian Indian Policy and the Development of Haudenosaunee Nationalism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” [Draft paper by Gerald R. Reid (Sacred Heart University) 2009 p.22]*

According to a Statement by Chief Thunderwater in 1915 the purpose of the organization was:

“To protect the American Indian against the injustice of any nature.

To ascertain for, and translate to the Indians, both of the UNITED STATES and CANADA the laws that effect[sic] the Indians in both countries,

To ascertain scientific, mechanical, agricultural and all other facts that tend to the uplift of the Indian. Especially to eradicate intoxicating liquor or other harmful[sic] influences that have been introduced to them by white people of low moral character.

To have Indians band themselves into one big league, cease internal dissensions, and thus protect themselves from INDIVIDUAL HELPLESSNESS.

To procure for the Indian the maximum value for his services and products.

N.B. TO CONVEY TO THE PROPER AUTHORITIES THE NEEDS AND WISHES OF THE INDIAN, JUST AS THEY DECIDED THAT THEY WISH IT CONVEYED WITHOUT CENSOR OF INDIAN AGENTS OR OTHER INTERESTED PERSONS.

To intercede for the Indian in Courts and other places in cases of error on his part.

To convince the Indian of the advantages of compulsory Education.

To first, WARN, secondly, PUBLISH, and thirdly, PROSECUTE persons that wantonly defraud or do other injustice to the Indian. [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

Starting in 1914 the Council of Tribes first organized people at Akwesasne (St. Regis), then Tyendinaga, Kahnawake and Ohsweken. By 1918 there were several thousand members in the "Thunderwater Movement". [Source: "To Renew Our Fire": Canadian Indian Policy and the Development of Haudenosaunee Nationalism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" [Draft paper by Gerald R. Reid (Sacred Heart University) 2009 p.23]

Thunderwater was in contact with other communities such as Kanesatake (Oka or Lake of Two Mountains) and also with at least one First Nations community in New Brunswick.

Not surprisingly, the Council of Tribes was not welcomed by the Government of Canada or by Indian Affairs. Indian Affairs was highly suspicious of the motives and the very last thing they wanted was politically coordinated action by First Nations communities.

In November 1914, the Indian Agent at St. Regis wrote to his superiors reporting on the fact that community members there were "flocking to" Thunderwater "with all their tales of long suffering and great injustice" caused by the actions of government Agents and Customs Officers. [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

When Thunderwater visited a community, supporters would organize into a Council that would be connected to the larger Council of Tribes organization. According to Thunderwater:

The Council of Tribes is simply a league of Indians organized for the purpose of detecting and exposing crooked methods executed by crooked individuals.

Every member of this Council is a sworn DETECTIVE working for the common good of all Indians and with a determination to root out evil practices, and to report all of their observations good or bad, at their regular meetings in hundreds of places; and through their Grand Councillors to send to headquarters reports on such cases as they deem should be handled by the Great Counsel...[Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

The St. Regis community used their local Council of Tribes to report on questionable behaviour by the local Indian Agent and the local priest. The Lake of Two Mountains community reported on an improper loan, trespass by land surveyors, interference by members of the local seminary, and abuse of elderly community members by the Indian Agent.

Indian Affairs officials were alarmed. They told communities in Canada through the Indians Agents to have nothing to do with the Council of Tribes. They reported Thunderwater as an “agitator and troublemaker”. Indian Affairs officials contacted the police in Cleveland for information on Thunderwater. [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

Thunderwater Comes to the Bay of Quinte:

Archival documents indicate that in the fall of 1915 there was a Convention of the Council of Tribes at Deseronto. Chief Thunderwater attended. One day of the convention was dedicated to writing papers to send to the Governor General of Canada and others.

The program for the Convention at Deseronto stated that Officers of the Council of Tribes for the Deseronto area were: Michael Clause, Grand Councillor, Johnson Lewis, Vice Grand Councillor, Isaac Clause, Secretary, George Hill, Treasurer, and Joel Johnson, Chairman.

Andrew Scero, Solomon Brant, Isaac Brant, William J. Scero, John Smart, Simon Hill, Peter Bardy, Cornelius Maracle were named as Councillors on the local Council of Tribes for the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte.

During the fall visit, C.C. Parker, an Inspector of Indian Affairs, was in Deseronto and sent information back to Ottawa on Thunderwater’s movements. One telegram reads:

“Thunderwater inspecting schools to-day please let me have name of lawyer in case needed.” [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

During his visit to Deseronto, Parker reported that Thunderwater “...preaches temperance, better farming by Indians, and compulsory school attendance.” Parker spoke with Chief Thunderwater and warned him against causing any trouble. Parker especially warned Thunderwater to “be careful not to incite or encourage Canadian Indians to act rashly or over-step the authority of our agents”. But Parker had to report to his superiors that Thunderwater was not saying anything “slanderos or threatening”. [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

Parker made a point of characterizing the Thunderwater supporters as being from a certain “class of Indians”: “It might be worthy of mention that those whom Thunderwater has obtained as his followers are the class of Indians who are always seeking trouble and seldom satisfied; at the same time not prosperous and poor farmers...”. Parker was also very concerned that the Council of Tribes would create divisions in the community: “dividing the bands and creating two factions who will not work in sympathy...” [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

Parker’s recommended solution to what he saw as the Thunderwater problem was to expand the powers in the Indian Act to regulate such organizations holding such meetings on reserves.

Attacks against Thunderwater:

Increasingly, officials were trying to characterize Thunderwater as a totally unsavory and dangerous person.

Thunderwater and his associates sold memberships, for \$1.00 to \$3.00 each. According to Thunderwater it was to cover his costs and finance the advocacy work. R. M. Clarke, Clerk of the First Division Court in the County of Hastings accused him of using the money to fund a lavish lifestyle.

In 1916 (in the midst of World War One), R. M. Clarke suggested that Thunderwater had financial support from a German source and warned the Commissioner of Dominion Police in Ottawa about Thunderwater stating: “... his advice and counsel was of a nature not in harmony with Loyalty to the Crown”. Clarke stated that “he is endeavouring to get the Indians throughout Canada, to cooperate in causing detrimental action to the Government of Canada...” Mr. Clarke recommended that Thunderwater be watched by the police. [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

In 1916, Thunderwater was planning a trip to Kahnawake. Officials wanted to deport him. They repeatedly wanted to find a way to prevent him from crossing the border into Canada.

In January 1917 Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs described Thunderwater's stated goals of "the promotion of temperance, education etc, etc" as not the real motive of the movement. Campbell Scott stated "the real motive, as evidenced by its action is to make difficulties for this department and its agents, and to stir up among the Indians distrust of the Department and opposition to the special laws existing for Indians." [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11336]

In November 1917 Duncan Campbell Scott reported in a memorandum:
"While the organization, which is called the Council of Tribes, is overtly for the purpose of improving education, morality, temperance and other virtues, it is covertly an attempt to organize among the Indians a body hostile to the Government of Canada and its methods of dealing with the aborigines." [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11336]

In 1918, Duncan Campbell Scott, described Thunderwater's supporters as "unprogressive" and "shiftless", while those who wanted Thunderwater removed were a "better class of Indian". [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

In 1918, a woman reported that Thunderwater was abusing her son. In 1919, Mary Ann George of the County of Lincoln signed a Statutory Declaration regarding "charges against Chief Thunderwater for alleged cruelty to Mitchell Benedict". Others supported her in the charges and made other accusations of wrong-doing. [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

Indian Affairs pursued the charges into the 1920s, even though one of the accusers withdrew his complaint.

In 1928 Thunderwater's difficulties were splashed all over the Louisville Times newspaper. Duncan Campbell Scott reported to the Managing Editor of the paper that Thunderwater "is supposed to be a negro" and "Thunderwater is an imposter". [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

According to the webpage dedicated to the family of Oghema Niagara or Chief Thunderwater, he was eventually able to clear his name against the charges but "agreed to confine his preaching" to the United States.

[See www.beadedflowerpatterns.com/thunderwater.htm]

Indian Affairs officials had accused him of fraud, of being an imposter, of spreading discontent and of undermining the authority of the Indian Agent. To them he was a troublemaker who had to be stopped.

Some of Thunderwater's words from almost a century ago:

For hundreds of First Nations People, Thunderwater came to their communities, he listened and he wanted to help to change things for the better. His words and message have resonance today.

In August 1915 Thunderwater wrote to Louis A. Loft of MBQ saying:

... That it should be the set policy of this Council [Council of Tribes at the Bay of Quinte] to persistently and firmly stand together in the face of all opposition of any nature whatsoever. That there is a decided opposition to any Indians organizing there is no doubt. Such has been made manifest on several occasions. The work of this Council [Council of Tribes at the Bay of Quinte] in your territory must of necessity be slow and carefully operated as the Indians have permitted the interested persons to infringe their rights to such an extent that it is much as if they had permitted a disease[sic] to make good progress throughout their systems and now are trying to eradicate it. Had the Indians organized before the Indian Act was passed there would have been no difficulty in putting a stop to the measure before it had reached it's[sic] growth. Now it will take persistent legal effort to have the Act repealed...[Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11336]

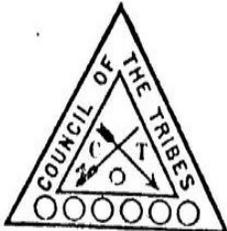
In September 1915, leading up to Thunderwater's visit to the Bay of Quinte, he wrote again to Louis A. Loft saying:***...it is the policy of this Council [Council of Tribes at the Bay of Quinte] to take all matters up in a legal way and use no bluster or physical force of any nature what so ever...[Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11336]***

Thunderwater visited Ohsweken in 1916. R. H. Abraham, an Agent representing the Indian Department, reported on Thunderwater's statements:

He said it was a deplorable condition of affairs that Indians, as intelectual[sic] as the Six Nation Indians should have to be treated as children by the Indian Dept. He appealed to the audience as to whether this was right nor not. He assured them that alone, they could do nothing to remedy this; but with his help (he had ways and means not at the disposal of any other of forcing Governments to do his bidding) they would be able to get complete control of their own affairs. He warned the Indians against the white men and told of different ways they (the white men) had of fleecing the Indians. He said that they (the Indians) should keep their own councils, transact their own business. He asked the Indians not to trust the white men, they have been trying for 300 years to push the Indians back into slavery and they had partly succeeded. They have passed legislation with this object in view. The 'Indian Act' is full of clauses that show truth of this... [Source: LAC RG10 Vol. 3184 File 458, 168 pt. 1 Reel C-11335]

Thunderwater's message must have found fertile ground among the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte because in December 1915 there was a Council election. The results of that election was a "Thunderwater Council": Chief Isaac Claus, Councillors: William J. Sero, George Hill, Jacob M. Barnhart and John A. Maracle. Next month we will take a closer look at the Thunderwater Council at Tyendinaga.

COUNCIL OF THE TRIBES

<p>OFFICERS THE OGHEMA OR GREAT COUNSEL OGHEMA NIAGARA (CHIEF THUNDERWATER)</p> <p>THE CABINET COUNCILLORS BARNUM POODRY, GREAT SACHEM MICHAEL CLAUSE, GRAND COUNCILLOR LOUIS SOLOMON, GRAND COUNCILLOR WM. R. BOYD, M. D., SUPREME PHYSICIAN AND TREASURER WANPHIA SPIECHE THOMAS WALTER MARTIN, SUPREME SECRETARY JAMES MOSES, GRAND COUNCILLOR JOHNSON LEWIS, VICE GRAND COUNCILLOR</p>	 <p>UNION - PROTECTION - PUBLICITY</p>	<p>THE INNER COUNCILLORS</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td>ALEXANDER EDWARDS</td> <td>WILLIAM SECRO</td> </tr> <tr> <td>MICHAEL SOLOMON</td> <td>ISAAC CLAUSE</td> </tr> <tr> <td>FELIX MARTIN</td> <td>JOHN SMART</td> </tr> <tr> <td>EDWARD CORNPLANTER</td> <td>CORNELIUS MARACLE</td> </tr> <tr> <td>ANDREW SECRO</td> <td>JOEL JOHNSON</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SOLOMON BRANT</td> <td>PETER BARDY</td> </tr> <tr> <td>ISAAC BRANT</td> <td>PETER PAPINEAU</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SOLOMON HILL</td> <td>PETER DAY</td> </tr> <tr> <td>GEORGE HILL</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	ALEXANDER EDWARDS	WILLIAM SECRO	MICHAEL SOLOMON	ISAAC CLAUSE	FELIX MARTIN	JOHN SMART	EDWARD CORNPLANTER	CORNELIUS MARACLE	ANDREW SECRO	JOEL JOHNSON	SOLOMON BRANT	PETER BARDY	ISAAC BRANT	PETER PAPINEAU	SOLOMON HILL	PETER DAY	GEORGE HILL	
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THE PROTECTION OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS' INTERESTS

FOUNDED O. S. E. 120--A. D. 1612
A. D. 1720--WAH-DAY-WAH-DEN-WOOHOOENDY--G. S. E. 228

Notes:

Most of the historical information in this article was taken from: Correspondence regarding a organization known as the Indian Rights Association or Council of the Tribes, This group was led by Chief Thunderwater and met with Mohawks on the Tyendinaga and St. Regis Reserves [Newspaper clippings, Photo. 1914- 1928. Library and Archives Canada, Indian Affairs, RG10 Volume 3184 File 458,168 Part 1 Reels C-11335 & C-11336], except where noted otherwise.

The archival files used for this article are at the Library and Archives Canada. These files have been digitized. The LAC web site is www.collectionscanada.gc.ca If you have any problems accessing the materials the library or the research office would be pleased to help you.

For more information about the Thunderwater Movement and more generally the movement at Tyendinaga to restore a traditional, hereditary Council we recommend the article by Professor Gerald Reid "To Renew Our Fire: Political Activism, Nationalism, and Identity in Three Rotinohsionni Communities." in *Tribal Worlds: Critical Studies in American Indian Nation Building*. Brian Hosmer & Larry Nesper, eds. Albany, State University of New York Press. 2013

Minutes of 1800

This is a continuation of the Minutes of 1800. In September 1800 there was a Council Meeting held in the community that spanned 8 days. This meeting was held to try to come to some resolution of the troubles that had been dividing the community at that time.

Reprinted in this edition of the newsletter is a proceeding of the meeting held on September 9th. No proceedings were held on September 7th as it was a Sunday. September 2nd to September 8th were previously printed in the newsletter in the months of May, August, September and October 2013 and February 2014. You can also find all of the Minutes of 1800 on our website.

If anyone has any questions please contact Amy Cowie in the Research Department.

Proceedings of a Council held at the Bay of Quinte beginning on the 2nd and ending on the 10th of September 1800, in the Mohawk Village

September 9th:

The Council held at Capt. John's House.

Present as before.

Capt. Claus informed Capt. John & his people the same as he had done to Capt. Isaac's party yesterday.

Captain John then spoke as follows:

Now, Brother, the Great Spirit has allowed us to assemble here in a very good cause. You have been greatly fatigued to make up this sad business between us; nor did we expect you should ever have had so much trouble or to come this great distance to reconcile our differences, and I hope it never will happen again. I am very happy to hear the good things that passed in Council yesterday after we left it, and if you will allow us a few minutes we will consult on the business among ourselves. We will go out and endeavour for the best and return immediately.

They then withdrew.

On their return:

Captain John said:

Now, Brother, you have called upon us for our opinion on this business and to know our minds. When you first came here, we were at a loss what you meant to do, as you spoke to Capt. Isaac first as soon as you arrived and also yesterday when we were desired to withdraw. I think, Brother, you was[sic] rather too mild with Capt. Isaac and his party, and I think also that Mr. Stuart said too much in Capt. Isaac's favor; and it does not appear to me that Mr. Stuart's advice would correspond with the General's intention. Mr. Stuart is very ignorant of the situation of this place as he only comes here once a year, and as his business is of a different kind I never wish to trouble him with what concerns the Village. Now Brother, we find the reason of you having seperated[sic] us yesterday was from a good cause, and we are very happy to find it so. We have very little more to say as everything seems to be settled and I shall say but a few words more.

You heard, Brother, what Capt. Isaac said to you, that he would not in future stir up any more disturbances, and I suppose he is now very happy, as he was very fearful before the business came to be heard. He studies nothing, and knows nothing and is very obstinate and knows not what honesty is. He will make fair promises and never will be as good as his word. We shall never credit him but upon proof of his future good behaviour. Sir John Johnson & Col. Claus always instructed me to keep in the strait[sic] path and I have always followed their advice: and what can I say more? I know the Great Spirit is ever looking at us and that is the reason I strive to do for the best. We, therefore, cannot think of shaking hands until we see whether he will stick to his promises. For the crime has been so great I cannot think of making up the matter in this manner, and General Hunter said that those who were in the fault should be sent out of the place.

Now, Brother, you have heard[sic] what I have said and the Village will never be in peace until those people who have made this disturbance are sent out of this place. When that is done the Village will be peaceable, and in future when they are gone, every person who misbehaves as they have done will be served in the same manner. But before anything more can be done these people must be sent out of this place. Now, Brother, you will take this into consideration. Which do you think, Bror. would be the best; To send me and my people from off this Land, or those who have been guilty of so great a crime? We would not think it a great hardship to set off and leave the King's land if required, because we know we have behaved well, but by being with bad people for some time it causes a great deal of trouble. You may depend that Capt. Isaac will never keep his promises, and when your backs are turned he will go on as

before, as he is possessed with a Devil. Capt. Isaac, Paulus, the Frenchman, and Thomas, the fidler[sic], are the men who make all the disturbances. Isaac says he will never be guilty of such conduct again; let him Pay all the Deceased's debts and go through the Custom of covering the Dead, and then we may expect he will abide by his Promises.

We shall now let the matter rest as it is until we hear General Hunter's opinion of the matter. I hope we shall never be guilty of such a Crime a Capt. Isaac' party have, as I always give good advice to my people. You see, Brother, when the white people come among us there is always mischief and misunderstanding. Sir Wm Johnson told me in the year 1760 to let all the prisoners go or they would ruin the Indians, particularly the french people for they are bad Birds, and that after they were all sent away we would have peace and quietness. These thoughts struck me when our disturbances began here. You white people made Christians of us on which account you have been applied to, to do us justice.

Now, Brother, this is all I have to say. You have the whole in writing before you and we hope you will do us all the service that lays in your power. As to taking Isaac and his party by the Hand, that is out of the question at present; time and experience of his future good Conduct may make us friends.

In the meantime, I shall conduct myself with quietness and regularity to all his party.

After some conversation with Capt. John and the Widow Laurence, and after Capt. John's consulting his people again, he returned and spoke as follows.

Brother, there is one thing still which you request. You wish all these disturbances and everything which has passed to be put under ground. We see clearly you wish us will[sic]. We are Christians and as such are not hard to be persuaded. Therefore, we agree to your request, as we must all die some time or other. When Capt. Isaac repeats before us what he has said to you, that he will have nothing more to say in the Village, we will be satisfied; and it is expected that Thomas, the fidler[sic], Little Peter, Nicholas Crawford and Ab. Hill will also come forward and make the same declaration, and also all those who were concerned in the Murder. I will then take Isaac by the Hand, and I hope, Brother, you will not be bashfull[sic], but speak sharply to them, as it may have a good Effect. I heartily thank all the Gentlemen for their long attendance and attention to this unhappy business.

Adjourned till tomorrow noon.