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# Mohawk Council of Kahnawake

P.O. Box 720  
Kahnawake Mohawk Territory J0L 1B0  
OFFICE OF THE COUNCIL OF CHIEFS



Tel.: (450) 632-7500  
Fax: (450) 632-7276  
Website: [www.kahnawake.com](http://www.kahnawake.com)

## MOHAWK COUNCIL OF KAHNAWÀ:KE'S RESPONSE TO LA PRESSE ARTICLES: TERRITOIRE MOHAWK NON CÉDÉ?

Montreal City Hall has recently recognized the Island of Montreal as unceded Mohawk Territory. For Kahnawà:ke, this recognition marks a first step in the transformation of our relationship, opening the door to reconciliation. For the first time in a very long time, we are not being treated as forgotten people.

In a series of articles that were recently published, La Presse considers the controversy surrounding the City of Montreal's position. To shed light on this issue, the newspaper chose to highlight the positions of four non-Indigenous historians, with two of these historians directly questioning the historic presence of Mohawks on the Island of Montreal. However, La Presse, did not think to contact the Mohawk Nation, to call upon Mohawk and Indigenous oral history experts or to include a critical perspective to shed light on the other side of a debate that has significant consequences that go beyond the realm of academia.

The Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation is the guardian of the eastern door to the vast territory of the Six Nations that form the Iroquois Confederacy. The northern part of our territory extends beyond the Island of Montreal, along the Saint Lawrence River. Archaeological digs demonstrate Mohawk presence across this territory, including in the regions of Quebec City, Sorel, Trois-Rivière, and even Gaspésie. To the south, our lands extend through the State of New York, from the Hudson rivers to the West, from the Genesee to the East. On this territory, generations of Kanien'kehá:ka built villages, hunted, cultivated the land, fished, forged alliances and diplomatic relations, held councils, concluded treaties, lead military campaigns and maintained a complex network of social, economic and political relations among clans, communities and Nations. On the Island of Montreal, Otsira'kè:ne (or "Hochelaga") which means where the large Council fire burns in Kanien'kéha, was one such site of convergence where Chiefs from different Nations met around the fire.

In order to continue to exist as Mohawk peoples and to assert our right to self-determination, our culture and our language, we must act within a legal framework that has served to consolidate the non-indigenous systems of power over our lands. A framework that does not reflect or reflects very little of our legal traditions, oral history, knowledge systems, but that nevertheless frames the public discourse around our rights.

Within this system, the recognition of our rights requires the demonstration of our past presence on the territory at the moment of first contact with Europeans, to establish aboriginal rights, and from the moment of affirmation of European sovereignty for the establishment of aboriginal title. In a legal and social context that accords little weight to our oral history, we have the burden to demonstrate our past

presence through ancient written texts that documented our presence from the perspective that the new migrants had on our ancestors.

For several decades, the historic presence of the Mohawk Nation in the Saint Lawrence Valley has been under concerted attack in Quebec academic circles, led notably by supporters of the Saint Lawrence Iroquois theory, including historians Denys Delage and Alain Beaulieu that have championed this theory. This version of history arose from non-Indigenous academic circles, and is, in essence, a contemporary version of the *terra nullius* ("no man's land") doctrine that was used to justify the appropriation of Indigenous lands by European powers.

As the mysterious "disappeared peoples" that Cartier met and that could not be found at the moment that Champlain arrived, the Iroquois of the Saint Lawrence, according to the fans of this theory, were "similar but distinct" on the cultural and linguistic fronts to the Hurons and Iroquois that were present on the territory, and this, in spite of the ancestral links established by the oral history of our nations. The supposed abandonment of the territory by these groups, considered as disappeared, justifies the appropriation of territory by European powers in the eyes of colonial legal systems. According to this version of history, when the Mohawks return to establish themselves on the south shore of Montreal after the peace treaty of 1667, it is at the invitation of the French and as "immigrants", to employ the term used by Mr. Delage and Beaulieu.

Migrant peoples or disappeared peoples, the fiction of the absence of Indigenous peoples on the territory continues to be invoked in Quebec to justify and perpetuate the dispossession and imposition of non-Indigenous governments on our lands. Behind this theory, constructed nebulously on historical uncertainties, the agenda could not be clearer: the negation of continuous Indigenous presence, in this case, Mohawk, in order to undermine the credibility of historic territorial assertions. This is demonstrated by the opinions of Mr. Delage and Beaulieu, who do not hesitate to venture outside of their areas of expertise to make pronouncements on the existence and nature of Mohawk rights to the territory of the Island of Montreal. It is certainly not within their purview to make pronouncements on such complex legal questions.

From their ivory towers and euro-centric perspective, M. Beaulieu and M. Delage do not hesitate to fasten themselves as experts in Mohawk and Algonquin oral history, and authorize themselves to use and interpret the chosen fragments of that history for their own purposes. They are therefore part of the academic tradition that is characterized by the domination of western knowledge systems. Even today, these so called non-Indigenous "experts" conserve the monopoly on the interpretation of our histories, of our treaties and of our political, diplomatic and economic choices. La Presse's choice to exclude the Mohawk perspective from a debate that has heavy implications for our rights and self-determination is just another example of this deplorable tendency.

The interpretation of historical and archaeological sources has never been neutral or objective, especially since these disciplines are in constant evolution, which obliges researchers to think critically about past research methods and conclusions. However, in Quebec, a version of history founded on the

negation of the political, diplomatic, cultural presence of our societies on the territory continues to dominate. If these versions allows the Quebec population to dissociate themselves from the responsibility for the dispossession of our territory, this truncated version of history does not advance reconciliation between our peoples. More than ever, the oral history of First Nations is essential to shed light on our shared history. It is no longer acceptable in today's context to exclude their rightful place in any public debate surrounding the rights and self-determination of Indigenous peoples.



Grand Chief Joseph Tokwiro Norton

Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke