

Igniting a Resistance Movement: Understanding Indigenous Opposition to the 2010 Olympic Torch Relay

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On a wet and windy October morning in Victoria, British Columbia, approximately fifteen thousand spectators congregated around the Inner Harbour for the 2010 Olympic flame arrival ceremony and community celebrations. The festivities commenced with the first sighting of the flame, as it travelled across the downtown harbour with the Four Host First Nations (FHFN) Chiefs aboard an ocean-going West Coast red cedar canoe, flanked by two other canoes being paddled by and carrying representatives from local indigenous communities.¹ As the canoes approached the shoreline, onlookers waved Canadian flags and cheered in celebration; however, Olympic festivities were momentarily halted so that indigenous leaders could observe local protocol. According to Coast Salish law, the FHFN Chiefs needed to receive permission from local leaders before entering their territory. Following a brief ceremony, local Chiefs Robert Sam (Songhees Nation) and Andy Thomas (Esquimalt Nation) formally welcomed the members in the FHFN canoe and the Olympic flame to Lekwungen territory. With the arrival of the coveted flame, Olympic dignitaries lit the cauldron in Victoria, thereby officially commemorating the launch of the Canadian leg of the 2010 Olympic Torch Relay.²

Elsewhere in the city, the V2010 Integrated Security Unit and local police were preparing for anti-Olympic protest action. This included a well-publicized demonstration event scheduled to take place that afternoon in Victoria's downtown Centennial Square.³ A local grassroots collective, known as "No 2010 Victoria," had organized an "Anti-Olympic Festival" and "Zombie March" so as to "greet" the flame with anti-Olympic messages. Furthermore, activists cited "indigenous rights violations" as one reason for resisting Olympic celebrations on Lekwungen territory.⁴ According to mainstream media reports as well as a statement from No 2010 Victoria, approximately 400 protestors successfully disrupted and diverted the relay.⁵

On this occasion, and in the months ahead, Olympic flame celebrations played out in similar fashion in many communities throughout the nation. While Olympic enthusiasts, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, eagerly anticipated the celebratory events, Olympic opponents were eager to use these opportunities to declare their grievances publicly and via mass media. By providing a brief summary on the origin of the modern Olympic torch relay, as well as the Vancouver relay organizational efforts, particularly in relationship to indigenous programming, this paper disentangles the complex issues that arose during the 2010 Vancouver Olympic torch relay. Anti-Olympic sentiments concerning indigenous injustices primarily centered on the issue of indigenous treaties and land sovereignty, which were cited by many indigenous peoples, their supporters, and social activists.

The flame has become one of the greatest symbols of the modern Olympic movement, and the torch relay one of its most cherished traditions. However, it is necessary to remember that the history of the relay stems from a dark and difficult past. The Olympic torch relay was, in fact, conceived and implemented as a propaganda tool under the directive of the National Socialists for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. For this event, Nazi organizers commissioned the German arms producer, Friedrich Krupp AG, to create and manufacture torches that would be used along the relay route, thus marking the first official sponsor of the torch relay. The flame was lit on the ancient grounds in Olympia, Greece, and travelled through Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Austria before arriving at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin for the opening ceremony. During the eight-day relay, there were a significant number of physical confrontations and arrests.⁶ Despite this tremulous beginning, the IOC formally entrenched the torch relay into the Olympic program following the Second World War. However, it has only been since 1984, with advances in mass media, mobile camera crews, and the Internet that substantial attention has been paid to this Olympic tradition.⁷ Since then, engagement with Olympic relay celebrations has increased considerably as members of the general public have come to recognize the potential of using the relay to either participate, disengage, or oppose the Games.

The Vancouver 2010 Olympic torch relay was marketed as "A Path of Northern Lights." On that note, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC), John Furlong, stated: "[W]e've always wanted these Games to be about the entire nation—to let everyone in, from every single corner of this huge, extraordinary country. We want these Games to bring Canadians together, igniting something in our hearts and souls that makes us better."⁸

Vancouver organizers ultimately devised a relay route that not only exceeded public expectations but also challenged the Olympic norm. The 2010 relay commenced on October 22, 2009, with the kindling of the Olympic flame in the ancient stadium in Olympia, Greece, and ended with the lighting of the Olympic cauldron during the opening ceremony on February 12, 2010. As for the Canadian segment, it was the longest domestic relay in the history of the Olympic Winter Games. The overall distance covered during the 106-day run totaled 45,000 kilometres, traveling by way of land, sea, and sky through approximately 1,020 communities, including the northernmost inhabited community on the globe, Alert, Nunavut. In the end, more than 12,000 torchbearers carried the Olympic flame.⁹ The operating budget for the 2010 relay was approximately \$30 million, which included support from the Government of Canada and VANOC, as well as sponsorship from the official Presenting Partners, Coca-Cola and the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), while manufacturing expenses for the torches (numbering more than 12,000) were covered by its design creator, Bombardier.¹⁰

The 2010 Olympic Torch Relay Committee remained committed to VANOC's intent to achieve unprecedented aboriginal participation in the planning and hosting of the Games. Accordingly, the relay travelled to more than 100 indigenous communities.¹¹ Included in community celebrations was an equal number of Community Torchbearers selected to carry the flame through their territories. Also selected were 11 Youth Flame Attendants, 71 Language Torchbearers, and 10 Hero Torchbearers. An Honorary Elder Fire Keeper from each community delivered welcome blessings and shared traditional teachings.¹² The torch travelled through at least one indigenous community, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, in every province and territory. In the province of British Columbia alone, the Olympic flame travelled through 50 indigenous communities. This was not only due to the province's Olympic host status but also indicative of the large number of indigenous communities located in the province (in total there are 203 First Nations communities in British Colum-

bia). Moreover, RBC announced the appointment of Phil Fontaine, former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (1997-2009), as Special Advisor on indigenous issues.¹³ One of his first responsibilities in this role was to ensure that RBC maximized the involvement of aboriginal communities in the 2010 relay.¹⁴ Meanwhile, anti-Olympic activists drew attention to the fact that RBC was financing the Alberta Oil Sands (commonly referred to as the Oil Reserves or Tar Sands)¹⁵ initiative, which contravened indigenous treaty and land rights in the province. For anti-Olympic activists and members of the Olympic Resistance Network, RBC's hiring of Fontaine suggested RBC officials were genuinely fearful that protest action in First Nations communities, as well as militant activity by groups supporting indigenous grievances, would seriously undermine relay celebrations.¹⁶ Olympic officials, partners, and enthusiasts certainly had cause for concern.

The story of indigenous resistance to Canadian Olympic torch celebrations predates the 2010 Games. In 1988, the Lubicon Lake Nation, a relatively small Cree nation located in northern Alberta, called for a boycott of certain events, including the torch relay, during the Calgary Olympics. At this time, countless indigenous peoples and supporters from across the nation stood in solidarity with the Lubicon Cree as they made their Olympic-related grievances known to the world. The leader of the Lubicon, Chief Bernard Ominayak, drew attention to the fact that the Government of Canada and Petro-Canada were co-sponsoring the relay—two entities illegally invading and destroying Lubicon territory.¹⁷ For the 2010 Olympics, indigenous peoples and activists opposed the torch relay and the Games more broadly on the basis of ongoing indigenous grievances concerning indigenous land claims in British Columbia (or the lack thereof), as well as the carrying of the Olympic flame through sovereign indigenous territories.

While the majority of relay events were celebratory in nature, there remained significant opposition to some Olympic festivities. Whether supporting indigenous rights, anti-capitalist interests, environmentalism, low-income housing, or the rights of the homeless, many, if not most, anti-Olympic activists coalesced under a campaign calling for “No Olympics on Stolen Native Land.”¹⁸ The campaign itself was an indication of how sophisticated anti-Olympic protest action had become, and the name became a slogan for most organized protest groups. Still, the campaign referred specifically to indigenous grievances: “The slogan reflects the fact that the majority of land in British Columbia remained unceded and non-surrendered indigenous lands in the lead up, and at time of hosting the games.”¹⁹ At the heart of anti-Olympic engagement remained the question of colonial land theft, and the ongoing destruction of indigenous territories in British Columbia. While it is safe to say that a great number of indigenous peoples and communities supported the 2010 Games (i.e., the FHFN and those that participated in the torch celebrations), there remained significant opposition to the hosting of the Olympics on unceded indigenous lands.

On most days of the relay, the celebrations encountered some type of anti-Olympic messaging, or at least the threat of opposition. While advances in mass communication have increased public interest in the torch relay, Olympic researchers Horne and Whannel argue: “Gatekeeping, agenda setting, framing and constructing news remain key aspects of the mediation of any event and mega-event. Power and influence to shape the agenda—and construct the story—remain tied to large media organizations despite the internet and the emergence of heterogeneous voices.”²⁰ The media reported on protest action along the relay route, including the arrests of activists in places such as Victoria, Montréal, Kahnawà:ke, Toronto, Six Nations of the Grand River, Guelph, Oneida of the Thames, Spanish River, Fort Rupert, and Vancouver, to name a few. This list is likely only a small sample of anti-Olympic protest activity that occurred along the route, as media agenda setting remained in the hands of the gatekeepers whose job it was to downplay the level of anti-Olympic sentiment and boost the feel-

good messaging that always accompanies Olympic celebrations. That being said, some torch celebrations received considerably more attention from mainstream and alternative media than others, most notably Kahnawà:ke, a Mohawk community located south of Montreal, Quebec.

Mainstream and alternative media sources provided considerable attention to the controversies and deliberations that took place in Kahnawà:ke prior to the arrival of the Olympic flame. The relay was scheduled to stop in the Mohawk community on December 8, 2009. However, one week prior to its arrival, official representatives from the Mohawk nation issued the following statement: "We must seriously consider the ongoing struggle of our Indigenous brothers and sisters in British Columbia who endeavor to prevent the Government of Canada from further commandeering and expropriating their traditional territory."²¹

It is worth noting that Kahnawà:ke was involved in an aggressive standoff with the Canadian military in the summer of 1990, an event commonly referred to as the Oka Crisis. As Cheryl Diabo, a member of the community's traditional council stated, "We don't support the torch coming through Kahnawake or any native community because of the land that's being destroyed in B.C...We support our native sisters and brothers who stood in line in our defence in 1990 during the crisis we faced, and it's only natural that we do the same."²² Furthermore, members of Kahnawà:ke rejected the presence of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Force (RCMP), who were escorting the Olympic torch on Mohawk territory, due to the long and arduous relationship between the community and the RCMP, who were viewed as a foreign and colonial policing unit. Then, immediately prior to the arrival of the torch, Olympic officials and members of the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke negotiated an alternative, which was to have the community Peacekeepers, the local indigenous policing unit, escort the Olympic flame through the community. In the end, the torch relay travelled through Kahnawà:ke, and a large number of people lined the road and cheered in celebration. To be sure, protestors also lined the route and held banners that opposed the relay, including one that read, "Remove the Poison. Remove the Torch."²³

As demonstrated in this paper, the decision to participate in the celebrations of the 2010 Olympic Games differed amongst various indigenous groups and peoples. VANOC went to considerable lengths to ensure unprecedented indigenous participation in the planning and hosting of the Vancouver Winter Games, as indicated by partnerships with the FHFN, as well as public ceremonies, similar to the one that took place in Victoria's Inner Harbour. However, not all indigenous peoples supported the relay. In fact, it was through the torch relay celebrations that many had the opportunity to draw attention to the injustices that indigenous peoples continue to experience within Canada's colonial structure, and to publicly protest the presence of the Olympic Games on non-surrendered indigenous territories.

Endnotes

- 1 The Four Host First Nations included the Lil'wat Nation, Musqueam Nation, Squamish Nation, and Tsleilaututh Nation, which were led by Chiefs Leonard Andrew (Lil'wat), Ernest Campbell (Musqueam), Leah George Wilson (Tsleil-Waututh), Bill Williams (Squamish), and Gibby Jacobs (Squamish and VANOC Board Member), respectively.
- 2 Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, *A Path of Northern Lights: The Story of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Torch Relay* (Mississauga, ON: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2010).
- 3 No 2010 Victoria. "'Anti-Olympic Festival' and 'Zombie March' to Mark the Launch of 2010 Olympic Torch Relay in Victoria," Pacific Free Press, October 28 2009. <http://www.pacificfreepress.com/news/1/4957-anti-olympics-festival-and-zombie-march-to-welcome-olympic-torch-in-victoria.html>.

- 4 Ibid.
- 5 "Activists Interrupt Olympic Torch Relay," CBC News, October 30, 2009, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2009/10/29/bc-olympic-flame-island-arrival.html> (accessed May 24, 2012) and Vancouver Media Co-Op, "No 2010 Victoria Statement on Torch Relay Disruption," January 24, 2011. <http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca/olympics/no-2010-victoria-statement-torch-relay-disruption/5759>.
- 6 John Horne and Garry Whannel, "The 'Caged Torch Procession': Celebrities, Protesters and the 2008 Olympic Torch Relay in London, Paris and San Francisco," *Sport in Society* 13(5) (June 2010): 760-770.
- 7 Janet Cahill, "The Olympic Flame and Torch: Running Towards Sydney 2000." In Robert K. Barney, Kevin B. Wamsley, Scott G. Martyn, and Gordon H. MacDonald (eds.), *Global and Cultural Critique: Problematizing the Olympic Games* (London, ON: International Centre for Olympic Studies, 1998): 181-190.
- 8 *A Path of Northern Lights: The Story of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Torch Relay*: 7.
- 9 International Olympic Committee, "Vancouver 2010: Objective Sustainable Development," The Olympic Museum: Educational Kit, 2010.
- 10 Federal support for the Olympic and Paralympic Torch Relays was funded through Heritage Canada. The total contribution from the Government of Canada for the Olympic and Paralympic Torch relays was \$14.6, which included \$10 million for the Olympic relay, \$2 million for the Paralympic relay, and \$2.6 to support logistic requirements. In total, the Government budgeted \$54.5 million for Olympic programming. See, Canada. Heritage Canada. *Audit of the Ceremonies and Events/Vancouver 2010 Directorate's Olympic and Paralympic Projects: Office of the Chief Audit and Evaluation Executive Audit and Assurance Services Directorate*. [Ottawa], February 2010. <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/em-cr/assurmc/2010/2010-02-1/2010-02-1-eng.pdf>.
- 11 The initial number of communities listed on the relay route was 115, however, organizers suggested that this number might increase as communities were added to the list. Subsequent reports listed as many as 130 indigenous communities having been visited. See Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, "List of Aboriginal and Northern Communities Along the Olympic Torch Relay Route." Government of Canada; http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/Map/2010trp/trch_html-eng.asp.
- 12 Community Torchbearers were selected to carry the flame through their respective territories. The Youth Flame Attendants comprised of young people between the ages of 19 to 25 who worked alongside the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to maintain the lanterns and backup flames. The Language Torchbearers represented Aboriginal linguistic groups in Canada, which included 43 First Nations, seven Inuit, and 21 Métis torchbearers. Finally, Honorary Elder Fire Keepers were asked to keep fires burning during ceremonies and to share traditional teachings. See "Vancouver 2010 Names Six Aboriginal Flame Attendants, Torchbearers and Honorary Elder Fire Keepers for Vancouver 2010 Olympic Torch Relay," Canada Newswire (October 19, 2009). <http://www.newswire.ca/en/story/429837/vancouver-2010-names-six-aboriginal-flame-attendants-torchbearers-and-honorary-elder-fire-keepers-for-vancouver-2010-olympic-torch-relay>.
- 13 According to a RBC News Research, Fontaine was responsible for providing "advice and counsel to RBC's Canadian businesses to help the company deepen its relationships with Aboriginal governments, communities and businesses in Canada." In this position, he first task was to "help ensure that RCB maximizes the involvement of the Aboriginal community in the 2010 Olympic Torch Relay." See Royal Bank of Canada News Release, "RBC Appoints Phil Fontaine as Special Advisor," Royal Bank of Canada, <http://www.rbc.com/newsroom/2009/0902-fontaine.html>.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 The Alberta Oil Sands export initiative is largest energy project on the planet. The government of Alberta asserts that the province's oil reserves not only play an important role in the national and international economies, but they provide the global community with "stable and reliable energy." However, in order to access these oil reserves, treaties with Indigenous peoples are being dishonoured and outright ignored. Furthermore, opponents of the Oil Sands have identified far-reaching environmental, resource, and health concerns resulting from this this energy project initiative.
- 16 Rod Mickleburgh, "Olympic Torch Stokes Warm Pride and Fiery Protest Among Aboriginals," *Globe and Mail*, September 8 2009, National News.
- 17 Kevin B. Wamsley and Michael Heine, "'Don't Mess with the Relay—It's Bad Medicine': Aboriginal Cultural and the 1988 Winter Olympics," R.K. Barney & al. (eds.), *Olympic Perspectives* (London, ON: International Centre for Olympic Studies, 1996): 173-178.
- 18 The name "No Olympics on Stolen Native Land" was adopted by the Olympic Resistance Network (ORN), which served as an umbrella organization for anti-Olympic engagement. The ORN coordinated efforts between numerous anti-Olympic individuals and groups, including 2010 Games Watch, Anti-Poverty Committee, No 2010 Olympics on Stolen Native Land, No One is Illegal, and Our Freedom.
- 19 Christine M. O'Bonsawin, "No Olympics on Stolen Native Land: Contesting Olympic Narratives and Asserting Indigenous Rights within the Discourse of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics," *Sport and Society* 13(1) (January 2010): 143-156.
- 20 Horne and Whannel, 767.

- 21 Vancouver Media Co-op, "Kahnawake Mohawks Oppose RCMP Escort for Olympic Torch," Jordan Standup, The Eastern Door (December 2009), <http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca/olympics/kahnawake-mohawks-oppose-rcmp-escort-olympic-torch/5673> [accessed July 12, 2012].
- 22 Vancouver Media Co-op, "Kahnawake Mohawks Protest Olympic Torch," Peter Rakobowchuk, The Canadian Press, December 8, 2009, <http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca/olympics/kahnawake-mohawks-protest-olympic-torch/5669>.
- 23 Ibid.