



## Address to 74<sup>th</sup> IFLA General Conference and Council

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**Meeting:** 144. Plenary Session

**Simultaneous Interpretation:** English, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian and Spanish

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### *Introduction*

- *Thank you for the kind invitation.*
- *Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen*
- *It is an honour to have been asked to speak to you this afternoon on the topic of "Libraries and the First Nations People of Canada"*
- *I intend to make the point that libraries and books can*

transform lives, but too many segments of society, especially aboriginal people, do not have access to them. And when governments will not or cannot act, then civil society can step up to fill the gaps.

## The Children

- My focus will be on the children.
- I'd like to start by asking a question.
- What do we want for our children?
- Timothy Garton Ash in the Toronto Globe and Mail of July 4, 2008.
- " I want my children to live at least as freely as I have, in a free country, and I want as many people as possible in other countries to be as free as they can be. That requires not just traditional civil and political liberties but also some

*basic conditions of personal, legal and economic security, and life chances based on education and equal opportunities.”*

Libraries are key to helping individuals achieve these goals

- They provide access to books, periodicals, the internet and other sources of information for personal development, for education and for the acquisition of skills.
- They help form good citizens of one's country and of the world.

## *Power of Books*

- And to what is due this transformative power?
- Reading is an act of self discovery.
- Reading allows you to learn the language of yourself

- Reading expands your consciousness.
- Reading allows you to go beyond the borders of your experience
- Reading wakes you up
- Reading, in the wonderful words of Mark Edmunston the writer, takes you from a world of harsh limits into expanded possibilities
- Reading is magic.
- Sadly in many developing countries most children do not have access to books and libraries, let alone to the quality of schooling we take for granted in wealthy countries
- And even in these so-called developed countries, equal access does not exist
- In Canada, we are proud, and justifiably so, of our

libraries.

- The Toronto Public Library for example is the second busiest in the world after Singapore

## Aboriginal Peoples

- But even in Canada, there are groups that do not benefit
- And aboriginal Canadians top that list
- And aboriginal people seem to be the excluded everywhere around the world
- They were the people pushed aside in the period of European exploration and colonization over the past four hundred years
- They are the people in Canada, the United States, Australia, Latin America who are at the bottom of the social economic ladder

- At times in history, the dominant settler society seems to have doubted that they were fully human
- I found this hard to believe until I travelled in a South American country as a young diplomat some forty years ago and discovered that settlers in a certain area were hunting aboriginal people for sport, as if they were animals
- Those days thankfully are long over
- But not enough is being done anywhere to give them equal access to libraries and information technology

## Canada's Aboriginal peoples

- Three groups
- First Nations ( registered Indians)
- Metis
- Inuit (USA - Eskimo)

Population - 1.2 million

Fastest growing sector of population - up 45% since 1996

First Nations People

- some 700,000
- Half on reserve half in urban areas
- 640 reserves or First Nation communities

Good news

- small but vibrant middle class
- doctors, lawyers, teachers, professional people
- pride in heritage
- cultural renaissance

Bad news

- outweighs the good
- Greatest domestic social justice crisis facing Canada

- Under Human Development Index, Canada ranks number eight but First Nations communities or reserves rank 68
- Lowest levels of educational achievement of any Canadian group
- 28 years to catch up
- suicide levels twice national average and is largely among the young
- More people in jail than in college or university
- ten percent of all First Nations children in care of child welfare authorities (22,000)
  - Suspect similar statistics for Native Americans in the United States and aborigines in Australia

Why?

- conquest



- neglect
- Racism
- Kafkaesque governance

### Residential schools

- social engineering
- late 19<sup>th</sup> century to late 20<sup>th</sup>
- 150,000 removed by force
- tens of thousands died illness and malnutrition
- beatings, sexual abuse
- social consequences: raised as orphans, lost culture and languages, dysfunction cascaded down through the years
- 1960s/ 1970s sweep of children

### Personal Story

- I grew up in another era in Canada, in the 1940s and

1950s in a small village in Central Ontario

- My mother was First Nation Canadian from a small reserve nearby.

- My father was white man from a neighbouring town.

- I am a member of my mother's first nation. And that is most important for my sense of who I am

- Neither of my parents had much in the way of education.

Grade four at the most.

- My father was a poorly paid day labourer

- Our first home in the village was tent on waste land near the village dump

- Later we moved to an old abandoned house with slanting floors, broken windows without electricity or indoor plumbing

- My family was at the bottom of the social economic scale of a class conscience village
- First Nation people were subject to much discrimination and did not have the same rights as other Canadians in those years
- They did not have the right to vote until 1960, even though thousands of them signed up and fought in Canada's wars
- When I first went to school, I was called racist names
- My family expected that I would obtain a rudimentary education as they had and live the life of an unskilled labourer
- That's when libraries and books came to my rescue
- I learned to read from comic books
- I then visited the small village library and was welcomed

by the librarian

- My life changed forever
- Books allowed me to dream and to envisage a life other than that of a day labourer and outside the village
- I found that I began to do well in school
- I was able to take advantage of opportunities that came along
- I had a summer job working on the grounds of a wealthy American cottager
- One day, unexpectedly, he told me he was going to underwrite the costs of university for me
- After graduation in the early sixties, I set out to see the marvellous world I had encountered in books and travelled in Europe as a backpacker

- I was hooked. And returned to join the Canadian foreign service and served for more than thirty five years on all six habitable continents

## Engagement of Civil Society

- Committed believer in power of books and libraries
- When I retired from the foreign service and became Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, mobilized civil society to bring them to First Nations people of northern Ontario
- Most isolated part of province.
- Fifty thousand native people in area the size of France
- Suicide epidemic for 25 years among youth
- no hope
- many schools full of mould
- libraries without books

- three levels of government clashing with each other
- lower funding provided to First Nations than to other

### *Canadians*

- collected over two million to provide books in two drives and delivered to communities
- established book club for all children age five to twelve in remote fly-in communities
- twinned 130 native schools with non-native schools
- established 39 literacy summer camps
- established aboriginal literary awards for short stories and poems for aboriginal children age six to eighteen
- working with current Lieutenant Governor to provide greater access to computers
- Heartening to visit schools to see children borrowing books

## *Conclusion*

- *When governments cannot or will not provide libraries and books to the marginalised in society, we can do it ourselves*
- *Lessons for helping other marginal groups in our societies:  
e.g. homeless, prison populations, ethnic minorities in big cities?*
- *Lessons for helping aboriginal peoples in other countries?*