

Indians Want Democracy on Reservation

by Julie Shortridge, Freelance Writer, St. Paul, MN

Approximately 50 Mille Lacs Anishinabae People's Party (MAPP) supporters marched to protest "the oppressive and corrupt tribal governmental policies and practices of the Mille Lacs Tribal Council" on Saturday March 18, 1995. Protesters marched a one mile stretch along County Road 35 and Highway 53 near the Mille Lacs Grand Casino.

MAPP members spoke about corruption in tribal government, harassment and threats MAPP members have been subjected to by the Mille Lacs Tribal Council and other tribal leaders, and encouraged people to continue to fight for democracy in tribal government.

Their Concerns Similar to The Hunting & Angling Club's

Hunting and Angling Club President Howard Hanson attended the protest, and discovered MAPP's concerns parallel his own – namely, corporations using federal Indian policy for their own gain, corporate and government theft and lack of government accountability to the average citizen, regardless of race. Howard also learned that many Indians are as upset as he is about how "sovereignty" plays out on Indian reservations.

Voting Irregularities

MAPP Chairman Vincent Hill, Sr. says the party was established one year ago over concern about the handling of tribal elections. MAPP endorsed a candidate for the Secretary Treasurer position in 1994. The MAPP candidate lost by only 29 votes, but irregularities in voting access for tribal members living off the reservation cause Hill to believe their candidate may actually have won. He says that many absentee voters did not receive their ballots in time to be able to vote, and the polling location for tribal members living in the Twin Cities did not even open on election day. "Election officials said they did not have time to open the polls," Hill says.

Hill compared the Mille Lacs voting problems to the well-publicized problems on the White Earth Reservation, which led to criminal charges being filed last year, following years of FBI investigations. Hill wants objective, outside monitoring of Mille Lacs tribal elections, such as from the League of Women Voters, to clean up the voting process.

Freedom of Speech and Assembly

Hill said that another key issue for MAPP is guaranteeing tribal members constitutional protections. Currently MAPP, and any other organization the Mille Lacs leadership doesn't like, is forbidden to speak or assemble on reservation land. "I could understand restricting our assembly if we were supporting violent overthrow of tribal government. But we're advocating democracy, dialogue, and accountability. That's what they're afraid of – democracy. They know that if people really had their say, they would no longer have the power."

Several MAPP supporters talked of how they have been targeted for harassment by tribal Chief Executive Marge Anderson and her people. Some have lost their jobs, been denied services, had their lives and safety threatened, and have in effect been forced off the reservation for raising politically challenging questions. Hill said that tribal leaders "systematically violate reservation, governmental, and civil laws to oppress tribal members for their own gain. The Tribal Council hides behind 'sovereign immunity' to give them that right. Our tribal leaders need to be questioned,

challenged, and held accountable like any other political leaders. The mainstream media is not asking the questions that need to be asked, so MAPP is trying to bring these issues to the public's attention."

Floyd Ballinger, Vice-Chairman of MAPP, poignantly pointed out the conflict of 'sovereign immunity' and U.S. citizenship, when he asked, "Why can't we meet, walk, and talk like everyone else can in the rest of the United States?"

Mismanagement of Casino Profits

MAPP contends that 40% of tribal profits goes to Lyle Berman and his management company (former owner of Berman Buckskin) and his non-Indian management group. The remaining 60% of the profits go to the tribal leaders who take it for their personal gain, and then distribute some to the reservation members in the form of services and a \$500 check at Christmas. Even with supposed millions in casino profits, Hill contends that the Mille Lacs reservation has no chemical dependency half-way houses, little or no program in the schools to keep kids off drugs, no shelters for abused children, and only five foster homes.

In addition, MAPP contends that the Tribe has borrowed millions of dollars from Berman for start-up costs; a debt that may take decades to pay back. MAPP members argue that the casinos are making millionaires out of a few corrupt leaders, and are not benefiting most Indians. MAPP is trying to get the Tribal Council to agree to a referendum on how casino profits should be spent and distributed. MAPP wants improved services, especially for chemical dependency and children's programs, and a more substantial per capita payment plan than the current \$500 per member per year.

According to Hunting and Angling Club President Howard Hanson, Indian groups like MAPP are vitally important to provide internal policing of tribal governments, because the U.S. government gets involved only when violations and criminal activity become flagrant enough to warrant making a federal case.

The Resource will keep readers informed on the activities and progress of MAPP and other Indian change-makers.

For more information about MAPP, contact Vincent Hill, Sr. at (612) 722-6546.