**IN DEPTH: ABORIGINAL CANADIANS**  
**Native rights movement**  
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This isn’t part of the article. These are the instructions that will make it easier to accomplish this task. Assuming you read them.

At the end of this article, you will find some questions I want you to answer. Throughout the article itself, you’ll notice there are tiny lower-case letters at the ends of some of the sentences. They’re called footnotes. They correspond with the questions.

Meaning; the information you need to answer the question can be found in the paragraph that comes directly before the little “i” thingy. Clear? Good. Get as much done as you can by the end of the period. See you tomorrow.

The native rights movement in Canada began to come of age in the early 1980s as the federal government moved to patriate the constitution. Before then, no single group could claim to represent all aboriginal people in the country.[[1]](#endnote-1)

There had been attempts - despite a section of the 1927 Indian Act that forbade First Nations people from forming political organizations to represent their interests.

In 1982, 300 native leaders went to London, England, in a bid to prevent Ottawa from going ahead with its patriation plans. There were fears that the Constitution would come home without recognizing First Nations peoples as among Canada's founding groups.

Shortly after they returned, they formed the Assembly of First Nations, which has been the primary voice of aboriginal Canadians ever since.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Native rights were recognized in the 1982 Constitution - but native groups remained excluded from the constitutional process until the 1983-87 First Ministers Conferences on Aboriginal Rights. The four conferences were a series of constitutionally guaranteed meetings between the prime minister, the premiers and the leaders of the Assembly of First Nations, the Metis National Council, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and the Native Council of Canada in order to identify, define and discuss aboriginal and treaty rights.

The conferences led to some progress in the relationship between the federal group and native groups - but, in the end, the federal and provincial governments refused to recognize that aboriginal people already had, through their history, an inherent right to self-government.[[3]](#endnote-3)

By 1990, with the Meech Lake Accord in trouble, then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney sought native support to amend the Constitution. He promised to appoint a royal commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

Meech died in June 1990. Less than a month later, tensions between Mohawks and the town of Oka, Que., over the planned expansion of a golf course onto land the Mohawks claimed was sacred, boiled over. Quebec police in riot gear stormed barricades that had been set up by the Mohawks. After 15 minutes of mayhem – clouds of tear gas and a hail of bullets – the police retreated as quickly as they attacked. The strike claimed the life of 31-year-old police officer Marcel Lemay. In the confusion and chaos, each side claims the other side shot first.

The standoff lasted 78 days. No charges were ever laid in the death of Lemay.[[4]](#endnote-4)  
 The royal commission began its hearings in 1991. Later the commissioners wrote:  
  
*"It was a time of anger and upheaval. The country's leaders were arguing about the place of Aboriginal people in the constitution. First Nations were blockading roads and rail lines in Ontario and British Columbia. Inuit families were encamped in protest of military installations in Labrador. A year earlier, armed conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal forces at Kanesatake [Oka] had tarnished Canada's reputation abroad – and in the minds of many citizens."[[5]](#endnote-5)*

They went on to note that the media were also reporting on the disturbing facts of life common in native communities: high rates of poverty, ill health, substance abuse, family break-down and suicide.

The commission would listen to hundreds of witnesses over 178 days of hearings in 96 communities. It would consult with dozens of experts. Its original budget was about $12 million and its report was due in 1992.

In the end, the commission cost close to $60 million - Canada's costliest royal commission at the time. The report was 4,000 pages long and contained 400 recommendations.

A section of the report titled "Looking Forward, Looking Back," begins: "After some 500 years of a relationship that has swung from partnership to domination, from mutual respect and co-operation to paternalism and attempted assimilation, Canada must now work out fair and lasting terms for coexistence with Aboriginal people."

As a starting point, the royal commission listed four reasons why this must be done:

1. Canada's claim to be a fair and enlightened society depends on it.
2. The life chances of aboriginal people, which are still shamefully low, must be improved.
3. Negotiation, as conducted under the current rules, has proved unequal to the task of settling grievances.
4. Continued failure may well lead to violence.

Other recommendations:

1. The creation of what would essentially be a third order of government: an aboriginal parliament.
2. An independent tribunal to decide on land claims.
3. More money to be spent to improve housing, health, education and employment.
4. Establishment of a native university.
5. An "immediate and major infusion of money" that would see $2 billion added to the government spending of $6 billion a year on aboriginal Canadians.

At the start of 1998, the Canadian government formally apologized to aboriginal Canadians for the way they have been mistreated.

In September 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin pledged $700 million to improve the health of aboriginal Canadians. On Oct. 21, 2005, Martin invited native leaders to a first ministers conference on aboriginal affairs, scheduled for Nov. 24-25. It's the first time since the constitutional talks of the mid-1980s that native leaders have been invited to take part in a meeting with the prime minister and the premiers. The government was expected to use the conference to announce a $4-billion package to improve living standards for aboriginals.

However, the accord was nixed when the Martin government was defeated by Harper's Conservatives in January 2006.

In November 2006, Canada's Assembly of First Nations gave the federal government a failing grade for its efforts in improving the quality of life for First Nations peoples.[[6]](#endnote-6)

1. Okay. I know. What does “patriate” mean, right? It means that before we “brought the constitution home,” Britain was still kind of in charge of us. It’s like you’ve moved away from home but your parents still have final say over all your decisions. So, now that you understand that; why could “no single group claim to represent all aboriginal people in the country?” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Why did Canada’s Aboriginals worry about Canada’s patriation efforts? [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Do you agree with the federal and provincial governments’ decision? Do native Canadians have a right to govern themselves, or should they be bound by Canadian laws? Explain your response. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Why do you think that call was made? [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Why would Oka have “tarnished” our reputation? Why does international reputation matter? [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Taking into account the Royal Commission’s recommendations, has Canada been fair in its treatment of Aboriginal Canadians? [↑](#endnote-ref-6)