

FOURTH RUSSELL TRIBUNAL ON

INDIANS



24TH-30TH NOVEMBER 1980

DE DOELEN, SCHOUWBURGPLEIN 50, ROTTERDAM

ORGANIZATION: BLOEMGRACHT 90, 1015 TM AMSTERDAM, P.O. BOX 51322, 1007 EH AMSTERDAM, PHONE 020-235984, POSTGIRO 4057800



Indians of the Americas

Tony Simpson

Tony Simpson recalls the Foundation's engagement with the Fourth Russell Tribunal on The Rights of The Indians of the Americas, which met in Rotterdam in 1980.

In 2020, Natalie Drache in Canada and Leo van der Vlist in The Netherlands invited the Russell Foundation to participate in marking the 40th anniversary of the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Right of the Indians of the Americas.

The first commemorative webinar included vivid pictures of Ken Fleet, Secretary of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, addressing the Tribunal 40 years ago. Sadly, Ken died in April 2020, a victim of COVID. For some 40 years, the striking blue poster of the Fourth Russell Tribunal hung on his office wall. I remember him returning from Rotterdam with the Tribunal handbook, and later seeing the yellow-covered Report of the Tribunal, which contained its conclusions.

At that time, in 1980, the Russell Foundation was busy launching the appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament, which convulsed much of Europe as it confronted the prospect of so-called 'limited' nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union conducted in the European 'theatre'. Nuclear disarmament was a key priority for Bertrand Russell in establishing his Foundation in 1964, and it remains so. We are reviving our work for European Nuclear Disarmament, which is given added point by the destruction of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty between the United States and Russia. Of course, indigenous peoples in many corners of the world, including the Americas, suffer long-term consequences of nuclear weapon manufacture and testing, as people in Utah, Marshall Islands, Australia and elsewhere can testify.

It is appropriate that issues that gave rise to the Fourth Russell Tribunal are revisited during these commemorative webinars. As we heard from Oren Lyons in the first webinar, the Tribunal gave voice and platform to indigenous peoples. But the problems haven't gone away during the intervening decades. Illegal appropriations of the lands of indigenous peoples throughout the Americas continue. Attempted appropriations are resisted, often at great personal cost to indigenous peoples engaged in the struggle. There is cause, still, for the eagle in the North and the condor in the South to unite.

The Fourth Tribunal has a rich legacy of materials in its archive, and it is encouraging that the archive will be digitised to widen access to these unique documents. The Russell Foundation strongly supports such efforts so that people may know their own history. It is for such a purpose that people at the Russell Archives at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, are engaged in documenting and interpreting Bertrand Russell's long and active life. In May 2022, it will be the 150th anniversary of Russell's birth in 1872. We are making preparations to celebrate this landmark anniversary, as Russell's popularity and appeal attracts new enthusiasts with new translations of his work into Kazakh, Russian, Albanian, Chinese, Spanish and other languages. Publication and translation is another fundamental way to give voice. Isn't a book of the Fourth Russell Tribunal long overdue?

Since the Fourth Tribunal met in 1980, much has happened. Ken Coates, my late colleague at the Russell Foundation, wrote in the Tribunal Handbook:

'... in the collective which works in the Indian Project we have found an exemplary group, who are in no way likely to imagine that the forthcoming Tribunal is an action sufficient in itself. The work they have already done will ensure that, rather, the Tribunal will merely mark a new stage in widening of a much needed, much wanted campaign.'

The basis is there for the Fourth Tribunal to resume its work, if the means and personnel can again be found to sustain its autonomous existence. It is perhaps worth noting that the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, after it had completed its scheduled sessions, convened an extraordinary session in 2014 following Israel's bombardment of Gaza. It was a timely and well-informed intervention that heard first-hand testimony, although some invited participants were prevented from travelling to Brussels to participate.

Of course, the interval since 1980 is much greater, but the collective memory is there to inform the work of a renewed Fourth Tribunal in the era of climate change, as we heard from Winona and Sarah James in the first webinar. Perhaps this renewal will grow out of the creative work now under way with this commemoration and the ongoing project to digitise the Tribunal archive.

Ken Coates went on to become a Member of the European Parliament, and to chair its Human Rights Committee, which was constantly reminded of the problems of indigenous peoples. In 1994, he contributed a Foreword to the book *Indigenous Peoples and International Organisations*, edited by Lydia van de Fliert, and published by the Russell Foundation. He recalled the Fourth Russell Tribunal and how, later, the UN designated 1993 as the Year of the Indigenous Peoples, and then ‘the thought arose that a year might not be quite enough to encompass all the necessary repentance’, and so it came about that there was the Decade of the Indigenous Peoples.

But these periods are puny in the great span of time. The longevity and wisdom of indigenous peoples have much to teach the world, if only it will listen. People need to hear the voice which spoke clearly in Rotterdam four decades ago, and continues to do so now, as the climate changes and, as we heard from Sarah James, the tree line advances northwards.

