

## Welcome to the Blanket Exercise!

The **Blanket Exercise** is an enormously popular and successful teaching tool that uses participatory popular education methodology to raise awareness and understanding of the history of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. Since its creation in 1996 as a creative, innovative and interactive way to educate Indigenous and non-Indigenous people about the major themes and recommendations of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, the **Blanket Exercise** has been conducted hundreds of times with thousands of people of all ages and from all backgrounds.

The **Blanket Exercise** begins with blankets arranged on the floor to represent Canada before the arrival of Europeans. The participants, representing Indigenous peoples, begin by moving around on the blankets. While a narrator reads from a script, other participants – representing the Europeans or newcomers - join and begin to interact with those on the blankets. As the script traces the relationship between Europeans and Indigenous nations in Canada, the participants respond to various cues and interact by reading prepared scrolls. At the end of the exercise only a few people remain on blankets which have been folded into small bundles and cover only a fraction of their original area.

By involving people in an holistic way, the **Blanket Exercise** has consistently proven to be effective in helping people to understand how federal government policies and practices impact on and continue to influence the lives of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

### A word about terminology

In the **Blanket Exercise** the terms **Indigenous** and **Aboriginal** are used interchangeably. Both terms refer to the original people of North America who belong to historic, cultural and political entities known as Indigenous or Aboriginal peoples (in the plural). While the term Indigenous is used worldwide, the term Aboriginal is unique to Canada. Canada's *Constitution Act*, 1982 recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples: First Nations, Inuit and Métis. The Blanket Exercise also uses a number of synonyms for Indigenous or Aboriginal people, including First People and original people. None of these terms should be used to describe one of the individual groups.

**First Nations** replaces “Indian” in common usage. There are many First Nations in Canada: Innu, Cree, Salteaux, Ojibwe, Haida, Dene, Mohawk, Mi'kmaq, Shuswap, etc.

The **Inuit** are the Indigenous circumpolar people of Canada and other northern countries. In Canada, the Inuit live in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, northern Quebec, Labrador and, in recent years, southern Canadian cities as well.

The **Métis** are the mixed-blood descendants of French and Scottish fur traders and other early settlers, and Cree, Ojibwe, Saulteaux and Assiniboine women. They have their own culture and history. As is the case with many Indigenous languages, the Métis language, Michif, is endangered. Métis society and culture were established before European settlement was entrenched.

## Blanket Exercise preparation and script

**Goal:** To engage participants in the historic relationship between Europeans and the Indigenous nations, and in the colonization of the land we now call Canada.

### What you need:

- 6 (or more) blankets
- Scrolls - Copy the “scrolls” following this script, roll them as scrolls, and number them on the outside. Use one colour paper for the main scrolls and another for the background scrolls if possible. (Note that the scrolls with letters are used by the European character. All others are read by participants.
- Index cards: Enough white cards to cover half the expected participants; two blue and three green (or other colours)
- Copies of the Fast Facts/ statistics
- One Narrator; one person to act as the European; one person to read the statistics.

### Time required

In all, try to set aside at least 3 hours. Whenever possible, invite an elder or leader to welcome people to the territory, and offer that person time to share their knowledge. (Invite them to stay for the day, too!) Good introductions will take at least half an hour. Doing the Blanket Exercise takes 45 minutes; it’s always better not to rush it. Reflecting together should take an hour minimum. The larger the group, the more time you will need. Sharing a meal together is also ideal.

### Preparation:

Read over the Blanket Exercise script. Ideally, speak to one or two people ahead of time, give them a copy of the script, and ask if they would agree to play the role of the European (or choose a confident member of your group on the spot). Photocopy and roll the scrolls, and number the outside of those scrolls that need numbers. Photocopy the statistics. Ask for a volunteer to read these statistics during the exercise.

The ideal number of participants for this exercise is 15–25. However, it can be easily and successfully adapted for smaller groups by having participants read more than one scroll. The key is to ensure there are some participants left on the blankets at the end of the exercise. Groups larger than 25 can also be easily accommodated.

## Beginning...

*If this is your first session together as a group, ensure you spend some time getting to know one another. Set some group norms that will guide how you act towards one another.*

## Hearing Aboriginal Voices

Invite someone in the group to read aloud each of the following three quotations, which you'll find printed on separate pages following this script. Feel free to abbreviate them if time is short.

*At contact with Europeans, each of the hundreds of Indigenous Peoples of Indigenous America possessed all the elements of nationhood that were well-established by European settlers: territory, governing structures, legal systems and a historical continuity with our territories. Nothing since the arrival of Columbus has occurred to merit any reduction in the international legal status of Indigenous Peoples. The recognition of Indigenous Nations and our rights possess no threat to non-Indigenous Peoples.*

*Sharon Venne, Cree*

*First Nations are nations. First Nations (treaty people) signed over 300 treaties with the Europeans during the 1700s and 1800s. The treaties agreed to share the lands and resources with the immigrants. ... Under existing legislation, treaty people are "sovereign" nations. ... The Indians surrendered over 9.9 million square kilometres of their land to the immigrants. Today, the sons of the immigrants have the largest treaty rights in Canada. The Indians have become the poorest peoples in Canada.*

*Chief Pascall Bighetty, Pukatawagan First Nation*

*Our cultures, our religions, our governments and our ways of life are all in danger. We are not simply individuals with individual's rights; on the contrary, we exist as distinct peoples, distinct communities, real functioning nations. We hold our lands in common; we hold our cultures and religions as nations and as communities and groups.*

*Chief Jake Swamp, Wolf Clan of the Mohawk Nation, Haudenosaune.*

Invite comments from the group in response to the following questions:

- What elements of nationhood are asserted in these statements?
- How well are these assertions accepted in dominant Canadian society?

**Sum up the conversation by saying something such as:**

The Europeans who “discovered” what we now know as North America encountered independent, distinct, self-governing and self-sufficient societies with a wide variety of languages and cultures, social traditions, and complex systems of government, including some that were matriarchal. The very fact that treaties were made with these peoples confirms they were sovereign peoples. The *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) said a new relationship with Indigenous peoples, so desperately required, should be based, above all else, on the reality of Indigenous nationhood. RCAP also said this new relationship – based on respect, sharing and the mutual recognition of rights and responsibilities – would be difficult because, among other things, it would require “decolonizing the relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in Canada, a road that the experience in other societies demonstrates is not an easy one to follow.”

**Learning through Experiencing: The Blanket Exercise**

Tell people they are about to participate in an interactive exercise designed to deepen their understanding of the denial of Indigenous peoples’ nationhood in Canada. Ask participants to notice how First Nations, Inuit and later Métis peoples lost access to their land, what impact this loss had on their communities – both in the past and today – and how Indigenous peoples have resisted, and continue to resist, assimilation. Share that for some this exercise may bring up difficult feelings. Assure participants that the last step will be a discussion so people can share their feelings in a respectful way.

Lay the blankets on the floor up against each other so as to create a blanketed area large enough to accommodate all the participants. Fold one blanket and set it aside. Invite everyone to remove their shoes and to stand on the blankets. Ask them to move around on the blankets. Ask your volunteer(s) (European) to stand with you.

**The narrator now begins reading the script below:**

*Narrator:* These blankets represent the northern part of Turtle Island, or North America, before the arrival of Europeans. You represent the Indigenous peoples, the original inhabitants.

Long before the arrival of Europeans, Turtle Island was home to millions of people living in thousands of distinct, self-governing societies that formed hundreds of nations.

These were fishing, hunting, and farming societies, with their own language, culture, traditions – their own customary laws, distinct institutions and systems of governance.

As Nations, you interacted with one another, economically and militarily. You traded and shared gifts. You learned to resolve clashes and disputes over lands and resources through treaty-making.

**In Peace & Friendship – A New Relationship with Aboriginal Peoples**  
**Blanket Exercise**  
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Diverse as you were, as Indigenous peoples you shared things in common. Your relationship to the land defined who you were as peoples. All of your needs – food, clothing, shelter, culture, spiritual fulfillment – were met by the land, by the blankets. In turn, you took seriously your collective responsibility to serve and protect the land.

*Introduce the volunteer (or volunteers) as representative of the European settlers, and have her/him/them join the others on the blankets.*

**Narrator:** Events occurred in Europe at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century that would deeply impact your societies. In 1493 the King and Queen of Spain asked Pope Alexander VI to issue the following papal bull or “solemn edict” from the Vatican. Known as the *Doctrine of Discovery*, it established Christian dominion and subjugation of non-Christian “pagan” peoples. It also granted Spain the right to conquer any lands its explorers discovered. Non-Christian nations could no longer own the lands, and the Indigenous people were to be placed under the tutelage and guardianship of those Christian nations that “discovered” their lands.

**European unrolls & reads Scroll A, in a loud voice:**

We ... by the authority of Almighty God ... give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, forever, all islands and main lands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered towards the west and south, ... from the Arctic pole ... to the Antarctic pole ... And we make, appoint, and depute you and your said heirs and successors lords of them with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind.

**Narrator:** And so began the process of the European “discovery” and colonization of Turtle Island.

*The European steps on the blankets and begins to mill around.*

**Narrator:** When Europeans first arrived on Turtle Island they were greatly outnumbered by you, the Indigenous people, and they depended on you for their survival, and to make sense of the existing complex political and social systems.

Your early relationships with the settlers were characterized by cooperation and interdependence. Inter marriage was considered acceptable and desirable for survival and living off the land. The settlers and their governors recognized you as distinct peoples with self-governing societies. This led to nation-to-nation relationships which were formalized in treaties, including some commercial arrangements and military alliances.

*The European greets the other participants. While shaking hands, he/she gives out index cards to about half the participants. Two more get blue cards and three get green cards. (Note: If the group is large enough, ensure that at least 10 participants do **not** receive cards. Any colour is acceptable, as long as you have two different colours. If you don't have coloured cards, write the colour on the cards.)*

**Narrator:** These treaties were *international* agreements between the European crowns and your nations. They formally recognized each nation's sovereignty and independence. They affirmed that you - the Indigenous peoples - were the original inhabitants, that your territories belonged to you, and that you were self-governing.

**European unrolls and reads Scroll B, in a loud voice:**

The *Royal Proclamation of 1763* hereby confirms that Indigenous nations have title to their lands, and that consensual treaty-making with the crown is the *only* way that land can be ceded from Indigenous peoples.

**Narrator:** Later on, the Canadian federal government replaced the crown as the treaty-making body, and the *Royal Proclamation of 1763* was entrenched in Canada's *Constitution Act, 1982*. To Indigenous peoples, treaties were sacred agreements that were marked with spiritual ceremonies. They were not statements of submission or surrender, or real estate deals. Instead, they were statements of peace, friendship, and alliance and they were based on instructions of traditional Indigenous spirituality around sharing, respect and honesty. Treaties were means of sharing land and resources, and of ensuring peaceful co-existence among diverse peoples.

*Now the European begins to slowly fold the blankets over, making the blanket space smaller and smaller. The Narrator should remind the participants they must not step off the blankets. The objective is to stay on the blankets, even as they get smaller.*

**Narrator:** But the Europeans had altogether different views of land, and of treaties. For them, land was a commodity that could be bought and sold, and treaties were a means of getting Indigenous peoples to “surrender” or “extinguish” their title to the land.

Over time, your relationship with the settlers continued to deteriorate. With the end of the War of 1812, the newcomers in the East no longer needed you as military allies. In the West, as the fur trade dried up and colonists turned more and more to agriculture, they no longer needed you as trading partners either.

Soon the Europeans began to outnumber you. One reason for this was diseases the Europeans brought with them – diseases such as small pox, measles and TB – for which you had no immunity. Some experts believe fully half the Indigenous people alive at the time died from these diseases. Many communities were decimated and lost up to 90 percent of their members.

**Narrator:** All people with white index cards, please step off the blanket. You represent the millions of Indigenous peoples who died of the various diseases to which you had no immunity.

More Europeans also meant an ever increasing demand for land for settlement. Fuelled by new ideas from Europe about the inferiority of non-white races and women, colonists began to view you as obstacles to expansion and settlement, and as a “problem” to be solved.

The colonial governments adopted policies and practices to take your land. Some was taken in war. A lot more, since it was taken without any right or justification, was stolen by the government. Some was taken by force, which led to some of you being killed.

Without access to the land you could no longer practice your traditional lifestyles. Many of you lost your cultures and languages. Some of you lost all hope, and a reason to live.

The federal government also imposed the *Indian Act* system of government on your communities, ignoring your traditional governments and excluding women.

*The Narrator walks to one person in the east.*

**Narrator:** You represent the Beothuk, the original inhabitants of what is now Newfoundland. Your people – the ones who didn't starve or die in violent encounters with settlers trying to take your lands - were hunted and killed, or taken captive for reward. Your people are now extinct. Please step off the blankets.

*The European and the Narrator then give a folded blanket to a participant in the west.*

**European:** On the West Coast and the Prairies blankets infected with the small pox virus were given or traded to the Indigenous people. You represent the thousands of First Peoples who died from TB, measles or small pox contracted in this way. Please step off the blankets.

*The European and the Narrator walk to the north and choose one "island" of people.*

**Narrator:** In the High Arctic, Inuit communities were removed from their traditional territories and relocated to isolated, barren lands with which they were unfamiliar, often with devastating results.

**European:** You represent those First Peoples – the Inuit, and the Innu at Davis Inlet, and countless other Indigenous communities – who suffered and sometimes died through forced relocation. Please move one the blankets away from the others, fold it small and sit down on it.

*The European directs the group to a smaller, folded blanket.*

**Narrator:** Those with blue cards, step off the blanket. You represent those who died of malnutrition after being forced off your traditional territory and away from your hunting grounds.

*The European(s) and the Narrator present eleven participants – either on or off the blankets – with numbered scrolls. As the Narrator calls out the numbers, each participant unrolls the scroll and reads it aloud. With smaller groups, each participant can read more than one scroll. Depending on the number of participants, the Narrator can read*

*the background scrolls or ask other participants to read them.*

**Scroll 1: Terra Nullius** - The notion of Terra Nullius, which in Latin means “empty land” – gave a colonial nation the right to absorb any territory encountered by explorers.

***Background Scroll 1 - (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

If the land was deemed “empty” by the settler government it was considered subject to the *Doctrine of Discovery* and could be claimed by the European explorers. Over time, this concept was conveniently expanded to include lands not occupied by “civilized” peoples, or lands not being put to “civilized” use.

**Scroll 2: The British North America (BNA) Act** - The BNA, also known as the *Constitution Act of 1867*, put “Indians and Lands reserved for Indians” under the control of the federal government.

***Background Scroll 2 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

The BNA Act was drafted in part to provide policy “teeth” for Sir John A. MacDonald’s announcement that Canada’s goal was “to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion.” The Act specified how Aboriginal people were put “under the protection” of the Crown. It provided the legal base for the treaties, and it emphasized the government’s central priorities of “assimilation, enfranchisement, and civilization.”

**Scroll 3: The Indian Act** - All laws respecting “Indians” were first consolidated into the *Indian Act* in 1876. It is still in force today and was last updated in the 1980s.

**Scroll C: European unrolls and reads the first part of this scroll in a loud voice:**

*(Part 1)* Now hear this! According to the *Indian Act* of 1876 and the *British North America Act* of 1867, you and all of your territories are now under the direct control of the Canadian federal government. You will be placed on reserves. Please fold your blankets in half.

***Background Scroll 3 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

The *Indian Act* pertains only to First Nations, not Métis or Inuit. The effect of the *Indian Act* was to transform independent First Nations into physically marginalized and economically impoverished “bands,” and individuals into “wards of the state.” Through the *Indian Act*, the federal government has denied First Nations people the basic rights that most Canadians take for granted. For example, under the *Indian Act* Indigenous people were not allowed to vote until 1960.

[Optional Paragraph] The Inuit were denied the vote until 1950, although it was not possible for them to participate until the 1962 federal election. While not covered by the *Indian Act*, in 1939 the Supreme Court of Canada interpreted the federal government’s powers to make laws affecting “Indians and Lands reserved for the Indians” as extending to the Inuit. Restrictions were never placed on Métis voting rights.

**Scroll C: European unrolls and reads the second part of this scroll in a loud voice:**

*(Part 2)* You may not leave your reserve without a permit. You may not vote. You may not gather to discuss your rights. You may not practice your traditional spirituality or your traditional forms of government. To do any of these things is to face prosecution and imprisonment.

*Narrator:* The *Indian Act* also severely restricted Aboriginal land rights. For example, under the *Indian Act*, it was illegal to raise money to fight for land rights in the courts until 1951.

**Scroll 4: Enfranchisement** - Under this federal policy, all Aboriginal peoples who became doctors, lawyers or who entered other professions would be granted “enfranchisement” and forced to give up their official Aboriginal status.

***Background Scroll 4 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

In other words, the government would “reclassify” Indigenous people entering the professions as Canadians, making them ineligible for treaty benefits. Since this included lawyers, it effectively prevented land rights cases from reaching the courts during the first half of the 1900s.

**Scroll 5: Assimilation** - In the early 1900s it was widely assumed by the Dominion government that the “Indian problem” would soon solve itself as Aboriginal people died off from diseases and the survivors were absorbed into the larger society. As Indian Affairs deputy superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott stated, the government’s goal was “to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic.”

***Background Scroll 5 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

The government’s policy of forced assimilation explains, in part, the extraordinary pressures placed on Indigenous people over the past century to surrender and/or sell their lands and resources.

**Scroll 6: Residential Schools** - From 1820 to the 1970s, the federal government removed Aboriginal children from their homes and communities and placed them in church-run boarding schools, often far from their homes. In most cases they were not allowed to speak their own languages. Most of the children stayed at the school for 8-10 months, while others stayed all year.

*Narrator:* All people with green cards must now move to a separate, empty blanket. You represent those who were taken out of your communities and placed in residential schools far from their homes.

*The Narrator asks a participant to begin reading the statistics.*

**Participant:** (*Fact 1*) On average, First Nations men live seven years less than other Canadian men, and First Nations women, five years less than other Canadian women. (*Health Canada*)

***Background Scroll 6 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

While some report having positive experiences at the schools, many Indigenous people suffered from the impoverished conditions and from emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Many more lost family connections and the opportunity to learn their culture and traditions from their elders. Raised in an institution, most lost their parenting skills. Some students died at residential school. Many others never returned to their home communities, or were shunned if they did.

**Narrator:** One of the people with yellow index cards must step off the blanket. You represent those who died as a result of their experience at residential schools.

*The Narrator cues the participant to read the next statistic, and all that follow.*

**Participant:** (*Fact 2*) According to the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) in 2006 there was an urgent need for 80,000 new units across Canada, and 44 per cent of the existing 88,750 houses are in critical need of repairs.

***Scroll 7: 1969 White Paper*** - This proposed federal legislation suggested abolishing the *Indian Act* and assimilating Aboriginal peoples into Euro-Canadian society as the solution to the “Indian problem.”

**Participant:** (*Fact 3*) While Indigenous people make up 2.7 percent of the adult Canadian population, approximately 18.5 percent of offenders now serving federal sentences are of First Nations, Métis and Inuit ancestry. Indigenous women are even more overrepresented in the criminal justice system, representing 30 percent of women in federal prisons (*Correctional Service Canada, 2006*)

***Background Scroll 7 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

Written when Pierre Trudeau was prime minister and Jean Chrétien was Minister of Indian Affairs, Indigenous peoples saw this legislation as an attempt to terminate their rights. They were outraged, and organized to defeat it. From this movement, the National Indian Brotherhood, now the Assembly of First Nations, was born.

*The Narrator asks participants to unfold one piece of their blankets to commemorate this successful act of resistance against the federal government’s “termination” legislation.*

***Scroll 8: Broken promises*** - Over the years, more than 2/3 of the land set aside for treaties has been lost or taken through fraud, mismanagement, intimidation, expropriation for military purposes, or for development. Rarely has the government attempted to replace this land, or to compensate Indigenous peoples for its use.

**Participant:** (*Fact 4*) Forty-eight percent of Indigenous people are less than 25 years old, compared to 31% for non-Indigenous people. The median age of the Indigenous population is 27, compared with 40 for the non-Indigenous population. (*INAC, 2006 Census*)

***European unrolls and reads Scroll D, in a loud voice:***

Meanwhile, we continue to allow large companies to set up shop on Indigenous territories, generate huge profits from natural resources and often pollute and deplete the land, without regard to aboriginal or treaty rights, and without any benefits flowing to Indigenous peoples.

**Participant:** (*Fact 5*) Suicide rates among Indigenous youth between 15 and 24 years are FIVE to SIX TIMES higher than the national average. For Inuit youth in particular, it's 11 TIMES higher. Suicide accounts for 25% of all deaths among Indigenous youth. (*Health Canada, 2003*)

*The European and the Narrator walk to a person standing in “the west.”*

**Narrator:** In the west, decades of dam construction and oil and gas exploitation have ruined the land and poisoned the water. You represent those Indigenous people who have died or were forced off their lands as a result of this destruction. Please step off the blankets.

***Background Scroll 8 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

Indigenous peoples continue to view treaties as sacred agreements between sovereign nations that must be honoured to ensure equitable sharing of resources and a peaceful, just coexistence. But that view of treaties continues to go largely unrecognized by non-Indigenous society, which views treaties primarily as surrender documents.

**Participant:** (*Fact 6*) In 2006, the unemployment rate for Indigenous people aged 25-64 remained almost THREE TIMES the rate for non-Indigenous people (13% vs. 5%). It exceeds the national rate in every region.

**Scroll 9: 2002 First Nations Governance Act (FNGA) -** This proposed legislation was introduced as part of a larger plan to overhaul the *Indian Act*. It was opposed by First Nations people and their supporters who saw it as yet another attempt at assimilation.. Among other things, the FNGA proposed privatizing reserve land to increase private ownership in a municipal-style governance system. First Nations said it threatened their inherent and treaty rights, as well as their potential for sovereignty.

**Participant:** (*Fact 7*) In 2006, the median income for Indigenous peoples was 30% lower than for other people in Canada. While this income gap narrowed slightly between 1996 and 2006 at this rate it would take 63 years for it to be erased. (*Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010*)

***Background Scroll 9 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):***

While Indigenous resistance to this potentially assimilative policy led to its defeat in 2002, the risk remains that governments will attempt to re-introduce elements of the *First Nations Governance Act*. For example, the privatization of reserve lands is one of the Harper government's proposed solutions to "the Indian problem," and one of the few initiatives aimed at Indigenous peoples included in the Conservative's 2007 Budget.

*The Narrator asks participants to unfold their blankets ONCE to acknowledge the successful campaign against the FNGA.*

**Participant:** (*Fact 8*) The rate of tuberculosis for First Nations and Inuit people is 10 times higher than for other Canadians. (*Health Canada*)

**Scroll 10: Extinguishment (or non-assertion) of Rights** - When the federal government negotiates with Indigenous peoples who have not ceded their traditional lands, it requires that they give up their title and rights to the vast majority of their lands in return for a specified set of rights and a tiny fraction of their traditional territories. While Canada no longer uses the word "extinguishment," its current approach has the same effect. Under the "non-assertion model" the Indigenous group agrees to exercise only those rights articulated and defined in the treaty and to assert no other Indigenous rights.

**Participant:** (*Fact 9*) The rate of diabetes is two to five times higher among Aboriginal people than among the general population, and increasing. (*Health Canada*)

**Background Scroll 10 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):**

Since the *BNA Act*, it has been Canada's policy to terminate or "extinguish" Indigenous peoples' rights. Various national and international bodies have condemned this policy. Canada's recent attempts to explain its "non-assertion" policy at the United Nations were rejected by human rights experts who said that asking Indigenous people to agree to never assert their rights was the same as extinguishing those rights.

**Participant:** (*Fact 10*) One Indigenous child in eight is disabled, double the rate for all children in Canada. (*Public Service Alliance Canada*)

**Scroll 11: U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** - The *Declaration* was a response to the lack of a comprehensive set of international standards on the rights of Indigenous Peoples at the UN. Under development for more than 20 years, the *Declaration* is one of the most intensely debated and carefully scrutinized human rights instruments in U.N. history. Uniquely, the primary beneficiaries of the *Declaration*, Indigenous peoples themselves, have been an integral part of its development.

*The Narrator asks all the remaining participants to unfold one part of their blankets ONCE, and asks one person read the following quote:*

*The Declaration is fundamentally about building meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples across the globe, and with nation-states and with Indigenous rights supporters. It is about our relationships with each other, our lands, natural resources,*

*our laws, our rights, our languages, our spirituality, our ways of life.*

*- Phil Fontaine, Former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations*

**Background Scroll 11 – (Read by the narrator or a participant):**

In 2007 the United Nations voted 144 - 4 to adopt the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Eleven countries abstained. The Government of Canada opposed the *Declaration*, along with the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Canada said it was concerned about the rights of non-Indigenous people, and the individual rights of Indigenous people.

**Participant:** (*Fact 11*) Aboriginal women between the ages of 25 and 44 are five times more likely than other women in the same age bracket to die as a result of violence. (*Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003*)

**The European unrolls and reads Scroll E:**

*When the Declaration was adopted by the U.N., then Minister of Indian Affairs Chuck Strahl said it was his job to protect the rights of non-Indigenous people. The Government also implied that as an international human rights instrument for Indigenous peoples, the Declaration would threaten the rights of non-Indigenous peoples.*

**Narrator:** In 2008, over 100 constitutional and Indigenous rights experts responded to Canada's reasons for opposing the *Declaration* with an open letter that said: "No credible legal rationale has been provided to substantiate these extraordinary and erroneous claims."

**Participant:** (*Fact 12*) Overcrowding among First Nations families is double the rate of that for all Canadian families. Nearly 1 in 4 First Nations adults live in crowded homes, and a recent government study found that more than half of Inuit families live in overcrowded conditions. Some three-bedroom homes are known to house as many as 20 people. (*StatsCan & National Aboriginal Health Organization, Preliminary Findings of the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey 2002-2003, November 2004*)

**Narrator:** Since 2007, Australia and New Zealand have reversed their positions and now support the *Declaration*. The United States endorsed the *Declaration* in January 2011. Two of the 11 countries that abstained – Colombia and Samoa – now support the *Declaration*. The Government of Canada finally endorsed the *Declaration* on November 12, 2010, but with qualifications. These included the belief that the *Declaration* is legally non-binding and doesn't reflect international law, which is untrue. Nevertheless, the endorsement was welcomed by most Indigenous groups and their allies who see it as an important first step towards a new relationship that upholds their human rights.

**Participant:** (*Fact 13*) The Government of Canada and the United Nations have repeatedly identified the condition of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples as Canada's most pressing human rights problem. According to the UN, Canada is consistently ranked one of the ten best places in the world to live. However, by the same measure, the living conditions of Indigenous peoples compares to those of nations ranked in the high 60s.

Now the real work of implementation begins!

*At this point, there should be a few people standing on very small areas of blankets.*

### **Reflecting**

Invite those people who have stepped off the blankets to join those still on the blankets in a period of silent reflection. Invite people to look around the room. Ask them to compare what they see now to what they saw at the beginning of the exercise.

Then invite people to take their seats. Ask people to share their insights and emotions. What did they experience? What did they feel? What did they learn? Be aware that participating in such an exercise can have a strong impact on participants, especially First Nations, Inuit or Métis people. It is important to allow time for participants to share their feelings. If time permits, consider using a talking circle instead of a general discussion. In a circle, participants do not debate or discuss others' words. Instead, they practice their right to listen.

After the circle or time of personal reflection, discuss:

- How have non-Indigenous people benefited from the historical and current denial of Aboriginal nationhood in Canada? In other words, how are privileges of non-Indigenous people related to the historical and ongoing injustices committed against Indigenous peoples?
- What responsibility do non-Indigenous people have as a result of these privileges?