

FOCUS



This section will help you understand

- a. why the federal government banned certain cultural practices of Aboriginal peoples
- b. how Aboriginal peoples reacted to the bans.

Why Were Bans Introduced?

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the thrust of government policies toward Aboriginal peoples was clear. The federal government wanted Aboriginal peoples to abandon their traditional beliefs and adopt Christian and “democratic” values. But many Aboriginal peoples were not prepared to give up beliefs and practices that had been ingrained in their cultural lives for thousands of years. As Indian agents continually reported slow progress, government regulations became increasingly **coercive**. In some cases, bans were placed on traditional activities of some Aboriginal peoples.

Banning the Potlatch

The potlatch was an important cultural and spiritual practice among Aboriginal peoples on the Pacific northwest coast. Chiefs used potlatches to

name children, to announce an important marriage, to transfer titles and privileges from father to son, and to mourn the dead. The chief and his family enhanced their honour and status at the potlatch by reciting their family history and by giving away valuable gifts. This ceremony showed their wealth, and guests who accepted the goods showed they agreed to the honours being claimed. The potlatch also served an economic function by redistributing wealth.

But some missionaries, Aboriginal Christians, and Hudson’s Bay Company traders complained that the potlatch ceremony encouraged non-Christian beliefs and distracted Aboriginal people from “productive work.” As trade goods had become more available and valuable, potlatches had been held on a grander scale and sometimes were fiercely competitive. In some cases, large quantities of goods were ceremoniously destroyed. Opponents of the ceremony seized on these cases as proof that the potlatch was destructive and “backward,” leading the people into poverty. The federal government agreed. In 1884, participation in a potlatch was made an offence with a penalty of up to six months in jail.

People continued to practise the potlatch “underground” avoiding government officials. At first, the government rarely enforced the ban. But in the 1920s, pressure mounted for a crackdown. Officials arrested many potlatch participants and forced Aboriginal peoples on the West Coast to surrender ceremonial and sacred objects. The ban on the potlatch was not lifted until 1951.

Banning the Traditional Council of the Six Nations

In the early years of this century, pressures from government and settlers led the Six Nations into a number of controversial land deals and left the people



Figure 16-1 Hudson’s Bay Company blankets, eulachon oil (oil made from the eulachon fish), canoes and coppers (flat copper plaques) were the main objects distributed at potlatches although flour and manufactured items were also given away.

demoralized and divided. In 1908, a group of Six Nations reformers dissatisfied with the traditional council sought more power on the reserve. They petitioned the federal government to replace the traditional council with an elected council. The Indian Act of 1876 required elected band councils, but the government had tolerated the traditional council (whose members were selected by clan mothers).

In the early 1920s, the traditional council under Chief Deskaheh prevailed over the reformers. Deskaheh was determined to fight against assimilation and Canadian government interference in Six Nations affairs. The council decided to seek international recognition of the Six Nations as an independent nation equal to the other nations of the world. Deskaheh put his argument before the Supreme Court of Canada, the British government, the King of England, and the League of Nations.

Deskaheh met with little success, but the federal government resented these actions. It blocked all attempts by the Six Nations to gain international attention. In an escalating conflict, the government first posted an RCMP detachment on the reserve in



Figure 16-2 This photo, dating from the early 1870s, shows chiefs from the traditional council on the Six Nations Reserve reading wampum belts. Though an elected council is the official representative of the Six Nations today, the traditional council continues to operate.

1923. Then, in 1924, the police expelled the traditional council and seized the sacred wampum belts used to sanction its meetings. An elected council became the official representative of the Six Nations and remains so to this day.

CROSSFIRE

In what way are the following statements: a) similar and b) different? Do you think that the potlatch should have been banned?

We will dance when our laws command us to dance, we will feast when our hearts desire to feast. Do we ask the white man, "do as the Indian does"? No, we do not. Why then do you ask us, "do as the white man does"?

It is a strict law that bids us dance. It is a strict law that bids us distribute our property among our friends and neighbours. It is a good law. Let the white man observe his law, we shall observe ours.

—Kwakwaka'wakw chief, 1896, quoted in Peter Nabokov ed., *Aboriginal American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-white Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492-1992*.

The giving away of gifts on a lavish scale was one of the most prominent features of the potlatch. Before the advent of the White man this plan undoubtedly served a useful purpose and was adequate to the needs of the people. Obviously, however, with the introduction of the new money system of economics, engagement of the Indians as wage earners in industry, the effects of the potlatch, if the practice were unchecked, would be disastrous.

—Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, 1931 quoted in *The Indian: Assimilation, Integration, or Separation?*

RECONNECT



1. Identify the purposes of the potlatch in West Coast First Nations culture.
2. Why did the Canadian government seek to ban the potlatch and traditional First Nations governments?