

## **Parrhesia and Indigenous Political Rhetoric**

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In September 2021, the community of Shoal Lake First Nation opened a water treatment plant, finally giving its residents access to clean drinking water. The community, located on the Manitoba-Ontario border, has been under a boil-water advisory for 24 years, despite the fact that Shoal Lake has supplied Winnipeg with fresh drinking water for over 100 years. While the community celebrated this achievement, there are still currently over 40 boil-water advisories in Indigenous communities across Canada (Keele, 2021). This is not the only issue Indigenous people in Canada currently face. At this moment in Wet'suwet'en First Nation in British Columbia, Indigenous protestors and supporters are attempting to block construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline, which they argue will damage traditional lands (Partridge, 2021). These are just two examples in the long history of conflict between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government, and that of Indigenous groups and governments worldwide. These conflicts cover a wide range of topics from water and land rights and self-governance to systemic issues including racism, child welfare, and disparities in housing, education, and healthcare. All of these conflicts boil down to political and environmental debates. If Indigenous groups want to succeed in addressing these issues, they need to participate in these debates. This echoes the efforts of Indigenous groups throughout history; one study examined the rhetorical strategies used by Indigenous leaders in America to decolonize the Indian Act, and found that Indigenous speakers “adapted to the dominant discourse

so as to establish a measure of identification with their white audience prior to revealing contradictions and making demands” (Black, 2009, p. 68). In order to achieve change, it is essential for Indigenous speakers to participate in the systems that have the power to create it.

Numerous political activists and politicians have worked hard to defend the rights of Indigenous people in political and environmental debates. There are several speeches related to this issue that stand out in contemporary Canadian history, including ones by Chief Dan George, Autumn Peltier, Murray Sinclair, and Mumilaaq Qaaqqaq. A comparative analysis was performed on these speeches in order to identify the rhetorical strategies employed in them, and whether they demonstrate parrhesia, or frank, honest, and fearless speech. The findings can help to determine whether parrhesia is a critical component of Indigenous political rhetoric.

## **Background of Speeches Analyzed**

One speech that stands out in Canadian history is “A Lament for Confederation” by Chief Dan George of Tsleil-Waututh Nation in British Columbia. This speech was delivered at Canada’s Centennial celebration in Vancouver on July 1st, 1967, to an audience of 32,000 (The Canadian Press, 2017). Rather than maintaining the celebratory tone of this Canada Day event, George spoke about the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous peoples in Canada, and encouraged Indigenous youth to become part of the legal and political systems that oppressed them in order to create change.

Indigenous youth have also spoken out on issues involving Indigenous peoples. Autumn Peltier is a young Indigenous activist and water protector. At the age of 12, she presented the Prime Minister with a traditional gift at the Assembly of First Nation’s winter gathering, and told him she wasn’t happy with his decisions affecting Indigenous people (Sapurji et al., 2017). She later delivered a

speech at the 2019 UN Global Landscapes forum and discussed the need to protect Canada's water and natural resources (CBC News, 2019). Peltier highlighted her community's sacred ties to the land and water and how they depend on it to maintain a traditional lifestyle, and urged people to return to traditional ways to protect the environment. She also emphasized that water is a human right, and called out the government of Canada for their lack of action on the issue of access to clean water.

A 2017 keynote speech for the Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives delivered by Murray Sinclair, former chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, discussed the history and impacts of colonization in Canada, the residential school system, and the changes that need to be made in order for reconciliation to occur. Sinclair reminded audiences that reconciliation requires Indigenous people, non-Indigenous people, and governments to work together and maintain a respectful relationship.

Another particularly powerful speech that stands out in recent history is an impassioned speech delivered by Inuit politician Mumilaaq Qaqqaq on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, in the House of Commons (APTN News, 2021). Qaqqaq, former Member of Parliament for Nunavut, and other MP's not seeking re-election were asked to give farewell speeches on the final day of the spring sitting of Parliament. Qaqqaq denounced conditions at the House of Commons and for Indigenous women in politics in general, sharing instances of racism she had experienced during her term. She also discussed issues impacting Inuit people in Canada that the government has failed to address, including housing issues and high rates of suicide among Inuit youth.

## **Analytical Framework**

An analytical framework allowed for a comparative analysis of the four speeches by Indigenous leaders discussed, in order to determine the rhetorical strategies employed and whether or not

they exhibited parrhesia. Two studies of Indigenous rhetoric and parrhesia were reviewed in order to identify key elements and help form the framework. Michel Foucault (1984) gave a lecture on the subject of parrhesia, which he believed should be regarded as a “modality of truth-telling” (p. 1). He discussed key elements of parrhesia, which include honest and frank speech, speaking directly rather than sending subtle messages, and the speaker’s need to speak the truth. Parrhesia also requires a unique relationship between the speaker and the audience. As Foucault describes, “the parrhesiast always risks undermining that relationship which is the condition of possibility of his discourse” (1984, p. 8). Parrhesia requires speaking the truth despite risking this relationship or fear of other consequences. A study by Doolittle (2010) investigated the rhetorical strategies used by Indigenous leaders at the 2008 World Conservation Congress in Barcelona when debating a United Nations’ emissions-reduction program they felt would be detrimental to the environment and Indigenous rights. The author highlighted two main strategies Indigenous leaders used, which were effective in political and environmental debates: the first involves using discourse “highlighting the special relationship between indigenous peoples and nature” (Doolittle, 2010, p. 286); the second involves calling for redistributive justice by reminding audiences of historical trauma and current issues affecting Indigenous communities.

After reviewing Foucault and Doolittle’s articles, five main elements of parrhesia and rhetorical strategies were identified, which helped form the analytical framework. These include whether the speaker demonstrated frank and honest speech and committed to speaking the truth, whether they demonstrated fearlessness by risking their relationship with the audience, whether they urged the audience to act on the information they presented, and whether or not they discussed Indigenous people’s relationship with the land, the impacts of colonization, or current issues impacting Indigenous communities.

The four speeches discussed were analyzed using this framework to see if any of the elements were present. Table 1 illustrates the results of this comparative analysis.

**Table 1**

*Results of Comparative Analysis: Rhetorical strategies and elements of parrhesia identified in speeches.*

Speech	Dan George	Murray Sinclair	Autumn Peltier	Mumilaaq Qaqqaq
Historical trauma/colonization	✓	✓		✓
Current issues		✓	✓	✓
Link to environment	✓	✓	✓	
Fearlessness (Risks relationship)	✓		✓	✓
Relationship with audience – urging action	✓	✓	✓	✓
Frank/Honest speech	✓	✓	✓	✓

## Discussion

### *Frank and Honest Speech*

All of the speakers demonstrated frank and honest speech, calling attention to issues affecting Indigenous communities and discussing environmental and land rights issues, which were two of the other main elements in the analytical framework. Qaqqaq discussed her experience at the House of Commons, speaking passionately about encounters of racism from other politicians and security personnel at Parliament. She stated, “every time I walk onto House of Common grounds, speak in these chambers, I am reminded every step of the

way I don't belong here. I have never felt safe or protected in my position" (APTN News, 2021, 00:10). She also referred to Parliament as a "clear colonial house on fire" (APTN News, 2021, 00:34). She also called out historical trauma and current issues impacting Inuit communities, in particular the youth suicide epidemic. She told the government that words meant nothing without actions behind them.

In his speech, Chief Dan George discussed the impacts of colonization on Indigenous communities in Canada, focusing on the loss of traditional lands. He shocked the audience with his words,

Oh Canada, how can I celebrate with you this centenary, this hundred years? Shall I thank you for the reserves that are left to me of my beautiful forests? For the canned fish of my rivers? For the loss of my pride and authority, even among my own people? (APTN National News, 2017).

Peltier also discussed the loss of land and water rights, calling out governments for their lack of action and stating that "Indigenous communities across Canada... live in third world conditions where they don't have access to clean drinking water" (CBC News, 2019). Discussing these issues reminds audiences of Indigenous people's roles as environmental stewards, an important part of Indigenous rhetoric.

In his speech, Sinclair mentioned numerous issues that impact Indigenous people that are the result of colonization, including racism. For example, he said that "people have been educated to believe that Indigenous people are inferior" (Canadian Centre for Policy for Alternatives, 2017, 28:23). He also mentioned disparities in education, housing, healthcare, child welfare, and other intergenerational impacts of colonization.

Reminding audiences of Indigenous peoples' ties to the land and historical traumas is an effective rhetorical strategy. An analysis of

the strategies used by Indigenous leaders in the 2008 World Conservation Congress found that “through the reification of their indigenous identity and environmental knowledge systems, they appear to be creating a political identity... based on their ability to sustainably manage natural resources” (Doolittle, 2010, p. 287). This study also found leaders discussed land dispossession and marginalization to influence audiences. The discussion of trauma and colonization is a strategy that was used historically, when Indigenous groups were attempting to decolonize the Indian Act. Black found that Indigenous speakers “relied on such reminiscences of their predecessors to resist removal” (2009, p. 73). Reminding audiences of past trauma can help create an emotional connection, and may increase support for Indigenous groups in political and environmental debates.

Displaying frank and honest speech is essential to parrhesia, but it can also help to achieve reconciliation. Discussing the realities of the impacts of colonization, environmental degradation, and issues impacting Indigenous communities is a form of truth-telling. Educating audiences on the history of Indigenous relations in Canada is also in line with several of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action related to education and media, which encourage initiatives “that inform and educate the Canadian public, and connect Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians” (TRC, 2015, p. 10). Additionally, hearing Indigenous speakers discuss these topics in such an open and honest way may be the only way that audiences become aware of these issues. And the level of emotion that comes from speaking about trauma may help to evoke a stronger reaction in audiences, putting increased pressure on governments to make changes.

### *Relationship with the Audience*

In his discussion of parrhesia, Foucault mentions a unique relationship between the speaker and the audience. The speaker is

not the one to create change, but by speaking the truth “leaves the person he addresses with the tough task of having the courage to accept this truth, to recognize it, and to make it a principle of conduct” (1984, p. 11). In the case of Indigenous political rhetoric, parrhesia puts pressure on audiences and governments to address issues and create changes that will positively impact Indigenous communities. It is up to the audience to listen to the truths being spoken and do something about them.

Each of the speakers discussed urged their audiences to act in some way. Dan George used his speech to encourage Indigenous youth to become involved in the systems that oppressed them, saying they would one day be “sitting in the houses of the law and government ruling and being ruled by the knowledge and freedoms of our great land” (APTN National News, 2017). In her United Nations address, Peltier was informing world governments and the general public of water access issues affecting Indigenous communities in Canada, which put increased pressure on the Canadian government to address the issue. Sinclair asked all members of his audience to contribute to the work of reconciliation and educate themselves on the history of Canada and its relations with Indigenous people. Finally, Qaqqaq discussed the need for change at the House of Commons, and in politics in Canada in general, and put pressure on the government of Canada to address issues impacting Inuit people. Each of the speeches could not create change on its own, but could lead to change by raising awareness of these issues among audience members.

Like parrhesia, reconciliation involves a unique relationship between different groups of people. Reconciliation cannot occur if Indigenous people have to shoulder the responsibility alone. Indigenous activists and politicians create awareness when they speak the truth about historical trauma and systemic issues, but reconciliation cannot occur until Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and governments work together to achieve change.



*Fearlessness*

Speaking without fear of consequence is another element of parrhesia demonstrated by Indigenous politicians and activists. They are willing to put their relationship with the audience at risk in order to speak the truth. This fearlessness is an essential component of parrhesia, according to Foucault, who said it “not only puts the relationship between the person who speaks and the person to whom he addresses the truth at risk, but it may go so far as to put the very life of the person who speaks at risk” (1984, p. 8). The comparative analysis examined whether each of the speakers discussed displayed this element of parrhesia.

Dan George displayed fearlessness in “A Lament for Confederation.” He was invited to participate in a celebration of Canada, and was expected to deliver a positive speech; instead, he took a risk and chose to inform the audience of 32,000 people of the realities of the country they were celebrating. George’s family feared for his life that night. His “address was so revolutionary, his daughter Amy George recalls, she feared he would be killed for delivering it. She was in her 20s and the assassination of U.S. president John F. Kennedy was fresh in her mind” (The Canadian Press, 2017). Instead, after a few moments of stunned silence, he received a standing ovation. Qaqqaq risked her relationship with the House of Commons and the government of Canada when she so blatantly called them out for their lack of action on important issues and for the systemic discrimination that occurs in Canadian politics. Peltier also risked her relationship with the government of Canada when she discussed the conditions in Indigenous communities and lack of access to clean water.

In terms of the comparative analysis, Sinclair’s speech for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives could not be said to demonstrate fearlessness. The results of the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission's inquiry and their 94 Calls to Action had been released, and members of the audience were people who were interested in these findings, and so would have been primed to hear these realities if they were not aware of them already. However, Sinclair has demonstrated fearless speech in other situations.

As discussed, Canadians need to learn the true history of their country and understand the issues facing Indigenous communities in order for reconciliation to occur. For this to happen, someone needs to be willing to speak up about these issues, like these four speakers were. In his lecture on parrhesia, Foucault discussed how speakers who demonstrate it had no choice but to speak the truth, stating "the parrhesiast is not someone who is fundamentally reserved. On the contrary, it is his duty, obligation, responsibility, and task to speak, and he has no right to shirk this task" (1984, p. 13). This reflects the attitudes of the four speakers discussed, who made it clear they would be willing to speak as boldly as they did again. For example, Qaqqaq stated "I will always fight for human rights of Indigenous peoples in Nunavut and across the country" (APTN News, 2021). By speaking the truth, Indigenous speakers are protecting Indigenous culture and land and providing a voice for Indigenous people and future generations. Having the courage to speak the truth is essential both to parrhesia and reconciliation.

### **Potential for Future Research**

Reconciliation requires an understanding of history and the true impacts of colonization, which is something that the Indigenous leaders discussed in this paper were committed to sharing. Truth is essential to both reconciliation and parrhesia. Parrhesia involves a relationship between the speaker and the audience, similar to how reconciliation requires Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations to listen to the truth and commit to working together. These common elements between parrhesia and reconciliation are interesting, and future research could further investigate this link.

Future research could also explore the impact of parrhesia on people's perceptions of Indigenous people and related political and environmental issues. For example, the Environics Institute conducted a survey of attitudes towards Indigenous people in Canada, including their perceived importance, general impressions, and what people thought about discrimination and other issues impacting Indigenous communities (2016). Similar surveys could be conducted to see if parrhesia demonstrated by Indigenous speakers influenced these attitudes.

A study by Osorio analysed Sylvie Rivera's 1973 speech on LGBTQ rights at the Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally in New York (2017). Osorio identified elements of visual and body rhetoric related to parrhesia. Further research of Indigenous political rhetoric and parrhesia could explore these visual elements and their effectiveness.

## **Significance and Conclusion**

This study is contributing to the amount of research available on Indigenous rhetoric, particularly by Indigenous scholars. The findings of this analysis may be of use to speakers, activists, politicians, or government officials who want to protect Indigenous rights and give Indigenous groups a voice in political and environmental debates. This is essential, as Indigenous groups worldwide have faced conflict over land and environmental rights and systemic issues for generations, and continue to face them today. Knowing which rhetorical strategies are effective can help to raise awareness of important issues and put pressure on audiences and governments to act. Success in these debates can help preserve the environment and protect Indigenous rights, lands, and culture, leading to a better world for future generations.

As is shown in Table 1, each of the speeches included in this analysis exhibited elements of parrhesia identified in the analytical framework, and can be said to demonstrate parrhesia. All of the speeches had a relatively positive response, and put pressure on audiences and governments to create change. Additionally, parrhesia can help to achieve reconciliation, as the two concepts have many common elements. Parrhesia is a powerful argumentative strategy, and an essential component of Indigenous political rhetoric.

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