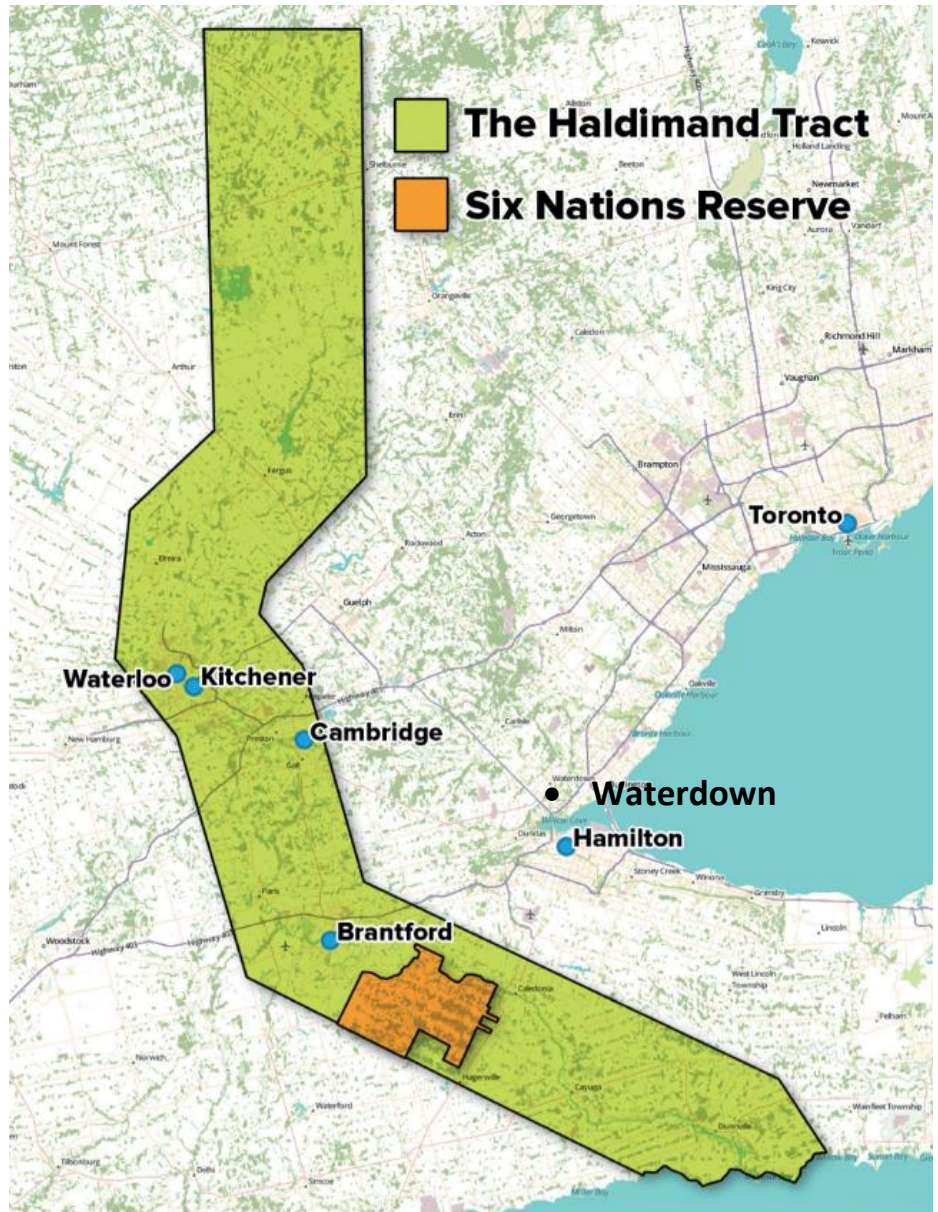


Cayuga Chief Deskaheh, 1873 - 1925 (Levi General)

- The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is the oldest continuous representative democracy in the world. The Confederacy is comprised of six principal nations: Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida & Mohawk and Tuscarora.
- The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is a complex matrilineal society where 50 Chiefs are nominated and elected by Clan Mothers to work to plan for the welfare of all the people and resolve disputes. Learn more [here](#).
- The Six Nations of the Grand River are part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (there are 16 other communities location in the lands around Lake Ontario)



Deskaheh

- Deskaheh was a chief from the Cayuga Nation.
- From the moment of its creation, the Indian Act (1876) was denounced by the Haudenosaunee Council of Chiefs as a gross violation of their Treaty relationship with the Crown.

What was the Indian Act?

“It is extremely inexpedient to deal with Indian Bands in the Dominion [as] being in any way separate nations.” - Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, 1887

Does this statement honour the relationships established by Treaty?

What is colonialism and how does this statement reflect a colonial relationship?

- The claims of the Council of Chiefs were ultimately dismissed as Canadian officials made their position clear: Indigenous Nations in Canada were to be recognized not as international political actors (sovereign) , as the Haudenosaunee Confederacy had insisted, but rather as wards of the state in need of both civilizing and federal protection (as dictated by the 1876 Indian Act).¹
- The Government of Canada passed a number of laws attacking Indigenous Treaty Rights, including the *Soldier Settlement Act of 1919* that enabled the federal government to distribute reserve lands to non-Indigenous veterans returning from the First World War.

¹ Belanger, Y. (2007). The six nations of grand river territory's: Attempts at renewing international political relationships, 1921–1924. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 13(3), 29-43. doi:10.1080/11926422.2007.9673441
Created March 2021



A meeting of the Council of Chiefs at Six Nations of the Grand River, 1898.

- Initially, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, accepted a petition from the Council of Chiefs challenging the legitimacy of the *Soldier Settlement Act of 1919* and promised not to apply the Act or the government's enfranchisement provisions at Six Nations of the Grand River prior to a formal decision from the Supreme Court. Scott would eventually go back on his word, causing Deskaheh (as the Speaker of the Council of Chiefs) to travel to London, England, using a Six Nations passport to appeal to the Crown [King George V] but was denied an audience.²
 - Deskaheh then decided to make an appeal to the League of Nations, catching Canadian officials off-guard. In response to this growing support for both Deskaheh and Six Nations, According to Yale Belanger "British officials aggressively lobbied the countries supporting the claim to withdraw voluntarily from the process by leveraging its political strength to halt the petition. This move was supported by Canada and the United States, the latter of which in particular was concerned about the potential implications that could result, if Deskaheh's claim was successful, due to the Six Nations straddling the US-Canadian border."³

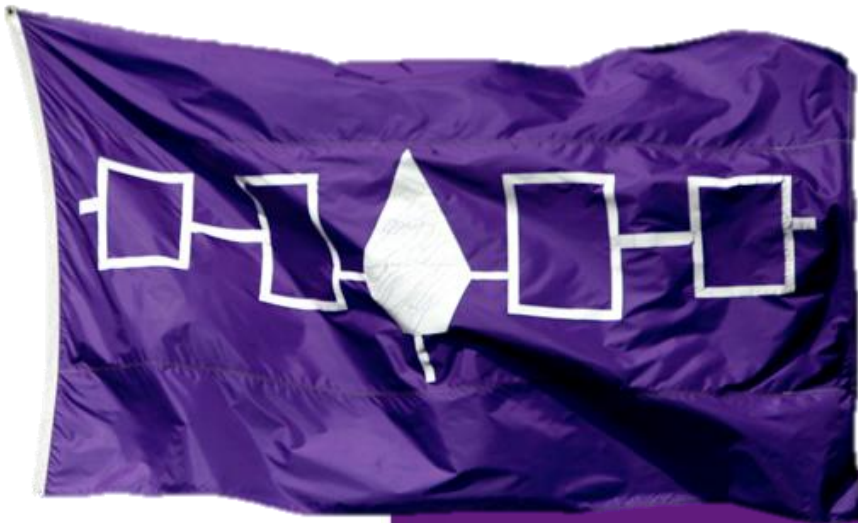
² Ibid.

³ Yale Belanger, *The six nations of grand river territory's: Attempts at renewing international political relationships, 1921–1924.*

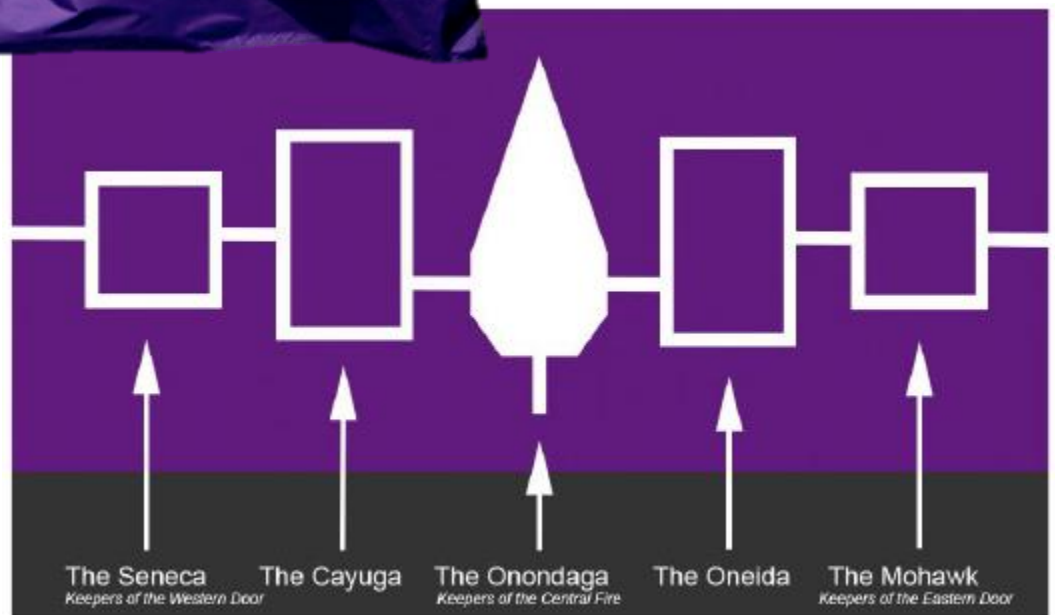
- Back in North America, Canadian officials announced that the Haudenosaunee Council of Chiefs would be replaced with a council elected using criteria mandated by the 1876 Indian Act. The powers of the elected council imposed by the Indian Act were also laid out in the act.

It is important to emphasize that the traditional Council of Chiefs were being elected using a system developed by their people over many centuries. The process mandated by the Indian Act was designed by Canadian officials that was in line with the overall goal of the Act to assimilate/destroy Indigenous ways of life.

- The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) sent an occupation force to the Six Nations of the Grand River who then invaded the Council House in an effort to dissolve the Council of Chiefs. Wampum belts and other documents were forcibly removed by the RCMP who declared the building off limits to further political activity.



The Flag of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy



The section of the Indian Act (1876) that imposes a new structure of government on Indigenous Nations:

<p>Periods of election how fixed: and term of office. Number of chiefs. Proviso: As to life chiefs.</p>	<p>62. The Governor in Council may order that the chiefs of any band of Indians shall be elected, as hereinbefore provided, at such time and place, as the Superintendent-General may direct, and they shall in such case be elected for a period of three years, unless deposed by the Governor for dishonesty, intemperance, immorality, or incompetency; and they may be in the proportion of one head chief and two second chiefs or councillors for every two hundred Indians; but any such band composed of thirty Indians may have one chief: Provided always, that all life chiefs now living shall continue as such until death or resignation, or until their removal by the Governor for dishonesty, intemperance, immorality, or incompetency.</p>
<p>Chiefs to make regulations for certain purposes.</p>	<p>63. The chief or chiefs of any band in council may frame, subject to confirmation by the Governor in Council, rules and regulations for the following subjects, viz.:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The care of the public health;2. The observance of order and decorum at assemblies of the Indians in general council, or on other occasions;3. The repression of intemperance and profligacy;4. The prevention of trespass by cattle;5. The maintenance of roads, bridges, ditches and fences;6. The construction and repair of school houses, council houses and other Indian public buildings;7. The establishments of pounds and the appointment of pound-keepers;8. The locating of the land in their reserves, and the establishment of a register of such locations.

Some questions:

1. Who has all the power in this structure?

2. What powers does the elected council created by the Indian Act have to protest, or fight, actions of the Government of Canada impacting their reserve community?

3. How does the imposition of a government structure by the Government of Canada violate treaty relationships?

***The Indian Act, including the section imposing government structures, remains law in Canada to this day.**

- At the same time that the elected council outlined by the Indian Act was being imposed, the League of Nations Secretariat notified Deskaheh that he would not be permitted to speak to them, stalling his efforts to engage the international community.

“It is the heart broken that I am against the most cruel indifference... my appeal to the Society of Nations has not been heard” - Deskaheh, 1924

- Deskaheh died in 1925.

Excerpts from an interview with University of Toronto’s Kevin White, assistant professor in the Department for the Study of Religion and Susan Hill, director of the Centre for Indigenous Studies:

Who is Cayuga Chief Levi General?

Kevin White: Cayuga Chief Levi General is a significant figure that, outside of the field of Indigenous studies, is relatively unknown. In 1924, he attempted to speak at the League of Nations in order to gain recognition for the Six Nations, by seeking international review of Canada’s actions against the sovereignty of the Grand River Haudenosaunee. Today, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues recognizes him as the first Indigenous person to seek recognition at the International Forum, and he is recognized by folks who do that work today around the world. The average Canadian, however, knows little about him.

What is it about him that makes him an exciting historical subject?

Susan Hill: Cayuga Chief Levi General brought a domestic issue within Canada to the international stage. At first he went to England to try to get the Crown [King George V] to recognize their treaty obligations. The feedback he received was that this was a domestic matter, and it was up to Canada to address it; the Crown wasn't going to get involved. And that's why he then chose to escalate it to the League of Nations.

It was such a radical action, I'm sure, at that time.

Susan Hill: Right. And England and Canada stopped him. They would not agree to allow him to speak to the League of Nations. As a result of that action, Ottawa made it illegal for First Nations to hire lawyers. People could be fined and removed from their communities for trying to hire a lawyer without the permission of the Indian Department. That was a law until 1951.

Shortly after he first started his work in the international arena, there was, what could be described as, a hostile takeover of the government at Grand River. The Canadian federal government enforced provisions of the Indian Act that imposed an elected system of government. They sidestepped the authority of the traditional government, for which Cayuga Chief Levi General was the lead spokesperson. On behalf of the federal government, the Northwest Mounted Police, now known as the RCMP, searched for documents and other aspects of material culture, confiscating items that were used by the traditional council. Because of that, many family members and other community people who had these documents went underground. A lot of material related to his work, and to the work of the Confederacy Council, went into hiding. There was great concern, and good reason to be concerned, that if the documents fell into the hands of the Canadian government it would be destroyed, and the community would no longer have access to that information. As a result, a lot of these materials are not widely known, and they are often held by members of the family or by family members of the leadership at the time.