

August 16, 2020 - Appreciation: Grand Chief Joe Norton fostered First Nations unity

Grand Chief Joseph Tokwirot Norton leaves an important legacy. His continued efforts to unify diverse First Nations and perspectives to create a common front set a valuable example and testify to his commitment to our collective well-being.

I spoke with Grand Chief Norton on July 31 and I did not know until Friday that it was going to be for the last time. Still recovering from a medical procedure, he wanted to raise concerns we all shared about the attempts by the province to rush passage of Bill 61, legislation for an economic reset amid the pandemic, with no recognition for Aboriginal and treaty rights. Although weakened, he had the strength to clearly convey the need for First Nations to come together to protect their collective interests. He spoke of the Two-Row Wampum and its principles, which provide for creating alliances so our nations enjoy the opportunities that everyone around us take for granted. So, once again, he was able to set the stage for the mobilization that is often our response when challenged by the political environment around us.

I first met Grand Chief Norton in the heat of the summer of 1990. I had travelled from Quebec City with individuals involved in what remains, to this day, the most eloquent standoff between our Indigenous nations and the colonial powers in this country. I was also there to deliver a message of support, although few within my own Innu Nation agreed with the use of force to achieve our goals. Because it was the middle of the night, Grand Chief Norton was at a hotel that served as headquarters. Like most of those directly involved, he needed to retire from time to time. I was allowed to knock on his door so I could deliver the message in person.

At the time, everyone, I believe, understood this was a moment to set aside our differences and present a united front if we were to find a peaceful, but, most of all, satisfactory outcome to this unprecedented crisis. I can say today that the grand chief was instrumental in bridging the many opinions and was able to achieve consensus for the benefit of all.

His qualities in reconciling sometimes completely opposite positions were often tested; he managed, in most situations, to live up to the challenge. More than once, those qualities also benefited our own process at the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador, where we often deal with a diversity of views on how to engage governments. I recall a comment by one of his colleagues, who referred to a time when Grand Chief Norton, during a tense strategic discussion, reminded us that the enemy is not “inside these walls” but outside. It came as a timely call to order about our purpose as leaders of our respective First Nations. I will say that in my tenure as regional chief for nearly three decades, I learned from his ways in making certain we remain focused on our true purpose as First Nations.

Most who knew him would agree he was deeply committed in the assertion of our jurisdiction and our right to be self-governing. Education and economic prosperity were high on his list of priorities. I recall a time in the late 1990s when he played a key role in ensuring that funding for education consider our children with special needs. As a result, today, the program provides much needed financial support in that area.

In our own political environment, where our diversity can potentially lead us on different paths, Grand Chief Norton and Kahnawake have remained faithful and full participants within our circle

of leaders of our region. Their contribution often served as a reminder that there is always a way to construct strong political bonds without compromising your principles. I am sure many, including myself, will continue to be guided by these teachings.

Kahnawake Grand Chief Joseph Tokwiro (Joe) Norton died Friday at age 70.

Ghislain Picard is chief of the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador.