

A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS  
A CULTURE OF PEACE

**INDIGENOUS LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT, SYSTEMIC CHANGE  
and an examination of the underlying role of the  
*Circle of All Nations, William Commanda's global eco peace community*  
With special recognition of the role of Mayor Bob Chiarelli (2001 – 2006)**

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**Late last year** I was asked to do a land acknowledgment for a personal assistant of a past mayor of the capital city of Canada – Mayor Bob Chiarelli (2001 – 2006), Member of the Provincial Parliament of Ontario. Dr. Andy Kusi-Appiah's request caused me to reflect on the practice of land acknowledgements in Indigenous Territory, now a common and respectful practice across Canada, and in many other places all over the world. I was led to the conclusion that we, the William Commanda's *Circle of All Nations* global eco peace community contributed in huge part to this systemic shift in attitude. Below, I share some thoughts about this.



When I was asked to do the land acknowledgement, I was first a bit taken aback. I wondered if my colleague knew I was not Indigenous myself. But then, of course, he knew I was born in South Africa (not that that is necessarily obvious). I began to reflect on the implications of the invitation, and then I realized our connection with land acknowledgement in the capital city and the National Capital Region went back twenty-five years!

Since the turn of the century, we have formerly acknowledged this land in the heart of the country as the unceded and unsurrendered, traditional territory of the Algonquins of the Ottawa River Watershed, from time immemorial. By *we*, I mean the late Algonquin political and spiritual leader, and Carrier of the Sacred Wampum Heritage of his ancestors, *Grandfather* to many, William Commanda, and his *Circle of All Nations* global eco peace community. It was his direct ancestors whose presence we honoured in the capital city. The land acknowledgment also included a prayer to the ancestors of all humanity at the ancient sacred Paleolithic meeting place; here three rivers meet at the circular waterfalls, on the most ancient rocks of the earth.

I began my work with Elder Commanda in 1997; a few years later we had a meeting with the then mayor of Gatineau/Hull, at the city hall, Maison des citoyens, where there were many beautiful displays of cultures of the world. At the time, the mayor was also the head of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities. Over the course of the conversation, I realized that he did not know anything about the Algonquins, upon whose birthplace and territory *his* city had grown. Thereafter, we made a point of acknowledging the original occupants of the land, the Algonquin Nations, at all meetings, in all his speeches and correspondence,

including to the Monarchy. Also, in all the events we organized, we included the Inuit and Metis and other First Nations, thus acknowledging and presenting the First Peoples of Canada.

But, actually, it was William Commanda himself who introduced this practice singlehandedly in 1968, when he welcomed the then newly elected Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to “my country and my territory.”



Intuitively, William Commanda was already expressing the message his ancestor had inscribed in the Three Figure Welcoming and Sharing Friendship Belt, at the end of the 1600s.

It is interesting to remember that at that time, it was the Algonquian People of the Eastern Seaboard who met with the earliest newcomers to North America: Turtle Island. We have been story mapping and explaining *Turtle Island* since 2004.



This reality was affirmed by King George III in the Royal Proclamation of 1763.

William Commanda affirmed his commitment to all of Turtle Island, as well as the right to traverse the continent “without molestation”. From June 24, 1975, to February 3, 1976, he served as the Spiritual Guide for the Sunbow Five Walk, from First Encounter Beach, Massachusetts to Santa Barbara, California, to take Indigenous prayer and ceremony to lands despoiled by blood and violence, to raise awareness of the Indigenous Peoples and to raise awareness of the looming environmental crisis. In fact, he also asserted connection with Central and South America, noting that he had not created the Panama Canal, and he often used a Condor feather to underline this relationality.

In 2008, William Commanda greeted Her late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, with a sovereign coin she herself had sent him in 1953, upon her coronation; it underlined their nation-to-nation relationship. In 2010, he welcomed the now King Charles to his country, and in 2014, his daughter Evelyn Dewache planted a tree at Rideau Hall with Princess Ann.

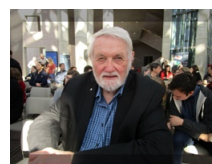


In 1970, Elder Commanda became Keeper of the Sacred Wampum heritage of his peoples. He raised the Three Figure Welcome and Sharing Belt publicly for the first time at the 1987 Aboriginal Constitutional Conference hosted by Prime Minister Mulroney, and

thereafter at all public events of the three levels of government and of countless other groups. Here he affirmed that his ancestors in the centre of the belt had welcomed the newcomers, then the French and English, drawing their hands together to build peace, agreeing to share their land and its grand natural resources in equal parts, guided by the *Anicinabi* values of generosity; he noted also that the presence of the Vatican cross affirmed this as a sacred agreement. While he knew that the commitment had not been honoured by all the newcomers, he continued to affirm the welcome to *all* citizens, now inclusive of the settlers and new immigrants, and the provinces and territories, with the Indigenous occupying the centre, indeed as the glue that holds the country together – in fact, it has evolved as such in our public consciousness over the past decades.



Former CEO of the Canadian Museum of History (then Civilization, and created by renowned Indigenous Architect Douglas Cardinal), George MacDonald, told me with what seriousness he approached offering welcoming remarks at their many events, from the time of its opening launch in 1989.



*Personal conversation at Alex Janvier exhibition at the National Art Gallery. He had created the Morning Star painting at the Museum of History. Morning Star is William Commanda's Algonquin name Ojigkwanong. William Command had smudged the artist at the first fully inclusive Art Conference of former Deputy Prime Minister Sheila Copps, where he presided as the Honorary Elder.*

Likewise, Elder Commanda did the same for the National Capital Commission events, often at Victoria Island, the site for his vision the Asinabka Indigenous Peacebuilding Centre, for UNESCO meetings, and at innumerable federal, provincial, municipal, RCMP, Ottawa City Police and community meetings.

Elder Commanda himself drew my attention to the fact that he had welcomed His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, and President Mandela to his country, in 1990 and 1998 – that is, as in the First Peoples welcome of the global leaders.

**FROM**



**Welcoming Global Leaders**

to

**RECEIPT OF THE  
KEY TO THE CITY OF OTTAWA**

**By Mayor Bob Chiarelli**



**Mayor Bob Chiarelli** played an influential role in this critical systemic change by inviting Elder Commanda to participate in many public events at City Hall and land acknowledgement became a meaningful part of the ceremonies; in fact, *Circle of All Nations* supported the city’s cultural renewal work during the first decade of the millennium, ensuring the presence and rightful place of the Algonquins was finally recognized. This included special moments of reconciliation and peace tree planting at the Ottawa City Hall.

The evolving relationship with Elder Commanda led to a most special historical event when both Mayor Chiarelli and Elder Commanda acknowledged the land. On April 27, 2006, the Mayor wrote, *“It gives me great pleasure to inform you that on Wednesday, June 21st, 2006, I will have the distinct privilege of awarding you the City of Ottawa's most prestigious award ~ the "Key to the City". This award will be presented to you on National Aboriginal Day on behalf of Council and all residents of this great city in recognition of your immeasurable contribution to the community”*. Mayor Chiarelli presented this special elder with the 12<sup>th</sup> Key to the City, inscribed in Algonquin as well as French and English, on the day of the Summer Solstice, *(which incidentally, William Commanda’s colleague with the North American Indian Nations Government,*

*Huron activist Jules Sioui, had called Indian Day in 1944, the timing underlining the interrelatedness of Indigenous Peoples with the cosmic cycles of nature. In fact, herein lie the seeds for Indigenous Land Acknowledgement, the cause Elder Commanda pursued all his life).*



*I was there with representatives of the Aboriginal Justice Learning Network, and Late Donald Marshall Junior was with us! As you know, he is the other historical Canadian voice for Indigenous land-based rights and justice).*



*(Here is another aside – it was William Commanda’s daughter Evelyn, who launched the first National Aboriginal Day event hosted by Governor General Romeo Leblanc at Rideau Hall in 1996.*



Here are a few excerpts from the Mayor’s speech: *Greetings and thank you for having me here at - Victoria Island - the sacred spiritual meeting grounds of Elder William Commanda's ancestors. This year marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of National Aboriginal Day Celebrations in Canada.*

*Bob Chiarelli went on to say, As the Mayor of Ottawa, I am both pleased and privileged to grant the Key to the City today, on behalf of City Council and the citizens of Ottawa in recognition of your outstanding leadership and devotion over four decades in fostering an understanding amongst aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples and in creating the Circle of All Nations, I am extremely pleased*

*to have the privilege to present the City's highest honour here on Victoria Island - a place rich in First Nations and Algonquin history and heritage; a place where, before Parliament sat upon the hill close by, the river flowed freely and the air was clean and pure. We respect the vision of Elder Commanda that this place will become a beacon for all those values that speak to protecting Mother Earth, and the philosophies and values of all our First Nations Peoples. It demonstrates how strongly our city feels about honouring Aboriginal People of Ottawa and Canada.*

Elder Commanda said that he saw three levels of significance that made him happy on that occasion: *the City of Ottawa acknowledging someone from the City of Maniwaki, the province of Ontario reaching across to the Province of Quebec, and the National Capital Region, representing the entire country, opening its heart to someone seen generally as belonging within the confines of a reserve, the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. The Indigenous, he affirmed, stand in the centre between the original settlers and the newer people.*

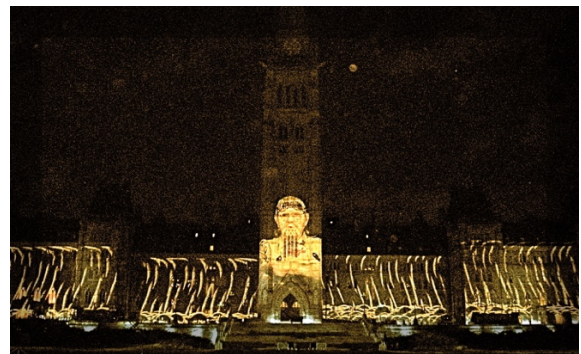
I share this history and these memories to register the critical role Mayor Chiarelli played in entrenching the land acknowledgement practice in our psyche at the turn of the century.

Canada at large has now been awakened to the history, tragedies, and strengths and values of the First Peoples, and events across the country now commence with land affirmations. It is always an honour for me to acknowledge with gratitude and respect the presence and place of First Nations, Inuit and Metis, on the traditional territory of the Algonquins of the Ottawa River Watershed – indeed I believe the spirit of the *Circle of All Nations* work lies in the

undergrowth – over the decades, and continuing to this day, countless people in Grandfather's global eco peace centre affirm this assertion.



On Grandfather's behalf, we acknowledge with gratitude and respect, the support and contributions of so many to this critical shift in public consciousness; and we continue to honour William Commanda's prayer for peace and respect for Mother Earth as we affirm Indigenous Land Acknowledgement.



By some strange chance I was able to capture this photo of Grandfather Commanda on the Peace Tower at the National Capital Commission's Sound and Light Show in 2010. He had a vision of the Peace Tower falling and it is recorded in the 1991 *Profiles in Wisdom* book by Steven McFadden. He also discussed Canada referenced as the 51<sup>st</sup> State in this book. We trust his prayer for his ancestral land remains with us.



## Postscript

I continue to research the work, legacy and ongoing influence of William Commanda and the Circle of All Nations. This article is a preliminary articulation of a research paper on the discursive reach of William Commanda and his Circle of All Nations, consistent with the Foucauldian discourse analysis commenced with the Commanda thesis:

Thumbadoo, R.V. (2018). *Ginawaydaganuc and the Circle of All Nations: The Remarkable Environmental Legacy of Elder William Commanda* PhD Thesis. Ottawa. Carleton University.  
<https://curve.carleton.ca/aa4e3cbb-5b83-464d-8286-a901fcd77b06>

Another article on the ongoing discursive reach of William Commanda's work may be reviewed in the Canadian Association of Geographers 2025 conference presentation  
<https://circleofallnations.ca/new/akikipautik-from-conflictual-views-to-confluence/>

If you would like to contribute to this exploration, please contact us.

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