

On the table



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By Nate Smelle

In terms of bringing people together there is no better piece of furniture than the table. Whether used for planning an initiative, governing a community, reaching an agreement, or sharing a meal the table compels us to face one another and attempt to establish common ground.

So far in 2020 we have heard a great deal about a mysterious 'bargaining table' where Ontario's four education unions, the Ontario Public School Board Association, and the Ford government have been coming together to discuss the future of education in Ontario. Following recent talks between Indigenous Services Minister Marc Miller and the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte in Tyendinaga on site of the CN Rail blockade, the minister told reporters that some of the issues 'put on the table' would be raised with the Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the federal cabinet.

Last time I checked: some 200,000 teachers and education affiliates were preparing for a province-wide strike in protest of the Ford government's cuts to education; and the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte in Tyendinaga were still standing in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en people in their fight against the Coastal GasLink LNG pipeline TC Energy plans to build on unceded traditional Wet'suwet'en Territory without permission of the First Nation's Hereditary Chiefs. Having served humankind as a uniting venue for millennia, why is it now that the table seems to be failing to achieve the most essential function of its design 'establishing camaraderie'? Tables still demand we sit around them, commanding us to sit beside and across from one another and discuss our ideologies. So why all of a sudden do tables seem to be provoking such divisions among us?

Despite my doubts, my faith in tables as a point of union was restored on Family Day during Transition Town Maynooth's Waste Not Swap Shop. Looking around the room, there were tables doing what they do best. On the one side of the hall there were tables filled with clothing and other items available for the taking. On the other side of the room more tables packed with people talking, laughing and feasting on a free spaghetti lunch. In the centre of the space, there was another table where others were learning to transform old T-Shirts into shopping bags. Spending time at each of these tables I discovered that at everyone of them there was a meaningful discussion taking place. I learned later that one of the main goals of the Waste Not Swap Shop, aside from waste diversion of course, was to facilitate the sharing of ideas. Without a doubt this was accomplished.

With the sun shining outside there was talk of gardening and the need for community gardens in Hastings Highlands. The constant flow of foot traffic coming and going with bags and boxes of items that otherwise would have likely ended up in the landfill there were numerous brainstorming sessions taking place regarding methods and communal strategies for waste diversion. With many in attendance being introduced to Transition Town Maynooth for the first time the practical philosophy inspiring the group to collectively find solutions to challenges such as our dependence on fossil fuels, as well as the ecological and economic crisis this addiction creates, were also on the table.

Amid this exchange it dawned on me how essential the sharing of ideas is for our survival as a species. While treasure hunting the tables, I became engaged in a discussion regarding the struggle of the Wet'suwet'en people to protect the land that has been sacred to them since time immemorial.

'I don't understand the difference between the Hereditary Chiefs and the band councils,' said one woman sorting through the books on the table.

'The Hereditary Chiefs were looking out for Indigenous land and people long before Canada was even a country - they predate colonization,' responded another man checking out the tools up for grabs.

Expanding on his explanation, he continued 'The band councils are a product of colonization. They are kind of like our municipal councils, but they are only elected by people with an 'Indian Status' card, so they don't really represent the entire Indigenous community. Plus, Wet'suwet'en Territory was never surrendered to the crown, so the band councils don't have any real authority regarding what happens on their ancestral lands.'

Arriving home, I began looking for ways to apply what I had learned from the conversation earlier that day to develop a clearer understanding of the ongoing fight to protect the traditional land of the Wet'suwet'en people. Seeking a place where common ground might exist for those who support the blockade of the rail-line running through traditional Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory - also unceded - and those complaining about the inconvenience it may be causing some individuals, I pondered the situation from a more personal perspective.

Imagine living on land that has been in your family for generations upon generations. From this land your family and ancestors have attained the water, food and nearly all the resources they needed to survive. Now imagine one day someone shows up on your land and imposes an authority overseeing what happens on your land. Next, you find out a private corporation plans to use your land for a massive industrial development that threatens the quality of life your family and ancestors have always enjoyed. Now imagine what you would do to have a voice at the table with those making decisions about your family's future?