

# Canada taking 'bold steps' on aboriginal issues, Strahl tells UN

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[CBC News](#)

The Conservative government has taken unprecedented steps in protecting aboriginal human rights and improving the quality of life of indigenous peoples in Canada, Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl said Thursday at the United Nations.



*"Aboriginal rights are not ignored" in Canada, Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl told reporters Thursday at United Nations headquarters in New York. (CBC)* He made his comments despite criticism at the international body that Canada has abandoned support for aboriginal issues on the world stage.

Strahl's visit to UN headquarters in New York comes amid lingering bitterness over Canada's vote against the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples last fall.

The non-binding declaration, which sets out global human rights standards for indigenous populations, was easily approved by the UN General Assembly in New York — only Canada, New Zealand, the United States and Australia dissented. Eleven countries abstained.

Australia has since changed its mind and supported the declaration.

Speaking to reporters, Strahl cited achievements such as the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and the imminent launch of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission examining decades of abuse of aboriginal children at the federally funded residential schools, as well as an expected apology this spring from Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Strahl also pointed to the Tory government's acceleration of settlements under the land claims tribunal, and newly signed agreements with several First Nations on education and the role of aboriginal peoples at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver.

"Never before has Canada taken such bold steps," he said. "Our government is committed to delivering real and measurable results, and since coming to office two years ago, we have done just that."

## Aboriginal rights not ignored, says Strahl

Strahl has said Canada opposed the declaration because it lacks clear guidance for implementation and conflicts with the existing Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which the government believes already protects the rights of aboriginals.

"Aboriginal rights are not ignored," he said. "I would encourage other countries to ... look at our constitution and look how it's handled in Canada. We don't have it perfect. You know there's a range of problems that face aboriginal people in Canada."

During debate over the declaration, Canadian representatives at the UN expressed significant concerns about the declaration's wording on provisions addressing lands and resources, as well as another article calling on states to obtain prior informed consent from indigenous groups before enacting new laws or administrative measures.

"Frankly, I think there's a real need to see the concrete results, rather than just seeing something aspirational," Strahl said Thursday.

Despite Strahl's message that the Canadian government is supporting First Nations in Canada, the minister's office refused to let any aboriginal representatives from Canada sit inside the room where the press conference took place. First Nations chiefs were turned away at the door and had to watch Strahl speak on a TV monitor outside, the CBC's Neil Herland reported.

Strahl defended excluding the representatives, saying he had spoken with them before the sparsely attended press conference, which he noted was an event for accredited journalists.

"In many meetings I've had with First Nations leaders, journalists aren't welcome," Strahl added.

Ghislain Picard, the Quebec regional chief for the Assembly of First Nations, who was in New York, called Strahl's visit a public relations exercise.

"[It's] essentially damage control," he told CBC News. "I think Canada is very keen on appearing as the best country in the world in terms of its treatment of aboriginal people and obviously the minister was here to control the damage."