

EDITORIAL

OUR VIEWS

A man of vision

The life of William Commanda, the Algonquin spiritual leader who died this week at age 97, reads like fiction. The great-grandson of a legendary 19th-century Algonquin chief, Commanda was also a chief, of the Kitigan Zibi First Nation near Maniwaki between 1951 and 1970, as well as a master birchbark canoe maker (who built a canoe for the queen of Denmark, among others), a guide and a trapper.

But it was his vision of peace, intercultural understanding and the environment that made him a respected figure on the world stage.

Known as "Grandfather," a term of respect and recognition, Commanda had a unique status in his own community symbolized by the fact that he was carrier of three wampum belts that have historic and spiritual importance. The belts, including the Welcoming Belt dating to the 1700s, represent sharing natural resources and values of the First Peoples with the newcomers to North America, another represents choice, and a third recognizes North America as a coherent entity.

He also had a unique status outside of his community, which allowed him to meet some of the icons of our time. In 1990, he blessed Ottawa's Human Rights Memorial alongside the Dalai Lama. Eight years later, he presented Nelson Mandela with an eagle feather on behalf of First Nations people. He was made an officer of the Order of Canada last year, and has received an honorary degree from the University of Ottawa and a Lifetime Achievement Award at the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards.

Commanda was a visionary who built bridges between people, as Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo said after his death.

At a time when there is serious talk about rewriting the relationship between the Canadian government and First Nations, when Atleo has called for the outdated Indian Act to be replaced and for First Nations to carve their own paths to self-determination, Commanda's bridge-building lessons will be more important than ever.

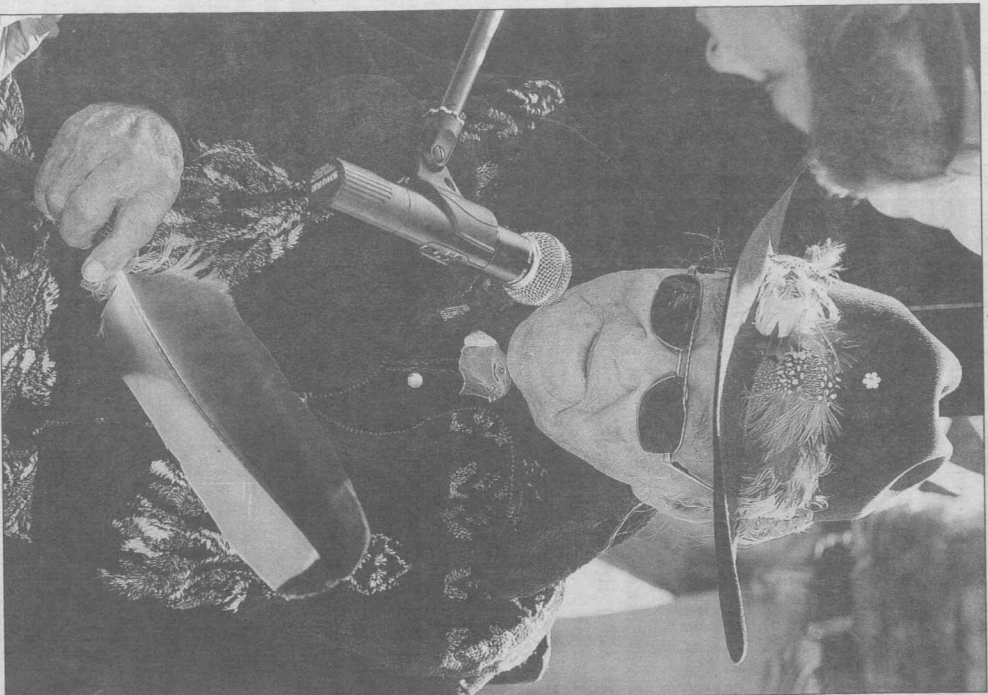
One of his most compelling visions was the push for a national aboriginal centre on Victoria Island in the shadow of Parliament Hill along with the "freeing" of Chaudiere Falls on the Ottawa River, which is a meaningful place to indigenous people.

Among those who have taken up the cause is architect Douglas Cardinal, who has sketched a plan for the centre on Victoria Island. Ottawa Centre MP Paul Dewar is a key supporter of the plan, as is Ottawa council. A city committee last year noted that such a project would be good for the city but most importantly good for indigenous peoples.

"It will be a deep sadness, indeed," noted the report "if Elder Commanda is not able to walk in its halls some day."

It would be an even deeper sadness if Commanda's vision is not carried on after his death to build something to mark his remarkable life.

OTTAWA CITIZEN



PAT MCGRAH, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN



"FAIR PLAY AND DAYLIGHT"

FUTURE WAR STORIES

We can only watch



DAVID WARREN

We are in Ramadan again, and yesterday was the first Friday in the Muslim holy season of fasting. As a priestly friend points out, it was also the feast of the dedication of St. Mary Major in Rome, but the purpose of this column is not to supply calendar notes. Instead, even when considering religion, we are looking at the public and political implications of religious faith. And I doubt that Roman feast has any political implications.

Ramadan, however, has been making a difference across the Middle East, for many years, through which it has coincided with an uptick in Islamist confrontations. And this year, the Islamists are har-vesting the "Arab Spring."

As a writer who spent some part of his early childhood in Lahore, Pakistan, and has very pleasant memories of the season there, now half-a-century ago, this is a source of heartbreak. Lahore itself, that once-beautiful city, is now one of many theatres of "terrorism." The notion that "Islam is a religion of peace" is today seldom uttered with a straight face, yet I have seen and felt that aspect of Islam. I recall so many passing, charitable gestures that were associated with Ramadan (closest, in Christianity, to the season of Advent), and the excited sense of a blessed renewal on first sighting the thin crescent moon.

But instead, today, in Lahore and elsewhere, Ramadan has come to be associated with fanatic imams, whose bloodthirsty sermons infuse ugly mobs. In Cairo, and right across Egypt last week, after Friday sermons, Islamists took to the streets, in numbers possibly exceeding those

who were demonstrating against President Hosni Mubarak several months ago. They demanded that Egypt be placed immediately under the Salafist (most puritanical) reversion of Shariah. There were many incidents, in which Coptic Christians and others were tormented; and at least one rampage, near the border with Gaza, where black-clad men seeking the destruction of a statue of Anwar Sadat had more success in slaughtering bystanders.

From this distance, and reading reports I cannot personally confirm, though from sources I have found reliable, I am struck by two things. The first is a minor but important detail: that acts of focused, apparently "spontaneous" violence, are usually perpetrated by nameable local thugs, who use public demonstrations as their cover and excuse. But Egyptian police seem to fear them as much as their victims do, and try to arrange "reconciliation" sessions when they should be making arrests.

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The other is that the much-discussed Muslim Brotherhood does not appear to be in control of the demonstrations. The inspiration is coming from more radical Salafists, and one Coptic correspondent tells me his people almost hope the Muslim Brotherhood will prevail, because, bad as they may be for Christians and other minorities, they at least maintain a front of civility and respect.

Iraq and Syria are two more Arab countries which have, for centuries, accommodated large Christian minorities. (They had once been majorities.) In the case of Iraq, the Christian community has been re-

duced by half, mostly through emigration, since al-Qaeda and allies declared an open season on them in 2003. In Syria, Christians are trapped, with no love of the monstrous Assad regime, which has killed thousands since their "Arab Spring" arrived. Yet the demonstrators themselves are openly guided by Islamists, whom they fear more than the Assad regime.

In Libya, where Canada and other Western countries are bombing "military targets," it has become clear since the assassination of Abdel Fattah Younis, that the Islamists are in the ascendant. Gen. Younis, commander of rebel forces, was "executed" by insiders. The murder was applauded on jihadist websites around the world. While some suggest a "mere tribal vendetta," it is apparent at least to me that every offer of compromise and concession comes from the nationalist factions, whose aim is only to bring down Gadhafi. The trans-national factions — many with battlefield experience in Iraq — have much more comprehensive ambitions.

I doubt that, in any of these countries, there is huge public support for extreme Salafist doctrines. But the revolution, begun by "democrats" through social media, cannot be completed by them. It is a hard fact of life that in social convulsions, the most ruthless tend to prevail.

From this distance, I think we can only watch, and begin thinking ahead to our own defences, should the entire Arab world become something like Iran. It makes no sense to act, as we have in Libya, to increase social disorder. It would make no sense to intervene in Syria, and it made no sense to cheer on opponents of the Mubarak regime. We have neither the will nor the resources to determine the outcome of any of these contests for total power. We should instead observe that our own preferred allies are just bit players in each one.

David Warren's column appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Saturdays.

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