

## The Conversation Piece Podcast: Vanessa Tait

### ADVERTISEMENT:

HOST: Indigenous women are among the most marginalized in Canada.

In her talk, Vanessa Tait speaks about how the sacred roles they previously held in their communities have been dismantled through colonialism and how all Canadians need to work together to support them.

Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Vanessa Tait.

### VANESSA TAIT:

*Tansi.* My name is Vanessa Tait. I'm a two-spirited Cree woman from O-pipon-na-piwin Cree Nation in Northern Manitoba. I would like to acknowledge the Treaty Six territory that we are gathered on. Thank you for welcoming us to your traditional territory, to share messages of "We desire a better country." I will be sharing with you a message and presentation that my sisters and I have presented and shared before. Now. I only have seven minutes and not an hour and not 150 years. And while my sisters are unable to come with me, but they are here in my heart and I was unable to bring the teepee bundle with me as a time and space would not accommodate it. Therefore you will need to utilize your thoughts, and imagine there's a teepee standing here beside me. The teepee in my language *mîkowâhp*, represents our Indigenous women.

Culturally, it has been the domain and place for our women. People ask, do you still live in a teepee? Really, I do wish we still live that way because a teepee is a symbol of our women. It honours our ancestors: great-grandmothers, grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, and all Indigenous woman everywhere. The teepee honoured our place in the circle.

Culturally and traditionally the women were the carriers of the teepee. The tee has 13 poles, which to me represents 13 moons and the height or canvas that wraps the teepee symbolises the shawl and the skirt, which represents the sacred circle of life. There are many teachings of the *mîkowâhp* and today I would like to utilise it as a symbol and honouring of our Indigenous women to share the message that I have for you.

Our Indigenous women and two-spirit people were honoured and held an important place in the circle before the patriarchal colonial structures and forced assimilation began to dismantle our sacred teepee. In 150 years, Canada has managed to dismantle and try and destroy us as Indigenous people.

The teepee poles that were held together by our ways and teachings and wrapped with that sacred shawl had been taken away by the colonial structures impacts of colonisation, such as the power shift, the Eurocentric domination and the interruption of a way of being that was grounded in spirituality and connection to mother earth.

The erosion of identity and belief systems, ceremonies, cultural gatherings, and traditional knowledge sharing was outlawed. Traditional roles of men and women interrupted. The land dislocation and land imprisonment, restrictions of traditional use of land and the reserve system enforced. Christianize, civilise and so assimilate. Taming the Savage occurred with the

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residential school system, the 60's scoop with the intention and goal to kill the Indian and the child. Residential schools and the child welfare system: children being taken from their families and placed in institutions where they were unable to speak their language and experienced horrific abuses.

Although the last residential school has only recently shut down, today's main institution impacting families now is a child welfare system where our children are being taken from their homes, culture, communities, and families to unfamiliar situations, language, and silencing. Banning of the languages and residential schools and punishment if used caused of disconnection of language, which disconnect the culture in ways of being.

Power over and conditional rights, the Indian act adopted, status membership introduced our people not entitled to vote until 1960s. Loss of status on gender and loss of matriarchal rights. Prior to contact, women held a sacred, significant role in leadership and communities and nations. This clashed with the values of, and beliefs of the settlers. Settlers imposed their beliefs of gender inequality, ultimately breaking down their roles while devaluing our place power and purpose. Indigenous women are one of the most marginalised in Canada as seen with the disproportionately shameful rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and two-spirited people in this country.

The hidden truth: Canadian history is written and taught from a settler's perspective and has unfortunately become the dominant narrative. History in many of our institutions seems to be taught on values of discovery, settlement, advancement, and progress without acknowledging the trauma, segregation, destruction, and negative consequences of advances. Truth of our people is often silenced and hidden in the shadows of the state. And genocide: this represents the smallpox and other diseases, represents over 500 years of colonisation, assimilation legislation, legalising oppressive acts.

And the last phase of genocide is when the initiators step back, wipe their hands and say, "look what these people are doing to themselves." As minister Duncan Campbell Scott said, "our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada." Well, guess what, Mr. Scott, we're still here and Canada has not fully dismantled our people and our teepee.

We have within our teepee we usually have three that are tied together. And with those three that represents our grandmothers, mothers, and children. This is our foundation that is strong, that is too powerful to allow a system to destroy us. The poles that were dismantled, the ones that were taken from the teepee. Those are our sisters, our missing and murdered Indigenous women and two-spirit relatives and our children in a welfare system. We want to bring them home.

We want our teepee and the domain that represents our place in the circle to be acknowledged and to bring back our traditions and to not be pushed away anymore. Therefore "We desire a better country" for me is representative of this teepee and bringing back those poles so that we can wrap her once again so that our women will have their place in the circle and our people can heal. I ask you now to participate those that are in the audience and watching this video, imagine that you're holding one of those teepee poles that were dismantled. I ask you as I'm

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going to sing the strong woman song. And as I am singing, imagine you were in coming back to that circle, bringing that teepee pole and answering the question "We desire a better country." I will and acknowledge what it is that you will do to assist the process and putting back together our teepee so that we can work together to have a better country that we so desire.

[SINGING AND DRUMMING]

*Kinanâskomitin.*

HOST: Vanessa Tait is a Two-Spirit Cree woman from O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation in Northern Manitoba. She is a Queen Elizabeth Scholar and has a master's in Indigenous development from the University of Winnipeg. She spoke at The Walrus Talks: We Desire a Better Country in 2017.

And she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled, or virtually zoomed onto the stage at The Walrus Talks and The Walrus Talks at Home.

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