The Iroquois Great Law of Peace

After declaring its independence from Great Britain in 1776, the United States formed the first democratic nation in modern history. Its founding fathers, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson drew much of their inspiration for creating America's first Constitution from a people who had inhabited the lands of North America long before the great grandparents of the first colonists had ever been born. The architects of America's Constitution looked to the democratic features that had provided the rule of governance and law for the Iroquois Confederacy for more than 600 years.

During the 1100s, when England was ruled by a feudal monarchy, the Iroquois Confederacy was established in what is now northern New York State. At first, the Iroquois Confederacy comprised of five independent aboriginal nations, the Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, and Cayuga. Later the original members were joined by the Tuscarora nation, and became popularly referred to as The Six Nations, a name that remains with them today. The confederacy was a union of six culturally similar yet different tribes under one government on the basis of equality. Although each Tribe remained independent and possessed its own local self-government, a Great Council of Sachems (ruling members), representing the entire Confederacy were invested with supreme powers over all matters pertaining to the Confederacy. Council members were elected and were accountable to the mass of people they served in the forum of open public meetings. Furthermore, equality among people, including between the sexes, was an important foundation of government. This feature allowed women to play a pivotal role in the administration of government. Finally, an elaborate system of checks and balances was created to prevent any one person or group within the governing council from concentrating too much power in the hands of too few. These were all important democratic features that were historically well ahead of their time.

The following are excerpts from the Iroquois Great Law of Peace, the constitution of the Iroquois nation:

1. I am Dekanawidah and with the Five Nations' Confederate Lords I plant the Tree of Great Peace. I plant it in your territory, Adodarhoh, and the Onondaga Nation, in the territory of you who are Fire Keepers.

I name the tree the Tree of the Great Long Leaves. Under the shade of this Tree of the Great Peace we spread the soft white feathery down of the globe thistle as seats for you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords.

We place you upon those seats, spread soft with the feathery down of the globe thistle, there beneath the shade of the spreading branches of the Tree of Peace. There shall you sit and watch the Council Fire of the Confederacy of the Five Nations, and all the affairs of the Five Nations shall be transacted at this place before you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords, by the Confederate Lords of the Five Nations.

1. I, Dekanawidah, appoint the Mohawk Lords the heads and the leaders of the Five Nations Confederacy. The Mohawk Lords are the foundation of the Great Peace and it shall, therefore, be against the Great Binding Law to pass measures in the Confederate Council after the Mohawk Lords have protested against them. No council of the Confederate Lords shall be legal unless all the Mohawk Lords are present.
2. The Fire Keepers [Onondaga] shall formally open and close all councils of the Confederate Lords, and they shall pass upon all matters deliberated upon by the two sides and render their decision . . .
3. All the business of the Five Nations Confederate Council shall be conducted by the two combined bodies of Confederate Lords. First, the question shall be passed upon by the Mohawk and Seneca Lords and then it shall be discussed and passed by the Oneida and Cayuga Lords. Their decisions shall then be referred to the Onondaga Lords, (Fire Keepers) for final judgment.
4. In all cases, the procedure must be as follows: when the Mohawk and Seneca Lords have unanimously agreed upon a question, they shall report their decision to the Cayuga and Oneida Lords who shall deliberate upon the question and report a unanimous decision to the Mohawk Lords. The Mohawk Lords will then report the standing of the case to the Fire Keepers, who shall render a decision as they see fit in case of a disagreement by the two bodies, or confirm the decisions of the two bodies if they are identical. The Fire Keepers shall then report their decision to the Mohawk Lords who shall announce it to the open council.
5. If through any misunderstanding or obstinacy on the part of the Fire Keepers, they render a decision at variance with that of the Two Sides, the Two Sides shall reconsider the matter and if their decisions are jointly the same as before they shall report to the Fire Keepers who are then compelled to confirm their joint decision.

Rights, Duties, and Qualifications of Lords

1. A bunch of a certain number of shell (wampum) strings each two spans in length shall be given to each of the female families in which the Lordship titles are vested. The right of bestowing the title shall be hereditary in the family of the females legally possessing the bunch of shell strings and the strings shall be the token that the females of the family have the proprietary right to the Lordship title for all time to come, subject to certain restrictions hereinafter mentioned.
2. If any Confederate Lord neglects or refuses to attend the Confederate Council, the other Lords of the Nation of which he is a member shall require their War Chief to request the female sponsors of the Lord so guilty of defection to demand his attendance of the Council. If he refuses, the women holding the title shall immediately select another candidate for the title. No Lord shall be asked more than once to attend the Confederate Council.
3. If at any time it shall be manifest that a Confederate Lord has not in mind the welfare of the people or disobeys the rules of this Great Law, the men or women of the Confederacy, or both jointly, shall come to the Council and upbraid the erring Lord through his War Chief... The War Chiefs shall then divest the erring Lord of his title by order of the women in whom the titleship is vested. When the Lord is deposed the women shall notify the Confederate Lords through their War Chief, and the Confederate Lords shall sanction the act. The women will then select another of their sons as a candidate and the Lords shall elect him. Then shall the chosen one be installed by the Installation Ceremony.

Election of Pine Tree Chiefs

1. Should any man of the Nation assist with special ability or show great interest in the affairs of the Nation, if he proves himself wise, honest and worthy of confidence, the Confederate Lords may elect him to a seat with them and he may sit in the Confederate Council. He shall be proclaimed a Pine Tree sprung up for the Nation and shall be installed as such at the next assembly for the installation of Lords. Should he ever do anything contrary to the rules of the Great Peace, he may not be deposed from office-no one shall cut him down-but thereafter everyone shall be deaf to his voice and his advice. Should he resign his seat and title no one shall prevent him. A Pine Tree chief has no authority to name a successor nor is his title hereditary.

Names, Duties and Rights of War Chiefs

1. There shall be one War Chief for each Nation and their duties shall be to carry messages for their Lords and to take up the arms of war in case of emergency. They shall not participate in the proceedings of the Confederate Council but shall watch its progress and in case of an erroneous action by a Lord they shall receive the complaints of the people and convey the warnings of the women to him. The people who wish to convey messages to the Lords in the Confederate Council shall do so through the War Chief of their Nation. It shall ever be his duty to lay the cases, questions and propositions of the people before the Confederate Council.
2. If a War Chief acts contrary to instructions or against the provisions of the Laws of the Great Peace, doing so in the capacity of his office, he shall be deposed by his women relatives and by his men relatives. Either the women or the men alone or jointly may act in such a case. The women title holders shall then choose another candidate.
3. The lineal descent of the people of the Five Nations shall run in the female line. Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and the soil. Men and women shall follow the status of the mother.
4. When a Lordship title becomes vacant through death or other cause, the Royaneh women of the clan in which the title is hereditary, shall hold a council and shall choose one from among their sons to fill the office made vacant.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Which of the nations can prevent a law from being passed?
2. What are the responsibilities of the Onondaga Lords (Fire Keepers)?
3. Outline the decision-making process:
   1. First passed by:
   2. Discussed and passed by:
   3. Final Judgment:
4. Who selects the Lords? How do they get the right to select?
5. For what reasons can a Lord be deprived of his title?
6. What are the qualifications for being a “Pine Tree Chief”? What happens to his title after resignation or death?
7. What are the duties of the War Chief?
8. Who selects the War Chief?
9. Explain the role of women play in the Five Nations
   1. Family
   2. Property
   3. Government