

# Activists hope Chippewa strife spurs changes

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The continuing political spasms on two Chippewa reservations in Minnesota make Richard Nixon's Saturday Night Massacre look like a simple misunderstanding.

President Nixon triggered a constitutional crisis when he fired the Watergate prosecutor assigned to investigate his own administration. But imagine if Nixon had also been a member of Congress and could block a vote on his own impeachment.

Imagine if Nixon and his allies ran the presidential election and hand-picked the judges who ruled it fair.

The analogy is apt at the White Earth and Leech Lake res-

ervations, where officials convicted of corruption cling to office and their elected successors find it hard to take power.

It's frustrating for Chippewa reformers who have long criticized the version of democracy they were prescribed by the federal government 60 years ago — a single-branch system they say gives elected leaders too much power and permanence.

Reform advocates thought the

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chairman. The same was true at White Earth. Yet both treasurers, while they wait out the weeks until their sentencing, refuse to relinquish office or cooperate with the chairman-elect.

Reform advocates say the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe constitution is too vague to force the treasurers' ouster. The document states that an official convicted of a felony "shall" be removed from office — but adds that a removal requires a two-thirds vote of the band council. At White Earth and Leech Lake, the treasurers sway factions on the council to block the necessary margin.

Leech Lake member Dee Fairbanks looked to another constitutional provision that lets members petition the federal government for a recall election. Late last week the Bureau of Indian Affairs said she must first let the old tribal council read the petition. Many of the petitioners wanted their names kept secret out of fear of reprisal from the old guard.

"The constitution sends you in a loop," Fairbanks complained.

◆ **If non-Indians familiar** with U.S.-style democracy find this hard to fathom, they should remember that Indians had their own political structure before Europeans arrived.

Among the Lake Superior Chippewa, individual families traditionally retained great autonomy, and band leaders relied on the consensus of members. When federal officials introduced elective government in the mid-1930s, many Chippewa saw it as cultural imperialism.

Even though the feds were beginning to recognize Indians'

right to self-determination, "They still did not trust the traditional way of selecting leaders," noted Alex Tallchief Skibine, a law professor at the University of Utah. "They wanted to impose a Western European system — kind of like, 'We'll recognize you, but your government must be one man, one vote.'"

And even proponents of constitutional change disagree on the direction.

Longtime dissidents favor constitutional amendments to allow separation of powers and a clear ban on felons holding office. But others are looking to a return to tradition. On Leech Lake, Roxanne LaRose and a group of neo-traditionalists want to replace the strong reservation council with a grass-roots board governing by consensus.

And some critics of the establishment may resist a constitutional convention for fear it would lead to stronger central government, said Marge Anderson, chief executive for the Mille Lacs band.

This much is certain: Change is in the air now that Wadena, long the president of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, is out of the picture. The tribe's executive committee on Thursday pleased change advocates when it symbolically censured Daniel Brown, the convicted Leech Lake secretary-treasurer, and rescinded a dictate some said gutted the people's right to call a referendum.

"I think it's going to be a new era of honest and open government," said Clint Landgren, elected Bois Forte chairman in June. "The constitution is so outdated. In the future, hopefully, we can work on it."



DANIEL BERNARD / NEWS-TRIBUNE

Eugene "Bugger" McArthur (center), elected chairman of the White Earth Reservation in June, talks with Minnesota Chippewa Tribe officials Thursday. In the foreground are two who helped block McArthur's installment on the tribe's executive committee, Tony Wadena (left) and Paul "Poncho" Williams.

## Chippewa government in Minnesota

The bands in the inter-reservation association known as the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe have elective democracy, but not the type familiar to non-Indian Americans.

**With the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA)**, the federal government encouraged reservations — or coerced, say some reformist Indians — to begin electing central bodies. The feds wanted to know whom to deal with on financial matters.

Many tribes adopted constitutions written by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, though some resisted, retaining traditional political structures that operated by consensus.

Generally, a band with an IRA government elects a five-member **Reservation Business Committee** (renamed Reservation Tribal Council by some bands). The RBC is the executive and legislative body and appoints judicial officials for the reservation.

In Minnesota, six Chippewa or Ojibwe bands — Fond du

Lac, Bois Forte, Grand Portage, Leech Lake, Mille Lacs and White Earth — formed the **Minnesota Chippewa Tribe** and adopted an IRA-style constitution. The chairman and secretary-treasurer of each RBC sit on the association's executive committee.

In the early 1980s, Mille Lacs in east-central Minnesota adopted **separation of powers** — elected judges and distinct executive and legislative branches. Change was stymied at the other bands, however: Though a majority of band members voted in 1988 to call a **constitutional convention**, it never happened. Dissidents say tribal leaders squelched it to preserve their power; leaders say the culprit was a lack of motivation on the part of rank-and-file members.

Sources: *The Chippewas of Lake Superior* by Edmund Danziger Jr. News-Tribune interviews with Alex Tallchief Skibine, University of Utah law professor; Bureau of Indian Affairs officials; band chairmen; and dissidents.

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way was opened to a government overhaul in June elections, when incumbents at White Earth and Leech Lake were turned out thanks in part to federal corruption trials.

But the ensuing events — even as they highlighted foibles in the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe — showed the confederation of six bands is deeply divided on the question of reshaping its government.

Consider:

◆ **At White Earth Reservation** in Northeastern Minnesota, Eugene "Bugger" McArthur received the most votes in the June election for reservation chairman. The old chairman, Darrell "Chip" Wadena is in jail, convicted of stealing band funds and awaiting sentencing.

Yet resisters can reasonably argue that McArthur is not the chairman. A White Earth judge — appointed, as per tribe rules, by Wadena and the old reservation council — ruled the election void because of absentee ballot irregularities.

Technically, Wadena backers can argue that the case is still pending and therefore McArthur's swearing-in by non-Indian officials last month was premature. The confusion was deep enough that the umbrella organization for six bands, the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, couldn't decide whether to recognize McArthur as White Earth's chairman last week.

◆ **At Leech Lake Reservation** in north-central Minnesota, the band's secretary-treasurer was convicted of corruption charges this spring alongside the former