Glossary of Terms

Aboriginal peoples. The descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. Section 35(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982, states: “In this Act, 'Aboriginal peoples of Canada' includes the Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada.” These separate groups have unique heritages, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs. Their common link is their indigenous ancestry.

Aboriginal rights. Rights held by some Aboriginal peoples as a result of their ancestors’ use and occupancy of traditional territories before contact with Europeans or before British sovereignty in Canada. Aboriginal rights vary from group to group, depending on what customs, practices, and traditions were integral to the distinctive culture of the group.

Band. Defined by the Indian Act, in part, as “a body of Indians ... for whose use and benefit in common, lands ... have been set apart”. Each band has its own governing band council, usually consisting of a chief and several councillors. The members of the band usually share common values, traditions, and practices rooted in their language and ancestral heritage. Today, many bands prefer to be known as First Nations.

Band council or First Nation council. The band’s governing body. Community members choose the chief and councillors by election, or through traditional custom. The band council’s powers vary with each band.

Elder. A man or woman whose wisdom about spirituality, culture, and life is recognized and affirmed by the community. Not all Elders are “old”. Sometimes the spirit of the Creator chooses to imbue a young Aboriginal person. The Aboriginal community and individuals will normally seek the advice and assistance of Elders in various areas of traditional, as well as contemporary issues.

First Nation. A term that came into common usage in the 1970s to replace the word “Indian”, which many found offensive. The term “First Nation” has been adopted to replace the word “band” in the names of communities.

First Nation Education Authority. A First Nation Education Authority is comparable to a board of education. Most First Nations have an Education Authority, which is responsible for administering education for the community. It is responsible for hiring teachers and principals working in the community school(s), determines the curriculum to be used in the school(s), and negotiates tuition agreements with local provincially funded school boards when students have to leave the First Nation community to continue their elementary and/or secondary education.

First Nation governance. Refers to negotiated arrangements that enable First Nations to exercise greater decision- and law-making authority than is currently possible under the Indian Act. (The Canadian government refers to this process as “self-government”.) In Ontario, the governance arrangements that are being negotiated by Canada with First Nations will not be treaties; will not create new rights, such as hunting and fishing rights; and will not expand the reserve land bases of First Nations.
**Indian.** A term that may have different meanings depending on context. Under the Indian Act, it means “a person who pursuant to this Act is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian”. A number of terms include the word “Indian”, such as “Status Indian”, “Non-status Indian”, and “Treaty Indian”. Status Indians are those who are registered as Indians under the Indian Act, although some would include those who, although not registered, are entitled to be registered. Non-status Indians are those who lost their status or whose ancestors were never registered or lost their status under former or current provisions of the Indian Act. Treaty Indians are those members of a community whose ancestors signed a treaty with the Crown and as a result are entitled to treaty benefits. The term “Indian” was first used by Christopher Columbus in 1492, believing he had reached India.

**Indian Act.** Federal legislation that regulates Indians and reserves and sets out certain federal government powers and responsibilities towards First Nations and their reserved lands. The first Indian Act was passed in 1876, although there were a number of pre- and post-Confederation enactments with respect to Indians and reserves prior to 1876. Since then, the act has undergone numerous amendments, revisions, and re-enactments. The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development administers the act.

**Inuit.** Aboriginal people in northern Canada, living mainly in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, northern Quebec, and Labrador. Ontario has a very small Inuit population. The Inuit are not covered by the Indian Act. The federal government has entered into several major land claim settlements with the Inuit.

**Métis people.** People of mixed First Nation and European ancestry. The Métis history and culture draws on diverse ancestral origins, such as Scottish, Irish, French, Ojibwe, and Cree.

**Reserve.** Lands set aside by the federal government for the use and benefit of Indians.

**Traditional lands.** Lands used and occupied by First Nations before European contact or the assertion of British sovereignty.

**Treaty rights.** Rights specified in a treaty. Rights to hunt and fish in traditional territory and to use and occupy reserves are typical treaty rights. This concept can have different meanings depending on the context and perspective of the user.

**Tribal council.** A body that typically represents a group of First Nations to facilitate the administration and delivery of local services to their members.

Resources: Ministry of Education, First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework.