

Benjamin Franklin on Native American Government

By Denise Breton and Christopher Largent

In 1982, Bruce Johansen joined a number of other authors—beginning with Donald Grinde, Jr. and his 1977 book *The Iroquois and the Founding of the American Nation*—in pointing out that many of the ideals on which the American Republic was founded came from native peoples, particularly the League of Five Nations of the Iroquois (the Haudenosaunee). Johansen's book, *Forgotten Founders*, raised a firestorm of controversy, to which he replied in his 1998 book, *Debating Democracy*. An earlier reply had come from Jose Barreiro in a 1992 book of readings he edited entitled *Indian Roots of American Democracy*.

We admire Grinde, Johansen, and the many authors who are pointing out the contributions that native confederacies made to American ideals of governing. But it is in Barreiro's book that we found a brief but great quote from Benjamin Franklin, giving his views on Iroquois society. Like the Pawnee quote from Gene Weltfish, this one demonstrates the potential in human beings to create harmonious, egalitarian, and just societies—a potential we need to tap in the new century as we remake our own cultures.

Franklin wrote his observations on Haudenosaunee government in 1783, just four years before, as historian Robert Venables says, "he became the sage of the 1787 Philadelphia Convention" to draft the new Constitution. Here then is what Franklin thought of the Five Nations methods of government in those years before the Constitution was written (Barreiro, *Indian Roots of American Democracy*, pp. 91-92—we've modernized some capitalizations, punctuation, and spelling for ease of reading):

The Indian men, when young, are hunters and warriors, when old, counsellors; for all their government is by the counsel or advice of the sages. There is no force, there are no prisons, no officers to compel obedience or inflict punishment. Hence they generally study oratory, the best speaker having the most influence.

The Indian women till the ground, dress the food, nurse and bring up the children, and preserve and hand down to posterity the memory of public transactions

Having frequent occasions to hold public councils, they have acquired great order and decency in conducting them. The old men sit in the foremost rank, the warriors in the next, and the women and children the hindmost. The business of the women is to take exact notice of what passes, imprint it on their memories—for they have no writing—and communicate it to their children. They are the records of the council, and they preserve tradition of the stipulations in treaties a hundred years back, which when we compare with our writings we always find exact.

He that would speak, rises. The rest observe a profound silence. When he has finished and sits down, they leave him five or six minutes to recollect, that if he has omitted anything he intended to say or has anything to add, he may rise again and deliver it. To interrupt another, even in common conversation, is reckoned highly indecent.

How different it is from the conduct of a polite British House of Commons, where scarce a day passes without some confusion that makes the Speaker hoarse in calling to order; and how different from the mode of conversation in many polite companies of Europe, where if you do not deliver

your sentence with great rapidity, you are cut off in the middle of it by the impatient loquacity of those you converse with and never allowed to finish it.