



BC TREATY COMMISSION

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Says new chief commissioner

Treaty making is our obligation

Steven Point has spent almost his entire working life in the field called 'native rights'.

He knows that field, and he knows how important it is. His knowledge and strong desire to serve First Nation communities landed him the job as chief commissioner of the Treaty Commission in February of this year.

"Long, outstanding grievances and claims around the land question deserve to be resolved and First Nations deserve to get to a position where they can be self-sustaining, self-sufficient and self-determining," explains Point. "I know I can help in that regard."

Indeed, Point has been front and centre, working to resolve the many issues facing First Nation communities in BC since 1975 when he came to the table as chief of the Skowkale First Nation. Fifteen years as chief and another five as tribal chairman of the Sto:Lo Nation have given him strong views on native rights: what they are and why we need them.

"First Nations have been fighting for treaty rights since before the turn of the century," says Point. "We've been fighting in court. We've been fighting in demonstrations. We've been sending people to England. We've been sending people to Victoria, to Ottawa."

But until 1993 that fight had fallen on deaf ears, creating mistrust and social, political and economic unrest.

"Resolving these kinds of issue creates an atmosphere in which people can get on with the business of living their lives, rather than fighting to protect their rights. When you define rights, you reduce conflict and you create opportunities."

One of those opportunities is to build a brighter future for all First Nations and British Columbians. And that is why Point supports the made-in-BC treaty process.

"I think what treaty making is about is a pragmatic approach to complex problems that creates solutions that are meaningful to everyday people. Not just lawyers. Not just politicians, but to everyday people."

For First Nations that means much needed social change firmly rooted in their traditions and history and the values passed down by the elders. For British Columbians, it is the chance to move forward in a new relationship with First Nations.

And Point sees much of this hard work happening at the 44 tables around the province where the parties are negotiating treaties.

"More and more we need to recognize the movement we've seen since 1992 and recognize the tremendous distance we've come in 12 short years," argues Point. "Twelve years ago

there weren't any tables established. Now, we have all of these tables where people are negotiating governance and talking about land, justice, health, child welfare and revenue sharing."

"We only dreamed about these things 15 or 20 years ago."

What's needed to see treaties through is a mutual recognition of what everyone is striving for. To meet that need, Point sees an important role for the Treaty Commission as the independent keeper of the process: communication that ensures everyone has the information they need to make the best decisions possible.

So what is the new Chief Commissioner's first message?

"My message is that we shouldn't lose our commitment and our faith in the process of treaty making and relationship building in British Columbia. No matter how we look at it - socially, economically, politically - we have to resolve these issues. We must. It's our obligation to this generation, and we've got to do the best we can to achieve fair and just treaties."