

Forging Linkages & Finding Solutions A BC Treaty Commission Conference for First Nations

Grand Chief Edward John, First Nations Summit Task Group First Nations Political Panel – October 31, 2008

Thank you, good morning. To the Salish people, I thank them and acknowledge that we are on their traditional home lands, to our chiefs who are gathered here, to our elders, to the young people and to the organizers, the BC Treaty Commission. Good morning.

To the Treaty Commission, one of the really important functions it has is the ability to inform the public and to provide forums for public education. It's written in the mandate of the Treaty Commission, the legislation that set up the commission as well as the agreement preceding it.

I want to begin by acknowledging that I come from the northern part of this province. People further north from me say, "You're not really from the North, you're from the South." It's all relative. From the geographic centre of this province and at the watershed of three major rivers – the Skeena, the Fraser and the McKenzie River Watershed – and the convergence in the great plateau of the Interior, that has really served as a bread basket in a way through the forest resources to the province's economy. Those are my people who come from that part.

Even though I am from up there, I had a really good opportunity last night to see the opening of the Little House at Musqueam. To see the babies there, to see the elders there and to see, in this city of a million-plus people, that the people from that community, as well as many of the other Salish communities up in the Valley, over on the Island and south of the border, carrying on and recognizing the importance of their traditions, their practices and their cultures of who they are.

I think it's significant and it's really important that those relationships – forging of relationships – are not only between peoples but between generations as well. Between generations is really significant and it's important to know those relationships. I saw three or four little ones, just babies – one, two, three months old. The parents and grandparents made a point to bring those little ones in to introduce them to hearing the drums, hearing the songs, smelling the smoke, hearing the laughter, seeing the people dancing and seeing the individual people who are singing their songs.

I say that out of complete respect for what I see one part of our peoples in this province doing – forging relationships between generations. I heard one of the elders lamenting the fact that as he looked around he saw a declining number of elders in these places, mostly because the elders were going on. But we see the generations, and between the generations, how these relationships, these teachings, these beliefs are being carried on. It's fundamentally important to have that and to build other relationships in the community and between First Nation communities.

This small panel up here is really just a representative body of the fact that First Nations in this province agreed to come together, forging relationships with each other to make a greater impact amongst ourselves; to work together and find solutions that are common. When it comes to land claims the Comprehensive Claims Policy is at the very root of one of the reasons why we're together. We've undertaken, as all of the chiefs here know, many steps to find solutions between ourselves. Of course the children were the fundamental basis on which we started to come together in the first place, to find those common grounds.

On the 24th of October in *Indian Country Today*, a daily Indian newspaper in the U.S. that I read all the time, there was an opinion piece by Barack Obama on the Native American Indians. I know and you know Barack Obama is going to be the next president of the United States. I've never seen a document like this from any presidential candidate, nor a Canadian candidate for prime minister or provincial premier.

But here's a statement – it's a couple of pages long - that reads:

“And the truth is, few have been ignored by Washington for as long as American Indians. Too often, Washington pays lip service to working with tribes while taking a one-size-fits-all approach with tribal communities across the nation.”

“...My American Indian policy begins with creating a bond between an Obama administration and the tribal nations all across this country. We need more than just a government-to-government relationship; we need a nation-to-nation relationship, and I will make sure that tribal nations have a voice in the White House.

“I'll appoint an American Indian policy adviser to my senior White House staff to work with tribes, and host an annual summit at the White House with tribal leaders to come up with an agenda that works for tribal communities.”

In respect of treaties with Indian Tribes in the U.S. Barack said, “I believe treaty commitments are paramount law and I will fulfill those commitments as president of the United States. “

He begins by saying that Indians need more than just a government-to-government relationship. We need a nation-to-nation relationship. He concludes and talks about some of the quality of life issues, education, housing, and some of the things that are so fundamentally important here as well.

He says, “Where I grew up, there were not many black families so I know what it's like to be viewed as an outsider...You deserve a president who is committed to being a full partner with you; to respecting you, honouring you and working with you every day. That is the commitment I will make to you as president of the United States.”

I bring that out as an example of an approach and a policy and a strategy that I think is required in this country to forge different kinds of relationships and to recognize that there's an important historic foundation we have and to recognize that important foundation to build relationships on. Personally, I'm tired of hearing the dual nature of Canada, French and English.

Over the last number of years we've been hearing more about the 'third solitude'. We've heard that from the premier of this province, and we've heard that from the former prime minister about building and forging links, forging relationships.

The transformative change the previous government had talked about had a lot of buy in from our communities. There are a lot of questions, a lot of scepticism out there, but a healthy one at that. How do we build those relationships based on important fundamental principles? Personally, I don't see that with this new Conservative government, but we may have the opportunity. I'm mindful of the fact that historically we seem to have made more progress with the Conservative government than we've had with other governments. All you have to do is check the record to see that we have actually made significant and substantial progress.

I'm not suggesting that one party is better than the other; it's just to view some of the historic commitments and the historic changes that have happened, and where and how those have happened. This process began with a Conservative government, under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Of course there was the failed Meech Lake Accord and then there was the Charlottetown Accord that had a wide-sweeping recognition of Indian self-government in it.

In hindsight when I look back, if that package had been approved, and it had the political support necessary from the national government, from the provincial and territorial governments, and First Nations peoples across the country who were significant parts of that development. And it had that (support). Then the prime minister goes to another step to hold a national referendum where that particular package got defeated. Of course, they have unresolved issues. In Quebec many in that community still figure they're on the outside and they're not really a significant part of Canada. We see that as the only place in this country where you have a political party like the Bloc that holds a significant number of seats from that province in the House of Parliament.

I wanted to lay some of those big context pictures in place and come back to the issues of governance and economic development capacity. I like the line that Shawn used about the walking conflict.

In many of our communities we have traditional systems of government that are hereditary, that we know. It's not everywhere across this province. We also have elected council systems, the only form of government that the government of Canada formally recognizes. It was for that very reason that Delgamuukw and the Gitksan hereditary chiefs and the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs brought their important and famous case to the Supreme Court of Canada. It wasn't the elected chief and council who brought that litigation forward; it was the hereditary chiefs because they wanted to stand on what was truly theirs and they were able to tell their story from that perspective. We've seen fundamental ground shifts.

But we still don't see the governments say to the Gitksan or the Wet'suwet'en, "We fully recognize your form of government." There's a reluctance and even a refusal to go down that road, to go down that line. So inherent in that, you're going to find room for conflict within the community because of the roots that people stand on.

The economic development side of this is that our people need work. It's as fundamental as that. It's simple. Like anyone else, our people need work, we need a roof over our heads and we need to feed our families. Those are the three essential elements that everyone faces. This is an area I believe we need to pay far greater attention to in the work that we do.

As we sit in negotiating treaties in this province, I have to ask myself this: What is there in the treaties that supports and sustains our communities and our people? Why is it that we're involved in negotiating treaties and the resolution of treaty land claims in this province? Why are we doing that?"

We say for the betterment of our communities, to improve the lives of our people, to create opportunities, to be able to provide jobs, good education. We all want to see a better quality of life for our people. We say that to each other in our communities, but why we are negotiating treaties?

The question that you have to ask is if the treaties do that. Do the treaties provide that foundation? Our hope is that they do. That there's a full and complete recognition, a revenue sharing arrangement between governments and our First Nation governments, a recognition of the authority of tribal governments to allow for open, transparent governments in our communities, and to help our communities achieve the better quality of life that we all look for, for our peoples in our respective communities.

At the end of the day what I see is that – as in the words of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which create a set of standards – we don't set standards in this country. In this country standards are set. We call them policies. Those standards are largely arbitrary, they're always self-serving on the part of the government and they are largely unilateral. There have been few exceptions where there has been some engagement of First Nation peoples in standard setting.

So the UN Declaration and the emerging Organization of American States Declaration that's in the works – which Canada refuses to participate in – bring hope that we will see another set of standards. I'm mindful of the fact the Hul'qumi'num Group made their presentation to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to plead their case about their lands that were lost when lands were granted to an individual to build a railway from Nanaimo to Victoria. We see that right across this country with railways, including the initial railway that was built here, and how people were dispossessed but private companies enriched as a result of that process.

The last point I want to make I want to use the example of Cowichan this past summer. The ability to use those games (North American Indigenous Games) to build and forge relationships within and amongst peoples in the Valley – the Cowichan Tribes, the Cowichan peoples and the non-aboriginal peoples in that area of the province and area of Vancouver Island.

I was amazed to see the huge numbers – over 2,200 – including many, many non-aboriginal peoples who were there participating, opening doors, recognizing and understanding who the Cowichan peoples are. Some of them were even holding drums and singing, which in many parts of this province you wouldn't see, but there was an ability to have that.

As we want to move forward there are still incredibly large challenges that exist. The relationship with the governments, the Crown federally, the Crown provincially; it's still a challenge in relationship. We are by no means out of the woods on this.

Any progress we've made on this front in relationship with the Crown has not come willingly on their part. All of it can be attributed and traced back to the court decisions that First Nations in this province have won against government and/or private interests.

I want to conclude on that note and thank the Treaty Commission for convening this session as a matter of public education in this province.