



**For immediate release
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**CHIEF COMMISSIONER TELLS SELECT STANDING COMMITTEE TREATY
NEGOTIATIONS ARE WORKING**

VICTORIA -- The Chief Commissioner of the British Columbia Treaty Commission, appearing before the Select Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, said treaty negotiations are working but face major challenges in 1997.

Alec Robertson Q.C., said 46 First Nations representing more than 70 per cent of aboriginal people are involved in treaty negotiations in British Columbia and nearly half will be working towards agreements in principle this year. That compares with last summer when just 11 First Nations were negotiating agreements in principle.

"The Commission opened its doors just over three years ago, and from our perspective, the treaty process has performed well in that short period. A substantial majority of First Nations have entered the process, moved through the earlier stages relatively quickly, and are resolving their issues at the table, and not through blockades or litigation," said Robertson.

"Because of the time involved and the difficult issues being faced, some parties will publicly vent their frustrations with the process. This is to be expected and British Columbians should not conclude that the process is failing."

Agreements in principle are where demanding and complex negotiations begin. The chief commissioner said these negotiations will require considerable resources and expertise, both human and financial. In the Commission's submission, Robertson urged the Provincial government to provide the resources necessary to conclude treaties in a timely way.

"We are concerned the recent cuts to the Ministry of Forests and other ministries is depriving the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs of vital expertise," he said.

The Commission believes the situation will become critical if too many First Nations are sidelined by the provincial government's lack of resources, but must continue to incur debt in order to remain in the process. The Commission is taking the lead in examining this issue and will report on it in the spring.

Robertson concluded by saying, "Treaty making is an historic task. We are already realizing its benefits in the form of reduced confrontation and a more stable economic environment. This is a good beginning. Treaty making must be allowed to achieve its full potential."

The British Columbia Treaty Commission is the independent body charged with facilitating treaty negotiations in British Columbia.

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