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## OPINION-EDITORIAL

### NISGA'A FIRST NATION LEADER BECOMES PRESIDENT OF UBCM

**By George Abbott**

**Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation**

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The legal authority to make decisions and institute them on behalf of one's constituents is crucial to achieving sustained, positive economic and social change; this is as true for First Nations as for all other communities. As treaty First Nations take their rightful place in 'the family of governments', their voices become a greater part of the process of deliberations in political decision-making. The acclamation of Harry Nyce, Sr. of the Nisga'a First Nation to the position of President of the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) demonstrates that treaties bring real and tangible change.

The theme of this year's UBCM convention was: *A Province of Champions*. The convention's focus was on recent successes of local governments and encouragement to share in each other's pride and achievements. The Nisga'a and Tsawwassen First Nations – the two First Nations in B.C. that have completed modern day treaties – are now unique, constitutionally protected, self governing First Nations and are indeed champions enjoying the benefits of their hard work. All parties have also approved the Maa-nulth Final Agreement, which will come into effect within two years; and we are well advanced in negotiations to achieve treaty with a number of other First Nations.

The benefits of treaties are tangible and significant: decision-making powers, certainty over land and resource ownership, and representation on regional governments to name only a few. Tsawwassen First Nation Chief Kim Baird took her seat on Metro Vancouver less than a year ago and on Saturday, October 3<sup>rd</sup> the first Tsawwassen Legislative Assembly will be sworn into office. The Nisga'a, of which Mr. Nyce is a member, have had a treaty in place since 2000, at which point the Nisga'a Nation became a member of the Kitimat-Stikine Regional District.

Last week Tsawwassen First Nation received a \$6-million infrastructure grant from the federal and provincial governments that will translate into much needed jobs not only for First Nation members, but also for their neighbours. That economic stimulus money is available to Tsawwassen First Nation because of their status, through treaty, as a regional government. Having a representative on Metro Vancouver is an enormous advantage for Tsawwassen First Nation. There they can have their concerns and wishes heard in the region on issues that directly and significantly affect their members; and they have a vote when it comes to deciding those issues.

Whether they are participating in the treaty process or not, I believe First Nations today are more determined and hopeful about improving their standard of living than at any time since the Indian Act was passed. Undoubtedly there are still obstacles to overcome, but by becoming partners through negotiating final treaty agreements First Nations gain an equal standing with other governments in the province. It is only through partnership that we will realize the social and economic development needed in B.C.

I congratulate the new UBCM president, Mr. Harry Nyce, Sr., as he takes on this position that carries with it so much responsibility, and I look forward to following the development of the Nisga'a, Tsawwassen and Maa-nulth First Nations as they move forward as self-governing First Nations. I hope other First Nations will be encouraged by these milestones and will add their voices to those already at the treaty table. We can all be encouraged by the progress that has been achieved within the British Columbia treaty process and look forward to further success that will benefit First Nations and all British Columbians.