

OPINION EDITORIAL

WHY DO WE CELEBRATE NATIONAL ABORIGINAL DAY?

By Michael de Jong

Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation

June 19, 2007

(662 words)

For over a decade, Canadians have recognized National Aboriginal Day. It is worth measuring the progress that has been made and the many challenges that remain in our journey to realize true reconciliation between Aboriginal people and other British Columbians.

Two years into the New Relationship with First Nations, based on mutual respect, reconciliation and recognition of Aboriginal rights and title, government relations with Aboriginal people in B.C. are changing for the better – and for good reason.

The New Relationship is not a unilateral exercise. The Province is working closely with the First Nations Leadership Council (representing the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Summit) and the Métis Nation British Columbia to reach major agreements with the goal of improving the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people.

In 2005, when the Transformative Change Accord was signed, British Columbia and the First Nations Leadership Council committed to a specific goal – closing the gaps in economic opportunities, education, health care and housing that separate Aboriginal people from other British Columbians by 2015. Similarly, the Province signed the Métis Nation Relationship Accord in 2006 to close socio-economic gaps that separate Métis citizens from other British Columbians.

We are working hard to spring these accords into action in tangible ways. For example, Aboriginal communities will soon have jurisdiction over the education of Aboriginal youth; economic opportunities have been created through agreements representing millions of dollars in revenue sharing and investment in areas such as forestry, mining, and job training; and the Province launched a \$65-million Aboriginal post-secondary strategy to help Aboriginal students start, stay and succeed in post-secondary education and training.

Under the New Relationship, reconciliation of long-standing disputes with Aboriginal people is occurring on a historic scale.

In 2005, Premier Gordon Campbell spoke in the legislature about the consequences of shattered hope spawned by over a century of denial and negligence by governments of every stripe. Less than a year after that speech, the Province and the federal government settled a long-standing claim with Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations related to the land where the legislature is built.

This year, we set in motion removal of murals from the legislature that have long offended First Nations by depicting Aboriginal people in passive, subservient roles. After decades of impact from flooding of the Williston reservoir during construction of the WAC Bennett Dam in the 1960s, the Province and BC Hydro signed agreements with Kwadacha and Tsay Keh Dene that will compensate the First Nations for the destruction of their communities.

The Province negotiates treaties with First Nations to achieve certainty of land and resource ownership to stimulate investment and economic growth. Though it has been slow, progress is now being made. The Province has signed three Final Agreements, four Agreements-in-Principle, and is negotiating with about 110 communities (over half the First Nations in B.C.) at 45 negotiation tables across British Columbia. Next month, the Tsawwassen First Nation and the Huu-ay-aht First Nations will vote to ratify their final agreements.

Earlier this month, the federal government, the Province, and the First Nations Leadership Council signed Canada's first Tripartite First Nations Health Plan to improve health care at the community level and fully involve First Nations in making decisions to guide local health care services.

Significantly, Prime Minister Stephen Harper also announced the establishment of an independent body to resolve specific land claims. Many of the more than 800 claims are decades old and about half are in British Columbia. We welcome any progress and commitments that can be made to settle these long-standing issues that have frustrated government relations with First Nations in B.C.

To quote from the original New Relationship document, "We are all here to stay." Yes – there are still challenges and frustration on all sides. But over the past two years the New Relationship has already changed the basic context of government relations with British Columbia's First Nations and Aboriginal people fundamentally and irrevocably for the better.

For more information on government services or to subscribe to the Province's news feeds using RSS, visit the Province's website at www.gov.bc.ca.