

FIRST MINISTERS' CONFERENCE  
ON  
ABORIGINAL CONSTITUTIONAL MATTERS

OPENING STATEMENT

OF

GEORGE BRADEN

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Ottawa  
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Mr. Chairman:

The discussions which we are beginning today are of great historical importance to all Canadians. It was less than a year ago that Canada patriated its Constitution. The 17th of April, 1982 was a day of celebration in this country, but for the aboriginal people, patriation of the Constitution did not resolve the burning issues which they deem critical to their survival as proud and distinct peoples in the mosaic we know as Canada. Today for the first time, the aboriginal people, through their elected representatives, have been afforded an opportunity to meet with the First Ministers to address these matters which are of such grave concern to them.

This First Ministers' Conference is also significant in that it is the initial opportunity for the Governments of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories to participate in the Constitutional process. For the first time, due recognition has been given

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to approximately 70,000 residents of this country by allowing them, through their elected governmental representatives, to take part in a conference dealing with constitutional matters which affect them as Canadians. The Government of the Northwest Territories is pleased to be able to participate in these talks which are of such fundamental importance to the aboriginal people of this country. It would be my hope that this conference will mark the beginning of a trend that will see territorial participation in all future constitutional meetings.

Mr. Chairman, the Government of the Northwest Territories brings to this Conference a unique perspective. The majority of the residents of the Northwest Territories are aboriginal people and this fact is reflected in the composition of the Legislative Assembly. Because of its unique status, the Government of the Northwest Territories is able to bring forward a viewpoint different from that of any other government in Canada and <sup>it</sup> has a special responsibility to see that the case of the aboriginal people of the north is put forward. <sup>top</sup> I feel that the Government of the Northwest Territories will

be able to greatly assist in the resolution of these important issues which the aboriginal delegates have brought to the table for discussion.

Mr. Chairman, we are today embarking on a task that is of the utmost importance to the aboriginal peoples of Canada. As the aboriginal peoples of this country, the Indian, Inuit and Metis people are entitled to special rights over and above those enjoyed by other Canadians. The Constitution Act 1982 recognizes the special status of our aboriginal people and establishes this First Ministers' Conference as the vehicle to identify and define aboriginal rights for inclusion in the Constitution.

I recognize that the job before us is not an easy one. The aboriginal people of Canada have long sought a resolution of the complex issue of aboriginal rights. It will require a great deal of hard work both at this Conference and in the future to adequately address some of the more difficult issues. But I believe that it is of fundamental importance that the delegates approach

this conference with a spirit of understanding and co-operation. It would be my hope that during the course of the next two days, we will be able to accommodate divergent viewpoints and reach a consensus on matters of substantial importance to aboriginal people.

It is unlikely that the aboriginal leaders will achieve all they had hoped to accomplish in these two short days of talks. Time is limited and the agenda is comprehensive. But this conference should be viewed as a very positive beginning toward the final resolution of these long standing grievances which have been a source of frustration to the aboriginal people of this country since well before confederation.

Mr. Chairman, I believe that we, as the elected leaders of the governments of this country have a deep and abiding responsibility to address these issues in a meaningful way. The discussions which we undertake today will have far reaching implications for all of the people of Canada. For centuries, the aboriginal people of this country have suffered

injustices; we have been given the opportunity to seek to redress some of those wrongs. We have been entrusted with the obligation to work toward providing a just and equitable treatment of the rights of the aboriginal people and the entrenching of those rights in the Constitution. We must be cognizant of this responsibility and work with aboriginal leaders to reach a consensus on some of these matters today and to lay the foundation for a continuing dialogue in the future.

It is sometimes said that the true worth of a country may be measured by the way in which it treats its minorities. This is especially true when the minorities are the country's aboriginal peoples. The degree to which we live up to the commitment made to the aboriginal people in the Constitution Act 1982 will to a large extent reflect the moral fibre of this nation.

The aboriginal people have valid rights based on their usage of land from time immemorial and their aboriginal status. Past history has shown that in areas where treaties have been signed, aboriginal people often received inadequate

compensation for their land, and the rights which they acquired under those treaties have, in many instances, been eroded and diminished by legislation. To provide protection for aboriginal rights, they must be clearly defined and entrenched in the Constitution. Moral considerations demand that a liberal and generous interpretation be given to these rights once they are given constitutional recognition. Canadians will only feel exonerated for the past treatment of the aboriginal peoples when the rights of these people are recognized, respected and given the highest protection from further trespass.

Mr. Chairman, much valuable work has already been done by our Ministers and officials in preparatory meetings with aboriginal leaders and I believe that because of those efforts, all of us here today have a clearer idea of the meaning of the topics which the aboriginal people have put forward. The convening of this First Ministers' Conference has created a tremendous public awareness of the issues involved in the question of aboriginal rights. An agenda, jointly submitted by the three aboriginal groups has

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been recommended to the First Ministers as the working document of this Conference. We must now seek to build upon the previous accomplishments of our Ministers and officials, with a view to leaving the Conference tomorrow afternoon with an accord to take back to our legislatures which accord will serve as the basis for a resolution to provide for constitutional amendments in the area of aboriginal rights.

If our Constitution is to be a model for emulation and regarded with esteem by Canadians, it must provide for an honourable and equitable treatment of aboriginal rights. To assist the native people to maintain their dignity, to increase their self-sufficiency and to enhance their rights as a collectivity means extending to them constitutional guarantees and protection. We must approach these talks with fresh insights and an understanding of the goals and aspirations of the aboriginal people.

Mr. Chairman, the Government of the Northwest Territories looks forward to actively participating in the discussions at this conference. I am sure that with a spirit of good will, mutual respect and the political will to succeed, we can make substantial strides toward the resolution of these major issues which have been identified by the aboriginal people as being so critical to them.