

FIRST MINISTERS' CONFERENCE
ON
ABORIGINAL CONSTITUTIONAL MATTERS

OPENING REMARKS

BY

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INUIT COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL ISSUES

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OPENING REMARKS TO THE FIRST MINISTERS CONFERENCE ON
ABORIGINAL RIGHTS BY JOHN AMAGOALIK, CO-CHAIRMAN, INUIT
COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL ISSUES

MR. PRIME MINISTER, PREMIERS, MEMBERS OF THE TERRITORIAL GOVERNMENTS, FELLOW INDIAN AND METIS LEADERS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. THE INUIT COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL ISSUES (ICNI) REPRESENTS INUIT OF CANADA ON CONSTITUTIONAL MATTERS. WE HAVE COME TO THIS CONFERENCE ON THE PREMISE THAT WE HAVE ABORIGINAL RIGHTS. THE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES OF CANADA ATTESTED TO THIS AT THE TIME OF THEIR UNANIMOUS APPROVAL OF THE ABORIGINAL RIGHTS CLAUSE ON JANUARY 31, 1981. IT IS OUR SINCERE HOPE THAT WE CAN ESTABLISH A MORE EQUITABLE AND JUST CONSTITUTIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR GOVERNMENTS AND OUR FELLOW CANADIANS.

INUIT, LIKE OTHER ABORIGINAL PEOPLES OF CANADA, WERE EXCLUDED FROM THE FORMAL PROCESS OF FOUNDING THIS COUNTRY IN 1867. NEVERTHELESS, WE DO NOT CONSIDER IT TOO LATE TO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS WHICH WILL GUIDE CANADA'S FUTURE. THERE ARE THOSE WHO BELIEVE THAT CANADA IS A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE ENGLISH AND THE FRENCH. IT IS OUR BELIEF THAT THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLES MUST BE A THIRD PARTNER IF CANADA IS TO ENJOY POLITICAL STABILITY. WE APPRECIATE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO BE PRESENT HERE TODAY TO MAKE KNOWN OUR POSITIONS WITH RESPECT TO OUR RIGHTS IN CANADA'S NEW CONSTITUTION.

THROUGH PERSISTENCE, TENACITY, AND PLAIN HARD WORK, WE AS ABORIGINAL PEOPLES OF CANADA LAST YEAR ACHIEVED RECOGNITION AND AFFIRMATION OF OUR ABORIGINAL RIGHTS IN THE CONSTITUTION. IT NOW REMAINS TO DEFINE AND ENTRENCH THESE RIGHTS IN THE CONSTITUTION. INUIT ARE HERE AT THIS FIRST MINISTERS' CONFERENCE FOR THIS CENTRAL PURPOSE: TO IDENTIFY AND ENTRENCH ABORIGINAL RIGHTS IN PART II IN THE FORM OF AN ABORIGINAL CHARTER OF RIGHTS.

DUE TO THE TIME CONSTRAINTS OF THIS CONFERENCE AND THE EXTENSIVE NUMBER OF ITEMS ON THE AGENDA, WE WOULD PREFER NOT TO SPEND UNDUE TIME ON OPENING COMMENTS AND WOULD RATHER CONCENTRATE ON THE VITAL ISSUES THAT FACE US ALL AT THIS CONFERENCE.

ALL THOSE PRESENT KNOW WHO INUIT ARE; YOU KNOW THE VAST ARCTIC REGIONS WHERE WE LIVE, AND WHERE WE HAVE, IN FACT, HELPED CANADA ESTABLISH ITS SOVEREIGNTY BY VIRTUE OF OUR OCCUPATION. YOU ARE, NO DOUBT, FAMILIAR WITH OUR RICH AND LONG HISTORY IN THIS LAND OF OUR ANCESTORS.

WE THEREFORE PROPOSE THAT ALL PARTIES TO THIS CONFERENCE GET DOWN TO THE TASKS AT HAND WHICH ARE BEFORE US IN THE NEXT TWO DAYS.

WE CONSIDER THIS CONFERENCE NOT ONLY A HISTORIC OCCURENCE, BUT ONE VITAL TO OUR SURVIVAL AS A DISTINCT PEOPLE. WE RECOGNIZE THAT THE ISSUES WHICH WE CONFRONT ARE OFTEN DIFFICULT ONES, BUT WE ARE CONFIDENT THAT IF WE ALL WORK TOGETHER IN THE SPIRIT OF CO-OPERATION AND NATION-BUILDING, WE WILL ACHIEVE MORE AT THIS CONFERENCE THAN MANY OF US PERHAPS EXPECTED. THANK-YOU.