

FIRST MINISTERS' CONFERENCE  
ON  
ABORIGINAL CONSTITUTIONAL MATTERS

NOTES FOR A STATEMENT ON ABORIGINAL RIGHTS

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PREMIER OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

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TODAY IS NOT ONLY AN HISTORIC DAY FOR THE FOUNDING PEOPLES OF OUR COUNTRY BUT FOR CANADA AS A WHOLE. WE SEE HERE THE LEADERS OF ALL THE JURISDICTIONS IN THIS GREAT COUNTRY PREPARED FOR THE FIRST TIME TO DEAL SERIOUSLY IN THIS FORUM WITH ANY INEQUITIES OF THE PAST AND TO SET A FRAMEWORK WHEREBY ALL OUR PEOPLES NO MATTER WHAT RACE OR RELIGION CAN LIVE IN HARMONY IN THE FUTURE.

OUR PRESENT CONSTITUTION AND SHORT HISTORICAL PAST AS A COUNTRY HAS SHOWN US THAT WE HAVE THE BACKBONE TO ACCOMMODATE PROVINCES AS SMALL AS PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND AND AS LARGE AS ONTARIO, AS WELL AS THE FLEXIBILITY TO ADJUST TO CHANGING TIMES. IT IS WITH THIS PAST THAT THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLES OF THIS COUNTRY CAN HOPE FOR SOME SATISFACTION IN THE FUTURE.

OUR COUNTRY, LIKE OTHERS, IN TODAY'S WORLD WILL BE JUDGED ON HOW IT TREATS ALL ITS PEOPLE, AND ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH AN UNIQUE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL TRADITION. IT IS MY HOPE THAT THE ISSUES THAT EXIST TODAY WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLES CAN BE ACCOMMODATED THROUGH A POLITICAL SOLUTION WHICH WILL ENTRENCH THESE RIGHTS IN OUR CONSTITUTION. THIS WILL ENSURE THAT ALL CITIZENS OF OUR COUNTRY ARE TREATED FAIRLY AND WITH THE DIGNITY EVERY CANADIAN DESERVES.

WE MUST UNDERSTAND THAT RIGHTS ARE NOT DEPENDENT ON NUMBERS. THE NUMBERS OF OUR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IS SMALL. NEVERTHELESS, WE MUST BE AS CONCERNED WITH RIGHTS AS THOSE JURISDICTIONS WHERE NUMBERS ARE LARGE. THESE CITIZENS OF OUR PROVINCE HAD ANCESTORS HUNTING AND FISHING ON A SEASONAL BASIS 10,000 YEARS AGO AND ARCHEOLOGICAL RESEARCH HAS ALSO FOUND EVIDENCE THAT YEAR-ROUND SETTLEMENTS WERE ESTABLISHED 2,000 YEARS AGO. SO, AS YOU CAN SEE, THESE SMALL BANDS ARE OUR HERITAGE AND OUR MUTUAL RELATIONS IN RELATIVE TERMS HAS BEEN SHORT.

WHILE IT IS RECOGNIZED THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN THIS COUNTRY HAVE EXISTING RIGHTS UNDER EXISTING TREATIES WE ARE ALSO PREPARED TO CONSIDER THEIR REQUEST FOR A CHARTER OF RIGHTS. HOWEVER, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT WE AGREE AT THE OUTSET ON THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES THAT WOULD BE INCLUDED IN SUCH A CHARTER. ONCE AGREEMENT IS REACHED, I EXPECT THE RIGHTS TO BE FORMULATED FROM THE PRINCIPLES AND SUBSEQUENTLY ENTRENCHED IN THE CONSTITUTION. FURTHERMORE, IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT EVERY JURISDICTION KNOW THE EXTENT OF THESE RIGHTS AND THAT EQUITABLE TREATMENT IS RECEIVED BY ALL CANADIANS.

IN ADDITION, WE THINK THAT WHATEVER PROGRESS WE MAKE DURING THE NEXT TWO DAYS WITH RESPECT TO PRINCIPLES OR RIGHTS THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S SUGGESTION BROUGHT FORWARD AT OUR MINISTERS' MEETING BE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED. THAT RECOMMENDATION INCLUDED ENTRENCHING THE PRINCIPLES IN THE PREAMBLE TO SECTION 37 OF THE CONSTITUTION. WE BELIEVE THAT THIS WOULD

BE A SOLID INDICATION OF OUR INTENTION.

I UNDERSTAND THAT DURING THE MINISTERS' MEETING THE ABORIGINAL GROUPS SHOWED UNANIMITY ON EQUALITY FOR MEN AND WOMEN. WE ARE OF THE OPINION THAT THE PRESENT CONSTITUTION ADEQUATELY COVERS THIS TOPIC. HOWEVER, IT MAY BE ADVISABLE TO STRENGTHEN THIS SECTION BY AMENDING SECTION 25.

WHILE WE HAVE SAID ALL THIS ABOUT RIGHTS AND PRINCIPLES, ANY FINAL RESOLUTION WILL REQUIRE A CLEAR DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS. THE COMPLEXITIES OF THIS TASK ARE ENORMOUS AND THIS MEETING SHOULD ONLY BE CONSIDERED A MAJOR STEPPING STONE TO THE FINAL RESULT. IT WOULD BE FOLLY IN OUR THINKING IF WE THOUGHT THAT ALL EXPECTATIONS COULD BE FULFILLED AT THIS MEETING. CONSEQUENTLY, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND IS COMMITTED TO AN ONGOING PROCESS EITHER BY WAY OF CONSTITUTIONAL ENTRENCHMENT OR A POLITICAL ACCORD THAT ENSURES ALL TOPICS DISCUSSED ARE RESOLVED IN THE NEAR FUTURE BY WHATEVER PROCESS WILL BE DETERMINED.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR FOUNDING PEOPLES IN CANADA HAVE NOT BEEN WITHOUT PROBLEMS, BUT THEY ARE NOT WITHOUT HOPE. THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY ADD AN ASPECT TO THE CANADIAN CULTURE THAT BENEFITS ALL CANADIANS. THIS RICH CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION SHOULD BE REMEMBERED AS WE PROCEED WITH THESE DISCUSSIONS TODAY.

