

**Preparing for the Day After Treaty:  
The Nisga'a Experience  
November 14 - 16, 2007**

**The Honourable Steven L. Point, Lieutenant Governor of BC**

First of all, I'd like to thank the Treaty Commission and the Nisga'a for having me at their conference.

Dr. Gosnell, it's a pleasure to see you. Of course it's a pleasure to be here with all of you. We're living in tremendously interesting times in this province. We're seeing treaties finally progressing after the tremendous windfall of the Nisga'a Agreement. We see two more treaties now coming through. And we see for, perhaps not the very first time, but we see an Aboriginal person stepping into the shoes of the Lieutenant Governor of this Province.

I keep thinking back to all those speeches that I made about the Lieutenant Governors, including Joseph Trutch. And all of those times that we went to conferences and passed resolutions and went on demonstrations. I remember 1982 standing at the edge of the Anthropology Museum with George Manuel. George was making a speech about the implementation of Aboriginal title and rights into the Canadian Constitution and how it'd just been taken out. And I was standing there listening in awe of the words that he had to say and the attention that he was being given by the media. There were three or four cameras there. I was a student. I had long hair and I had one of those Billy Jack hats on. I'd been swept into this whole movement with the drums that were being played like they'd stepped off an old yellow bus. And the union of chief's staff and their many, many followers were drumming their way over to the museum and they were intent on taking the building over, which I found out once I got there that that's what they were going to do.

I was standing next to George and after making his final statement George said, "Now Steve Point wants to make a statement too." Oh, man I was looking at those cameras much like I'm looking at you today wondering what the hell am I going to say that's going to impress anybody.

But all I can think about saying is we've come a tremendous distance, you and I. We've seen a lot of failures, a lot of losses, but we're beginning to see some tremendous victories, as

well. I think we're in a threshold of a tremendous change in the attitudes, of not just government people, not just people in the churches but people at the everyday community level. We're no longer invisible, we're no longer that reservation, that reserve, those people. We're coming out of our communities and taking our rightful place in this country. A place that's been there for a long time, a place that we dearly deserve to take and one that, I think, is absolutely necessary to do so.

Treaties can and must reconcile the extension of sovereignty by the government of this country, to the aboriginal title of our people and their rights that have never been extinguished. But can true reconciliation happen just through treaties? Can a group of people sitting in a room negotiating the legal documents really bring two groups of people together that have such a tremendous history, a history torn by violence in many cases, a history wrought with poverty, ignorance and prejudice?

I remember my son when he went to school, he was five-years old and as a young man he didn't know who he was, where he was going to go in his life and what he wanted to do with his life. But after being at school for a couple of days he came back and he knew one thing, he said to me, Dad, I'm not an Indian. That's what he said to me.

How is it that we can send our children to school for just a few days and they come back feeling badly about who they are. It's because we still have gaps in our community that have not been filled. We still have barriers out there that have got to be broken down. Not just in our education system, but in our health care system and policing.

Treaties will unravel the tremendous dilemma that we've been in, in relation to the issue of land title and in relation to the legal status that we enjoy in this country under Section 35 of the Constitution. They will enshrine the jurisdictions that we ought to have in terms of our own self-determination to decide for ourselves who and what we want to be in the future. But can they mend the fences that have been broken down, the awful relationships that we sometimes have in our communities? Will they resolve the poverty that exists?

I looked at the word reconciliation, and then as my experience tells me as a lawyer, I used to get clients coming into the room wanting reconciliation, they want compensation, they

want to be put back to the position they would have been in had they not had someone smack their car or break their window.

Can Aboriginal people in this province be put back into the position they had been in, had Europeans not come? No. Can Aboriginal people be put back into the position they would have been in had they had treaties 150 years ago? No.

Treaty making in this country is 150 years too late to do exactly what would have been done then. We've got more than four million non-aboriginal people living in this country, and more keep coming everyday. Canada has a declining birth rate, that means that they are relying on immigration to support its economics.

It was said in a newspaper I was reading just the other day, the Globe and Mail, reported a statement by a politician, which really struck a chord for me. It said that the greatest resource of Canada isn't its natural resources but the untapped resource in Aboriginal people who have yet to achieve their full growth and development in terms of education.

Over half of our people are still not succeeding in high school. We're still dying too early in life and our suicide rates are way too high.

If treaties are going to get implemented in a way that I hope that we will want them to be, the health of our communities has to be the next order of business. We have to examine those issues in light of the achievement of treaties. We have to ask ourselves - what do we want for 20 years from now, for that seventh generation in 50 years? How do we reconcile the past so that we can take control of the present in light of the need that we have for the future generations? I think that's our challenge now.

True reconciliation can and must begin through treaties. But true reconciliation can only occur in my mind, after our communities have had an opportunity to heal from this colonial hangover that we've had for the last 100 years, after we've come to grips with our history, and after the government and the people have taken responsibility for everything that's happened in a way that reconciles our relationship.

There is a lot of talk about new relationships. Lord knows we've been wanting

one for a long time. But if we're going to dance with the devil we better pick the tune; we better have good shoes on; and we better know our partner.

It is possible to make changes. It is possible to dream and to improve our communities. But the concerted effort of a few leaders cannot equal a concerted effort of the entire community to achieve an entire community that is no longer impoverished.

These last few weeks for me as Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, has taught me one important lesson, that this office, although I'm viewed as the head of state, is non-political, non-partisan and independent of government. However, I can still speak to you from my heart.

But if there is something further that I can do, I welcome that opportunity. I welcome the opportunity to come and speak with you from time to time, but more than that if necessary, have a dialogue with you.

We are after all still a part of the greater picture, the larger country, the larger scheme of things. And I look forward to that dialogue. Thank you very much. Thank you for your time.