

OPENING WELCOME

Strengthening the Relationship

Canada-Aboriginal Roundtable

May 31, 2005

WILLIAM COMMANDA

Algonquin Elder

www.circleofallnations.com

I am honoured to be here with you all and to welcome you to traditional Algonquin Territory.

Mr. Martin, a year ago you commenced this dialogue with the Aboriginal Peoples of this land, and today, you are finalizing this phase of the process.

For the past forty years, I have followed the direction of my ancestors who welcomed yours to this land, and I have worked hard to create a *Circle of All Nations, a Culture of Peace*, to advance respect for Mother Earth and to advance racial harmony. I see today that Canada is engaged in one of the most interesting and difficult challenges of modern times ñ reconciling a huge array of diverse interests, peoples and cultures.

My peoples have been crushed for a long time and sometimes it seems like we beg for crumbs and acknowledgement at a table

where the world seeks its place. We see churches, cathedrals, synagogues, temples and mosques reflecting the great diversity of cultures here, but there is still no place where indigenous peoples can gather together in the spirit of unity that used to mark our heritage.

On April 17, 2004, I showed you the Three Figure Welcoming/Agreement Wampum Belt which signified the commitment of my ancestors in 1700 to share their country, grand natural resources and values with yours, with the land being held in trust for Creator and the unborn children. This was before my country was divided. Since then, our resources have been exploited, depleted and contaminated. The balance of life has been disrupted, and the centre can no longer hold things together. We have seen this in unprecedented fires last year and in floods this year.

I also said that the nation would not find true peace until the relationship with the first peoples of this land was healed, and we occupied our rightful position in the heart of this country. Sadly, it has been a year of great hardship, division and rancour. I have worried as we faced the threat of another division. We accept as a governing principle that one out of four key federal voices in this land can represent only its one constituency, and not the federation, and we have seen how dangerously close to dissolution this has drawn us, right on my doorstep. I have not been happy to see this strife and turmoil.

But my ancestors used to say the most nutritious walnuts emerge after the coldest winter.

In my mind, it is the indigenous peoples who hold the seeds for a vision of inclusion and collective sharing, respect and responsibility, and in our very existence we serve as the glue to bond a fragile federation together. We must work together collectively for a strengthened nation.

The National Capital Commission was established about a hundred years ago and given the responsibility to create a sense of nationhood within this capital city on what remains unsurrendered Algonquin Territory and the spiritual heartland of my peoples. For well over thirty-five years, Victoria Island has been identified as the site for an Aboriginal Centre. Yet nothing materialized during the terms of previous prime ministers.

With the commencement of the United Nations Decade for a Culture of Peace, I began to pursue the work of developing a vision for a fully inclusive indigenous peace-building cultural centre on Victoria Island actively.

Over the past three years, I have consulted with Algonquin communities in Quebec and Ontario, both on- and off- reserve; with non-status Algonquins in Ontario, and with the MÈtis of Quebec; with Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and with representatives of all the National Aboriginal Organizations, and National First Nations organizations; with Aboriginal organizations in the Capital region; and with non-Aboriginal peoples nationally and internationally, to develop a viable vision for this centre, and, I believe, they all strongly support this goal.

I have also engaged with representatives of government. Canadian Heritage has demonstrated its interest and commitment to this initiative with the provision of \$50,000 to advance its development. Thus, architectural plans for the proposed centre have been advanced to the B level, and a viable draft proposal has been negotiated with a respected consultant for the National Capital Commission, and it stands ready for advancing.

Further to my meeting with Minister Scott last November, I believe that the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada recognizes how important it is for psyche of the nation for the vision to manifest. The Minister of Finance is cognizant of this initiative. He has seen very recently, in the visit of the Queen, the First Nations University in Regina serve to reflect, both publicly and globally, the improved profile of the relationship between Aboriginal Peoples and Canada and the Queen.

This sentiment will only be amplified when the world come to Canada for the Olympics in 2010, if they find Aboriginal Peoples assuming a place of pride and inclusion in the heart of the country at the conclusion of the United Nations Decade for a Culture of Peace, showcasing Inuit, MÈtis and First Nations.

The Queen's gift to the First Nations cements the acknowledgement of the sacred trust inherent in the relationship that the First Peoples of this land share with the monarchy; this linkage is formalized in the role and responsibilities of the Governor General of Canada.

I have met with Her Excellency on three occasions to discuss the vision for the Aboriginal Centre:

In 2000, at the *Circle of All Nations* International Millennium Peace Gathering, to broker this idea;

In 2002, to apprise her and the Chairman of the National Capital Commission, of developments to date; and

Most recently in November 2004, to present her with the developed proposal.

I am encouraged by her interest and support.

Likewise, I have also met with Alex Himelfarb, Clerk to the Privy Council Office and Secretary to the Cabinet, and many other senior federal bureaucrats and ministers. The Aboriginal Caucus of the Liberal Party, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Mayors of Ottawa and Gatineau, and MPs such as Ms Ethel Blondin-Andrew, Mr. Ed Broadbent, and Elijah Harper and others are also aware of and have expressed great interest in this initiative. Easily a thousand others have signed petitions in support of the vision.

I am told we only need the political momentum to galvanize us into action. Mr. Martin, you have the power to do take this action as fulfillment of the sacred trust and obligations to the First Peoples.

Since the commencement of your term in office, you have demonstrated a commitment to forging a new relationship with Aboriginal Peoples on behalf of the peoples of the land. I am greatly encouraged by your leadership and courage in announcing to the country that its relationship with Aboriginal peoples is of

crucial importance to the federal government, first in the inclusion of Aboriginal ceremony at your investiture, then in establishing of the Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat, and finally in conducting these Roundtables.

The concrete manifestation of this commitment needs to be visible to the country at large, the original settlers who need to reconcile with First Peoples, and the newer immigrants, who have very limited knowledge and awareness of us. At the same time, it must contribute to strengthening Aboriginal Peoples individually and collectively. This commitment can be made evident and visible in the endorsement of the vision for Victoria Island.

This would constitute the tangible, public expression of the commitment of this government to the First Peoples. I continue to pray for the materialization of this work during my lifetime.

I have faith that you will find the strength and demonstrate the leadership to take just and honourable action on this file. I am available to discuss this matter further with you and your colleagues at any time.

On June 21, I shall be hosting the fifth annual Gathering of Nations Pipe Ceremony at Victoria Island to continue my prayer and work for all people. June 21 was identified as Indian Day in 1945 by native activist Jules Sioui; a few years ago, the former Governor General formally recognized the date, and today, many join in this celebration of National Aboriginal Day.

I invite you all to join us on June 21. I am sure you will be heartened when you see the multicultural face of Canada join Aboriginal Peoples in celebration on the ancient spiritual meeting grounds of my ancestors, and you will see that when we learn to come together with *one heart, one mind, one love and one determination*, the seeds of peace-building can and indeed shall blossom and embrace all.

Megwetch!

William Commanda