

SPEECH BY
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***ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS
OF QUEBEC AND LABRADOR***

TO THE COLLOQUE

LE TERRITOIRE ET LES AUTOCHTONES

ORGANISED BY

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Le territoire et les Autochtones
Speech by AFNQL Regional Chief Ghislain Picard

Greetings – Wachay – Sekon and Bonjour!

I wish to recognize the drum (if there is one), the Elders and the Mohawk Nation whose traditional territory we are privileged to be on today.

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Nitassinan, Ganienkeh, M’ikma-Agi – Anishnabe-Aki
– Iiyiyuuschii

Are any of you familiar with these words?

Lanaudière, les Laurentides, la Côte-Nord, la Gaspésie – I am sure you are all familiar with those terms, what they refer to.

Why are most of you familiar with the latter but not the former?

After all - your ancestors were very familiar with them.

They are the Innu, Mohawk, M'ikma, Algonquin and Cree words for our respective territories. And the other 6 First Nations in Quebec also each have their distinct languages and words for their traditional territories.

My name is Ghislain Picard. I am the Vice-Chief of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador. I represent 42 communities that form the 11 distinct First Nations cultures and languages in Quebec and Labrador.

Our identities as First Nations – the way we see ourselves – the way the Creator made us – are tied directly to the land, to the territory – the theme of this conference.

Many of you who identify as Quebecois and/or as Canadian are proud of your country and your economy is tied largely to the land.

But most of you also draw the roots of your identity from the “old country”.

Our histories and our identities are here – on this territory.

I challenge you to remember at least one of those terms. They are essential to the future of Quebec. Your kids will be learning about them.

Again - Nitassinan, Ganienkeh, M’ikma-Agi – Anishnabe-Aki – Iiyiyuuschii

[There will be a quiz at the end.]

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When we talk about our territory, First Nations territory, we talk about our identity and our relationship to Quebec and to Canada.

The two main messages I have for you today is that our identities as First Nations, and thus our future as distinct Peoples, are tied to the land – you cannot divorce it or separate it from the land -

And -

Our relationship to Quebec and to Canada must be finally clarified to our satisfaction and according to our rights. I am referring to the legal title to the territory, jurisdiction, harmonization of laws and a share of the natural resources and the profits made from their exploitation.

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Ladies and gentlemen, to help me make my point, I ask rhetorically – what is the harbinger of our futures as distinct Peoples?

It could very well be First Nations hunting and fishing lodges – like the one owned and operated by of the people of La Romaine - Unamen Shipu.

It used to belong to non-Natives but for the last several years it has belonged to the Innu of Unamen Shipu. It employs 20 people, many of whom are Innu.

It operates as a business and regularly hosts Canadians and Americans who travel far to partake of its services and to use the territory.

The Innu are now the owners and managers, not just the guides and caretakers.

The Innu are not the only First Nation to run such lodges. Over the last 15 years or so, several First Nations in Quebec have either established new lodges or taken over existing ones.

Why do I refer to hunting lodges as the predictors of our futures? Because they are the leading edge of a trend – a trend that marries First Nations traditions and values with the requirements of a cash economy.

Although they focus on hunting and fishing, they are more than that. They incorporate our values. They use the territory and its renewable resources.

They are also what trapping was to our ancestors shortly after first contact several hundred years ago. Trapping became an industry that combined our ancestors' talents with available resources and filled a market need. Today's hunting lodges do the same.

But commercial hunting and fishing lodges owned and operated by First Nations do not only carry a prophetic element, they also have a very symbolic meaning. I will get to that later.

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But as we plan for the future, hunting and fishing lodges are only the beginning. Our leaders and business people are involved in all kinds of enterprises, projects and development plans.

And as many of you know, the opportunities for most of our First Nations in the mid-North and North are largely in primary industry. We now have plans and projects, for example, in small hydro-electric development, wind power and forestry, to name a few.

The self-reliance of our people in most of Quebec, like that of most Quebecois North of the St. Lawrence valley, is tied to the exploitation of the territory.

I have made the general case that our identities are tied directly to the territory. There is no doubt our continued existence as distinct people is tied to the land. But what hurdles are in our way?

Well, that brings me to my second key message today.

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The relationship between our Nations and Quebec and Canada has much unfinished business that hampers our economic development. Land title, jurisdiction over the land and a share of the profits and benefits from exploitation of the resources is not clear.

Those issues have been settled, at least in theory, with the Crees and Naskapi Nations but not with the Algonquin, Innu, Atikamekw and Mi'gma Nations. Indeed, the Mohawk will tell you that despite what the governments and the courts have said, those same questions remain unresolved with them as well.

Although the territorial question has been resolved with the Crees and the Naskapi, and it is well on its way to being resolved with many of the Innu, there are no negotiations with many of the other First Nations whose aboriginal title remains intact.

What are the barriers and challenges?

The federal comprehensive claims policy is the largest barrier. But there are also problems with exploitation continuing on our territories without our consent and without our input.

The federal claims policy is the main reason the Innu negotiations have been dragging on for more than 25 years. Many Chiefs of the other Nations not yet in negotiations tell me that they and their people will not enter negotiations until the policy fully respects and recognizes title – not trade it off for money and some type of legislated right. They see no compelling reason aboriginal title shouldn't be fully recognized.

And the First Nations indebtedness incurred to negotiate is unacceptable to many First Nations. Instead, why not give a share of natural resource exploitation up front to First Nations who can then use those funds to support their participation in negotiations?

The Supreme Court decisions in Haida and Taku now require consultation and accommodation of First Nations aboriginal and treaty rights where they would be affected and before resource exploitation occurs. But the details on how that is to happen are

largely determined by the Quebec government instead of through negotiations. It does not have to be that way.

More recently, Quebec announced it would devolve much of its land management authority to MRC's. It did so without a prior word or conversation with First Nations.

Unilateral actions such as those are not the way to improve relations.

Nevertheless, First Nations continue to press Quebec and Ottawa to deal fairly and appropriately with us on these issues that are fundamental to our futures and to our distinct identities.

A major First Nations Socio-Economic Forum is scheduled for late October, 2006 in Mashteuiatsh. Canada, Quebec, the First Nations and leaders of Quebec's civil society will try to hammer out

commitments to improve the lives of First Nations people for the coming years. Although it will deal with programs and services, it is the chiefs' position that it must also address the lands and resources barriers that I have described.

Premier Charest was in Laval about a month ago speaking at a First Nations reception leading up to the Forum. His words gave us some faint hope for change. He said – and I paraphrase him – “it is important for Quebec to enter into partnerships with First Nations because we share the territory – because we are brothers and sisters”.

His federal counterpart, Minister of Indian Affairs Jim Prentice, spoke positively about the Forum but we await more specific commitments from him.

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If we are going to maximize the benefit from the territory for all of us – for Quebecois – Canadians and First Nations – we better find a way to create and clarify our relationship.

- The legal, social and political relationship.
- One that shares the land equitably.
- One that shares the resources from the land fairly and takes care the land so that it will sustain us collectively.

And that has not happened yet.

I congratulate the organizers of this conference. Events like this can only help to push governments to improve their policies so that finally, all First Nations, Quebec and Canada can negotiate a clarified relationship.

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In closing, I refer you back to the First Nations hunting and fishing lodges like the one at La Romaine Unamen Shipu.

They are tangible advancements while being symbolic.

They are symbolic of the history of our relations with the newcomers. At the time of first contact with explorers like Jacques Cartier, our people welcomed the new arrivals, guided them in the new world, fed them, showed them how to hunt, build shelters and generally cared for them. That is almost exactly what First Nations hunting and fishing lodges do today.

What does it symbolize for the future for First Nations? Does it mean we are doomed to repeat history where we will be gradually limited to minor roles, ignored and the remainder of our lands and resources will be taken from us and our identities eroded?

Or does it foretell of a renewal where we will once again be self-reliant, where we will manage and control our development using

our resources from the land – while experiencing good relations with our neighbours?

The First Nations will not leave anything to chance. We will act to control our own destiny, which means we will assume greater control of Nitassinan, Ganiienkeh, M'ikma-Agi, Anishnabe Aki, Iiyiyuuschii and all of our Nations' traditional territories.

Thank you and have a great conference.