

Signed and sealed but delivery still years away

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Inuvik (Apr 25/03) - An agreement that will lead the way to a system of government that has never been tried before was signed here, last Wednesday.

The Gwich'in and Inuvialuit self-government agreement in principle outlines a system of government in the Beaufort Delta that will represent regional powers to the two aboriginal groups and all others who live here.

The agreement was initialled Oct. 3, 2001, and was scheduled to be signed June 21, 2002, but Gwich'in chiefs refused to support the document over their disagreement on a section that called for the dissolution of the Gwich'in bands. To rectify that problem, negotiators have worked with the chiefs.

The signing ceremony was held at the Midnight Sun Recreation Complex with entertainment provided by the East 3 Reelers, who jiggled with all the signatories. A feast followed.

The event began with speeches from co-hosts and negotiators from the Inuvialuit and Gwich'in.

Gwich'in negotiator Lawrence Norbert dedicated the signing for Charlie Snowshoe and other elders who died before they could see the completion of their work.

"They have certainly paved the way for us," Norbert said. "We owe them our gratitude."

Norbert said the time has come for the people of the Beaufort Delta to be "masters of our own destiny, rather than wards of the state."

Norbert was one of the students at the leadership program in Fort Smith under the guidance of Father Pochat who told his students:

"Don't be afraid -- go for it, whatever you do."

Fred Carmichael said the day called for celebration, but also warned that there is a long way to go and all the people of the region need to work together.

"We have to put our petty jealousies aside," Carmichael scolded. "Let's be straight out about it; we are having trouble working within our organizations."

He harkened back to when he was a child in Aklavik when the Inuvialuit, Gwich'in and "the white trappers" all worked together.

"They all shared the land in harmony and they got along with one another very well," he said. "Why? Because in those days, they needed one another and they depended on one another."

"You need one another today, just as much as you did back then."

Nellie Cournoyea, chair and CEO of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, congratulated the people on their determination in seeing the deal this far.

Cournoyea held up elders Annie Goose and Jane Charlie as examples of the strong people who set down the roots for the new generation.

"Those roots are strong and those roots will make sure that what ever we do and the accountabilities that we take in signing this document today are the right ones," Cournoyea said.

She said there is no shame in difference of opinion and how in Southern Canada, it's called a "great debate," but when aboriginals have differences, "they're fighting."

"Debate is good and different opinions are good," she said, adding that people should not be fearful of speaking their minds, because honesty will lead to the right path.

Robert Nault, minister for Indian and Northern Affairs, said the Aboriginal groups should be congratulated in the achievements and said the region has much to look forward to.

"When we consider these positive achievements along with the exciting resurgence in resource developments in the region and the partnerships they offer, we can feel very confident about the future of the Beaufort Delta," Nault said. "I look forward to coming back to sign the final agreement very soon."

Premier Stephen Kakfwi recalled the early days of the Indian Brotherhood and the dream of Aklavik's Charlie Furlong to establish a "Denuit council," that would bring together the groups as one voice.

"We thought that was pretty impressive and progressive thinking at the time," Kakfwi said.

The strength and courage of the Inuvialuit and Gwich'in to secure land claims

"In the '70s, some of us said, we're all going to get our land claim agreements and go back to our homes and life was going to be pretty good," he recalled. "We were young and foolish, to say the least. As we're starting to acknowledge, the more we do, the more there is that needs to get done -- it doesn't get any easier."

Beaufort Delta Self-Government team has negotiated the following areas:

- \* Culture and language
- \* Child and family services
- \* Early childhood education
- \* Education
- \* Training
- \* Health
- \* Income support
- \* Justice and policing
- \* Guardianship, trusteeship, wills and estates
- \* Local government operations

Still to be negotiated:

- \* Housing
- \* Marriage
- \* Economic development
- \* Tourism
- \* Roads and traffic
- \* Tourism

The Beaufort Delta Regional Council:

- \* Replaces four bands and eight municipal governments.
- \* Represented with one head councillor each from Inuvik, Aklavik, Tuktoyaktuk, Sachs Harbour, Holman, Paulatuk, Tsiigehtchic and Fort McPherson.
- \* One head regional councillor
- \* Regional councillor will be elected by all voters
- \* One Gwich'in and one Inuvialuit councillor

Community Council:

- \* 50 per cent representation for Gwich'in in Gwich'in communities
- \* 50 per cent representation for Inuvialuit in Inuvialuit communities.
- \* In Inuvik, council will be 25 per cent Gwich'in, 25 per cent Inuvialuit and 50 per cent at large.
- \* All residents will nominate, run and vote for 50 percent of council.