



## OPINION EDITORIAL

### NEW DAY MUST FINALLY DAWN FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

**By Tom Christensen**

**Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation**

June 21, 2006

(914 words)

On June 21, British Columbians join Canadians across the country, in all their diversity, to celebrate National Aboriginal Day. In communities large and small, urban and rural, Aboriginal people will share their vibrant culture with their non-Aboriginal neighbours. There will be parades, songs, dances and smiles. There is much to celebrate.

It is appropriate for Canadians and British Columbians to acknowledge on National Aboriginal Day that too often the relationship between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people has also been confrontational, tragic and sad.

Premier Campbell summed up the essence of our history with the Aboriginal people of British Columbia when he told the legislature last month that we have seen the consequences of shattered hope spawned by over a century of denial and negligence by governments of every stripe.

We see those consequences in the social and economic gaps that still separate many Aboriginal people from the quality of life enjoyed by other British Columbians. It is time for a new day to dawn for Aboriginal people in this province and this nation. But the inertia of history is considerable. Attitudes from another age still linger beyond their day. It's time to end the neglect and stop the condescension that for too long dominated the way governments have regarded Aboriginal people.

In British Columbia, we are determined to forge a better path forward. Last November in Kelowna, the premiers from all of Canada's provinces reached consensus on working to close the economic and social gaps separating Aboriginal people from other Canadians. Premier Campbell called it Canada's moment of truth, heralding a New Relationship with Aboriginal people based on respect, recognition and reconciliation of Aboriginal rights. British Columbia signed the Transformative Change Accord with the federal government, committing us over the next 10 years to closing the gaps between First Nations and other British Columbians.

Earlier this year, we created the \$100-million New Relationship Trust, to provide significant resources to help First Nations to develop skills and capacities that will enable them to build a better standard of living for themselves and their children.

We support the success of Aboriginal students in our schools to empower Aboriginal youth to fully participate in the economic growth we are seeing in British Columbia. We've signed over 100 forestry agreements to provide revenue-sharing and access to timber for First Nations to create economic opportunity.

We reached an agreement with the First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Working Group to focus funding on the establishment of a First Nations Forestry Council, to implement wildfire management, undertake research, and do the long-term planning needed to help communities cope with the impact of the infestation. We've also funded training programs for Aboriginal people in mining and shellfish aquaculture, and supported First Nations in land use agreements impacting the development of natural resources.

We continue to make unprecedented progress with treaty negotiations to bring certainty over the ownership and use of Crown land and resources. There are over 100 First Nations involved in treaty negotiations across B.C. and we are closer to signing final agreements than ever before.

Under the vision of the New Relationship, our government is working closely with the First Nations Leadership Council, representing the First Nations Summit, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs and the BC Assembly of First Nations. Never in British Columbia's history has there been such a focused effort and commitment to work hand-in-hand to include First Nations in the development of government policy.

We signed the Métis Accord that recognizes a relationship with the Métis community in B.C. The accord acknowledges the influence of Métis people on the history of British Columbia and their emergence as a people with their own language, culture, and traditions.

These agreements and joint projects that create opportunities are important, but the New Relationship goes farther because it includes respect and recognition. The Aboriginal people of British Columbia deserve respect and recognition. Repatriation of a totem pole carved by the Haisla people from Kitimat is a timely event that shows why.

In 1929, the totem pole was removed from a Haisla village to a museum in Sweden. The Haisla erected the pole to commemorate rebirth after a deadly smallpox epidemic. Others brought the smallpox to the Haisla. Others took away their pole. Dedicated to reclaiming the totem, the Haisla led a successful repatriation campaign, and after 77 years, the pole returned to British Columbia last March. The Haisla persisted because they knew they were right to reclaim their sacred totem pole.

Today, on National Aboriginal Day, Premier Campbell and I are joining with the Haisla, the First Nations Leadership Council and the Ambassador of Sweden to welcome the pole back to British Columbia. From Vancouver, it will go home, scheduled to arrive in Haisla territory on Canada Day.

The successful repatriation of the Haisla pole is an accomplishment that could only have been made by a proud, vibrant people determined to triumph over adversity. It symbolizes the enduring strength and power of Aboriginal culture in British Columbia. It is a culture that has earned recognition. It is a culture that deserves respect. The repatriation of the Haisla pole tells us that anything is possible if we continue to do what we know is right. It gives us new hope that if we want it to happen, a new day that embraces reconciliation will finally dawn for all Aboriginal people and British Columbians. On National Aboriginal Day, we celebrate our determination to move forward together toward that new day.

For more information on government services or to subscribe to the Province's news feeds using RSS, visit the Province's website at [www.gov.bc.ca](http://www.gov.bc.ca).