

**Remarks on the Release of the  
NSHRC's Aboriginal Framework Release**

By

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Thursday, October 11, 2007  
1:00 p.m.  
Membertou Trade and Convention Centre  
Membertou NS

Good afternoon everyone. I want to extend sincere thanks to Dr. Fred Wien, Carla Moore and Tuma Young for the excellent report they have completed for the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission.

I also want to thank the chiefs and councils of Nova Scotia's thirteen band communities and all the individuals and organizations that agreed to meet with Dr. Wien and his colleagues as they prepared this report. Your contributions have been invaluable to creating this action plan for the Commission. Our challenge now is to match your sign of good faith by moving forward and implementing the steps outlined in the conclusion of the report.

The release of this report marks a major step in the development of the Commission's relationship with First Nations in Nova Scotia. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this is a beginning for that relationship.

The courage to move forward with this initiative does not rest with me. That courage was exemplified by my predecessor in the role of Director and CEO, the Honourable Mayann Francis, who is now Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia. I would be very negligent if I did not acknowledge her leadership in this context this morning.

One of the first meetings Her Honour had about proceeding with this project was with Chief Terry Paul of Membertou and Human Rights Commissioner Sister Dorothy Moore. She wanted to meet with them not to tell them what the Commission was doing, but to seek their input and to a great extent their blessing before going forward to engage the Mi'kmaw communities. She also spoke with Chief Lawrence Paul, who at that time was head of the Assembly of Nova Scotia Chiefs, again to seek his input and his blessing before going forward.

I am sorry that Chief Paul was not able to be with us today as the Commission reports back to the public on this initiative here at Membertou. In a way, it would be like coming full circle if he was. But I can assure you that the dialogue with the Mi'kmaw people does not end here. It has only just begun and I hope to be able to carry forward with Her Honour's commitment to base that dialogue on respect for the unique place of the Mi'kmaw people in the history of what European settlers have called Nova Scotia, but which has been known for much longer as Mi'kma'ki.

Dr. Wien and his colleagues have succeeded in developing a road map which can lead to a more productive and effective interaction between the Commission and Mi'kmaq and other aboriginal people. It underlines the importance of bringing clarity to the human rights process and working to improve the Commission's understanding of First Nations' approaches to dispute resolution.

What we do not need is a lot of rhetoric, so I am going to be very clear in our response to this report. I am here today to indicate that the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission accepts the advice that is being provided to us by Dr. Wien, Ms. Moore and Mr. Young. What we can do immediately will happen quickly. What will require more time

and more discussion with other agencies and First Nations, we will begin planning to undertake in the immediate future.

The first and most important step for the Commission will be acting on the report's recommendation to hire two new Human Rights Officers of aboriginal heritage. The Commission will begin the process for recruiting these new staff members immediately with the intention of having them begin their work by the start of the new fiscal year in April 2008.

These new staff members will not be based out of our central office in Halifax. As the report suggests, we will base them closer to band communities by using our regional offices located outside the Halifax area.

I have already had discussion with my colleagues at the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs about the recommendations that affect their organizations: clarifying jurisdictional issues and taking part in educational programs. Obviously, I cannot speak for these organizations. However, I have been pleased with how positively they have responded to what this report recommends.

Judith Sullivan-Corney is with us today from the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. She and her staff have been very supportive as the Commission worked with its partners to organize this public forum. Judy has also indicated that her organization will assist the Commission as we move to work through the Tri-Partite process to clarify jurisdictional questions. I appreciate Judy's advise and expertise in this area and thank her for being willing to work with the Commission as we move forward with implementing this report.

I want to conclude with some personal observations. I have been with the Commission for over seven years and witnessed a lot of change during that time. The Commission has changed in many ways, and must continue to change. Where in the past we have been seen as an enforcer of the Human Rights Act, we can also be viewed as a resource for employers and other organizations that need help to understand their obligations under the Act.

Now it is my hope, one shared by the staff and commissioners of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, that we will be known as a an organization which is open to First Nations people; a safe place to bring their concerns regarding human rights.

That is a challenge for the Commission, which requires that we work very hard to increase our understanding of First Nations issues, culture and hopes. I ask that you help us to meet that challenge. We need to work together, in the spirit of *nikmaq*, or "friendship".

As Joe B. Marshall pointed out at a recent conference called "Celebrating Communities", despite the history and the trauma which has been visited upon the Mi'kaw in Nova Scotia, they are still opening their arms to other people at places like this First

Nation of Membertou. I hope that you will come to see that the Commission is also opening its arms and seeking to embrace the notion of *nikmaq*.

Thank you.