

Premier Gordon Campbell
Address to Nisga'a Lisims Government
April 26, 2002

Check Against Delivery

Thank you for welcoming myself and the attorney general to Nisga'a land, and for this opportunity to meet with you.

Having heard Chief (Joseph) Gosnell's comments, clearly there are many things on the agenda to continue to work on to build a successful new relationship between British Columbia and the Nisga'a government.

I'm pleased to be here today with our attorney general – Geoff Plant, minister responsible for treaty negotiations and implementation of the Nisga'a Final Agreement. I'm also joined by North Coast MLA Bill Belsey, who is profoundly and deeply interested in the success of your government.

The Nisga'a Treaty took decades of hard work and dedication and commitment by the leaders and the Nisga'a people. I want to congratulate that leadership for their commitment to all of the Nisga'a people, and particularly to single out Chief Gosnell, Frank Calder and generations of Nisga'a chiefs and elders who did not lose track of their dream and their commitment to the people they serve.

The Nisga'a Treaty is a living testament to the perseverance of the Nisga'a people. It shows that it's possible to build new relationships based on trust, equity and understanding, and to create a future of hope and opportunity for all.

There is no secret that there were differences of opinion between myself and my party and some of your leadership about aspects of your treaty. However, I think it's important to say today to all of you and to all of the Nisga'a people that we at no time felt the Nisga'a negotiators were negotiating in any way other than honourably. The strong voice you took on behalf of your people is one that has been recognized across the province. You negotiated with honour and with integrity, and for that we all say thank you.

I agreed with much of the treaty and disagreed with some parts of it. However, we made a commitment to British Columbians and to the Nisga'a people. When the treaty was signed, our obligation was the same as your obligation and the government of Canada's obligation: to make sure the treaty works, to work together, and to build partnerships and understanding based on fact and mutual commitment.

We will uphold and respect that final agreement. Since our government was sworn in last June, we have been presented with issues where we acted quickly to reinforce our commitment to you with honour – not just to the letter but to the spirit of the treaty as well.

It is critical for us to recognize that while we have a treaty in place, there are many things within the treaty and outside of the treaty that will require continual work. Forests Minister Mike de Jong is preparing to add to the agenda on your behalf to deal with forest leases that may be expiring. This is an important transition period for all of us. We want you in the Nisga'a Lisims Government to know that we have every intention of living up to our obligations under the treaty and working with you to make sure the transition is as smooth as possible.

As we work together on those forestry transition issues, I think it provides us with an opportunity to create an example for industry, for other First Nations and for all British Columbians. It's an opportunity to show how we can create benefits for everyone and demonstrate the certainty the treaty can provide for us. We will see benefits both in management of the resources and in providing a framework for openness and certainty around the land-use issues that are clearly involved.

Chief Gosnell has mentioned today a number of areas of concern, which are concerns of our government as well. I'd like to highlight just a few of them.

First is aboriginal health care. We recognize the challenges of aboriginal health care and of health care in the northern part of British Columbia, and we have started to meet some of those challenges.

We have said to people training to be nurses and doctors who are willing to serve in rural and remote communities that 20 per cent of their student loans will be forgiven for every year they are in a rural or remote community in British Columbia.

We have just approved additions to our medical school at the University of British Columbia with special satellite campuses at the University of Northern B.C. and at the University of Victoria. At UNBC in particular we will be looking at how we can train physicians and nurses to make sure they can meet the challenges of practising their profession in rural and remote communities.

Chief Gosnell mentioned the importance of tele-health. We have already implemented a tele-health pilot project that has provided care for people in rural and remote communities by connecting them with specialists in other parts of the province while allowing them to stay close to their families for support as they healed themselves and moved to a healthier life.

We have committed to connecting people throughout the province with broadband applications. The Premier's Technology Council has identified smaller and remote communities as the last step – the last mile – of that broadband connection, and I have met with (federal) Minister (of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Robert) Nault in Ottawa. Our government is committed to making those connections.

This is critical not just in health care, but in building a platform for future economic development for people who want to live in New Aiyansh on the Nisga'a lands and to be able to develop economic capacity here.

We believe it's important that we develop education enhancement agreements with aboriginal communities and particularly with the Nisga'a Lisims Government. We believe it is clear that young aboriginal people have been failed by our education system in the past.

It is not satisfactory for us to watch graduation rates of young aboriginal people stay at approximately half of the non-aboriginal population. It will require all of us to work together to make sure every generation has educational opportunities so they can build the kind of future that they want with confidence and with trust and with excitement.

It is critical for us to continue to communicate, to ask questions even when they're difficult questions, to search for answers, and to build the kind of relationship that's essential.

Honest and open dialogue is a critical component of building understanding, and building understanding is a critical component of building trust. Building trust is a critical component of building a future that young aboriginal people can look to with pride, with confidence and with hope.

Again, I say thank you for the opportunity to meet with you here in this chamber, with your government, on your land. Thank you for your commitment to a process that is new and that carries with it risks. And thank you for your commitment to the Nisga'a people and to the successful building of a future that all of us can look to with pride.