

Opening Remarks at the 2nd Annual First Citizen's Forum
Premier Gordon Campbell
October 31, 2003

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I want to thank everyone for coming today.

I also want to recognize that the Honourable Stephen Owen, the Secretary of State for Indian Affairs and Northern Development, who has joined us today.

We have a number of MLAs here today and a number of cabinet ministers. But most importantly we have a number of First Nations people from all over the province. You're here to help share in the building of a new relationship between the Government of British Columbia, the people of British Columbia and B.C. First Nations.

We are striving to build a relationship on shared responsibility for addressing the injustices of the past, respect and recognition of the rights of B.C.'s aboriginal people, and reconciliation, as we set aside misunderstandings and move forward in a partnership and in pursuit of common goals.

We should never underestimate the size of the challenge, or the distance from here to our destination. But I think I can say on behalf of all of my colleagues that we have been reinforced by the commitment of First Nations across this province to work with us to build the kind of future for First Nations of British Columbia that they can be excited by and take pride in.

The dialogue and exchange of ideas are critical to forging any new relationship. Honest, open dialogue is the foundation upon which we can build our relationship for the future. We have had two First Nations forums, three Cabinet meetings with the First Nations Summit, and meetings with the individual First Nations to continue to make progress down the road to reconciliation.

Together, we have acted to revitalize the treaty negotiation process to bring renewed certainty of the benefits of treaties to all British Columbians. We have listened to ideas and together we have made significant progress. Agreements-in-Principle have been signed this year with the Lheidli-T'enneh and the Maa-nulth. Three other AIPs are in the ratification process; the Snuneymuxw, the

Sliammon, and the Tsawwassen. We have entered into 38 treaty-related measures, with a significant provincial investment.

Together, we have explored ways to help First Nations create economic opportunities to provide jobs and prosperity. Together, we are working to develop a response to the skills-needs of First Nations people across the province. Ninety-five million dollars in forest revenue-sharing over the next three years, and a redirection of eight percent of our annual allowable cut to First Nations is a step. More than 50 agreements on resource development initiatives, and many agreements on land-use plans, including 14 forest agreements, have been made. We have doubled the First Citizens Fund to \$72 million dollars. Forty million dollars in the economic measures fund has led to a 113 agreements that are now in place with First Nations to open up opportunities in oil and gas, shellfish aquaculture, the 2010 Olympics, tourism, and forestry.

Together, at last year's forum, we identified the need to build stronger relationships between aboriginal communities and school districts, and to improve aboriginal student achievement. We are making progress. We have signed eight aboriginal enhancement agreements with school districts, with more to come. Over \$44 million is annually committed in school districts to specifically fund aboriginal education. Almost \$3 million over the past two years has been identified for post-secondary programs for aboriginal learners. The First Nations Studies-12 course is growing in popularity. Since 1996 the number of students in the course has nearly tripled to over 1,400 students today.

Your priorities with regard to aboriginal and First Nations children are also being approached in a newly cooperative and constructive way. Together we have worked to provide a brighter future for aboriginal children.

Aboriginal children, like all children, thrive when they are brought up in safe, loving families, supported by the strength of their own cultures. To that end, in September of 2002, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed to work together in the best interests of aboriginal children.

In June of this year, a plan was announced to explore options on how we can return aboriginal children in care to their families, extended families, and communities. Through the "A child's roots are forever" project, files of 2,700 aboriginal children in Ministry care will be reviewed over the next two years. The project has three objectives: to identify aboriginal children for whom a return to family or community may be appropriate; to help Ministry workers and

families develop reunification plans for those children; and, where returning a child is not in the child's best interest, to help strengthen the child's connection with their community, and involve the community in planning for the child's future.

We recognize, and I know you recognize, that still more needs to be done. We need to do more to expand economic opportunities for the benefit of all British Columbians. We need to do more to build on our progress at the treaty table. We need to do more to improve educational opportunities and to enhance understanding of aboriginal culture and history in our schools, and that is one of the reasons why we are here today.

We will have an opportunity today to hear from people who are deeply immersed in the issues that are important to all of us. And, equally important, we will have an opportunity to hear from you.

After the first forum, you asked for greater emphasis on education and employment opportunities. You asked for increased opportunities for dialogue, and we have tried to incorporate that into today's agenda.

Before I introduce George Abbott, let me just reiterate that this is one of many steps and one of many opportunities we have to learn from one another. It is important for you to feel comfortable stating your position, telling us what you know and telling us what you think we need to know as we go through today. This forum is brought together in good faith, but we can always improve on it. You should feel free to tell us how we can do this. We want this to be worthwhile to all of the participants, young and old, from north and south, aboriginal and non-aboriginal. We have a special obligation to meet the needs of the people of our province. We have a special obligation to meet the needs of First Nations citizens of our province. By you being here today you help us meet that obligation and you help us move forward. On behalf of all of my colleagues, I'd like to say thank you for that.