

Mercredi has a big job ahead holding native group together

By Jack Aubry
Ottawa Citizen

June 13

WINNIPEG — Canada's native chiefs proved this week they can hold a national political convention with plenty of drama and hoopla.

The drag-'em-out, knock-'em-down fight was the most exciting leadership race witnessed by the national media since 1976, when Joe Clark came out of nowhere to become the leader of the Progressive Conservative party.

But where does that leave the Assembly of First Nations? Most chiefs seemed to agree Wednesday that the country's most powerful native group may be a bit frazzled by the bitter race, but they are in the best shape they have ever been since being founded in 1982.

Having brought Saskatchewan chiefs back into the fold less than a month ago, the assembly now represents a united voice for the native cause.

And the new national chief,

Ovide Mercredi — considered to be a hardliner when dealing with Ottawa — wants the respect of the Tory government in any future dealings in order to reflect its new credibility.

"We are very skeptical about our relationship in this country because our history has not been a very positive one. We are not taking the prime minister or anyone at their word," he said.

"It is very natural for us to be pessimistic about any announcement by this government."

Mercredi told the chiefs at the convention's closing Wednesday that the assembly has so far only identified the issues that need to be addressed — it's now time to find solutions, he said.

He promised to meet soon with the five candidates who ran against him and with regional chiefs to develop a "program of action" for the assembly.

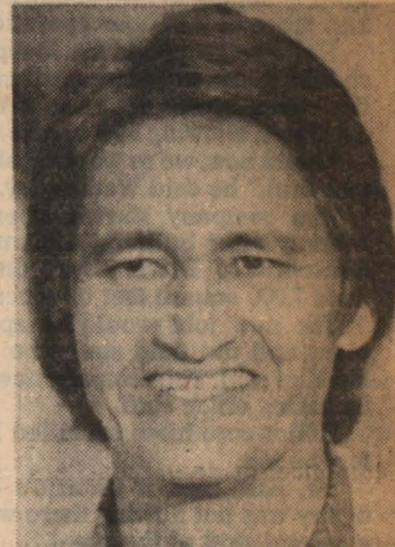
Dan Gaspe, campaign manager for Mohawk Chief Mike Mitchell, said while some wounds need to be healed, they are not serious. It was not like some past conventions in which entire provincial delegations walked out of the assembly.

The assembly's requirement that a candidate must get 60 per cent of the vote to win ended up giving Mercredi a decisive victory over Phil Fontaine in the fourth ballot, rather than a virtually hung assembly in the third. That helped unify the assembly rather than leaving it seriously split.

The 45-year-old lawyer is promising to be a hands-on chief who will partake in any civil disobedience action if asked by the community involved.

Mercredi also said he wants the assembly to control the native agenda, not any radical group of "hotheads" that make up a small minority of the native population. To do so, Mercredi realizes he must make the assembly relevant to the most remote communities.

"The fact the national organization has elected a more proactive leader and will be out



Mercredi front with the people of the communities . . . that will hopefully be a deterrent to the more militant factions," he said.

In his acceptance speech, Mercredi warned Indian Affairs Minister Tom Siddon that he is "one tough nut." When handed a note from Siddon in Europe, asking him to call, he jokingly asked the crowd if he should bother.

He later said he will meet with elders before meeting with any government minister.

While the convention had many of the trappings of a white-man's political free-for-all, there were some distinct differences.

For one, the candidate who spent the least amount of money — Mercredi spent about \$11,000 — and with the smallest entourage ended up winning.

And using campaign workers from the white-man's political system ended up costing a candidate several votes, if not the election.

Fontaine had Liberal members in key spots, and his slick campaign — which included bodyguards in double-breasted suits, cellular phones and fancy posters — was sneered at by many chiefs.

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