

History made as Nisga'a Treaty is signed

By: Mandy Eason

NEW AIYANESH, BC: History was made August 4th 1998, the first native treaty in over two-hundred years was signed in New Aiyanih, British Columbia. The agreement which took over two decades to create between the Nisga'a and both the federal and provincial government has finally become a reality.

The treaty states the Nisga'a will receive close to 2000 square kilometers of Nass Valley land (approximately the size of Prince Edward Island). However this is only one-tenth of the land they originally claimed and a portion of that land is already inhabited by 100 non-natives who will continue to pay property taxes to the provincial government.

The Nisga'a will also receive mineral and timber rights along with a \$190,000,000 cash transfer payable over 15 years.

An additional \$31,000,000 for fisheries conservation, stumpage fees and employment training.

The federal government will also pay \$30,000,000 to assist with the legal cost for negotiations that spanned over two decades. This is where the conflict begins. British Columbia Liberal leader Gordon Campbell, says in order for the agreement to be made legitimate it needs the approval of seven provinces (over 50% of the population) or a national referendum.

Campbell is so adamant about the country's approval because he says the treaty will

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alter the Constitution Act of Canada. Therefore, as outlined in the constitution, such actions require majority support of the Canadian population.

Campbell also said on Monday that a federal referendum is justified because it is the federal taxpayers who will be footing most of the cash in the \$490,000,000 deal.

Attorney General Ujjal Dosanjh opposes Campbell's allegations, saying the NDP government and the federal Liberal government have the authority to change the pre-existing treaty.

Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Jane Stewart, sees the new revised agreement as a "relationship based on mutual respect and understanding."

Also present at the initialing of the treaty was Nisga'a Tribal Council President Joseph Gosnell, Sr. British Columbia Aboriginal Affairs Minister Dale Lovick and B.C. Premier Glen Clark. Clark describes the agreement as "the

most significant progress we have ever made in reconciling our communities and achieving the certainty and opportunity all British Columbian's desire."

Some of the 5000 Nisga'a view the agreement as a sellout of their rights and see only a settlement for the amount of territory they claim owed to them.

The final agreement specifies all personal tax exemptions will cease and future treaty claims are prohibited.

It also gives Nisga'a Central Government a jurisdiction comparable to that of other local governments.

"The Nisga'a struggle to settle the land question for more than a century. In 1887, our ancestors climbed into their canoe and paddled all the way to Victoria, where, on the steps of the B.C. Legislature, they were turned away by Premier Smith. But today our canoe has returned to the Nass." said Nisga'a Tribal Council President Joseph Gosnell, Sr. of the agreement.