

AFN Conference centres on North-South unity

by David A. Moses

VANCOUVER, B.C. - Sixty years ago, members of both Canadian and American First Nations were invited by the University of Toronto to a joint assembly to discuss common issues and concerns shared by native peoples on both sides of the border. The conference was orchestrated by some U. of T. academics and consisted of about one hundred and fifty delegates.

This small gathering — more like a study group for students and professors rather than the beginnings of a political movement — preceded the formation of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada and the National Congress of American Indians in the United States.

Last week in Vancouver another joint assembly took place between First Nations rep-

resentatives, but this time it was initiated, organized and run by First Nations people themselves.

This conference was called "Uniting First Nations - Tecumseh's Vision" and took its name from Tecumseh's desire to unite all native people with "one heart, one body". It was part of the AFN's 20th Annual General Assembly and was declared the first such joint gathering in sixty years.

The Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre was the site of what were really two conferences in one. There was the AFN and NCAI joint assembly from July 20th to July 23rd and the AFN/Nexus'99 Trade Show and Business Conference from July 21st to July 23rd.

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NCAI President Ron Allan and AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine celebrate the signing of a Unity Declaration between their two organizations at the annual AFN meeting last week in Vancouver. Said Fontaine, "I'm certain we will all remember this moment for the rest of our lives"

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3000 delegates

There has never been a larger Aboriginal Business Event in Canada, and the two events brought both politics and economics together under one roof. The economic event had about one hundred and fifty-trade booths set up attracting hundreds of people. There were daily entertainers inside the trade show area, as well as a Gala diner on Thursday evening featuring many First Nations' artists.

Over three thousand delegates from around the

world took part in the political side of the conference, with representatives from China, Taiwan, Mexico, South Africa, New Zealand, Guatemala, the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and of course the United States and Canada. It took three hours for all the delegates to finish their opening addresses.

The Honourable Jane Stewart, Minister of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, was also on hand and addressed the assembly. Twice making

reference to the prevailing etiquette that she need not have been asked to attend such a gathering, she said she was humbled and appreciative of being invited.

Addressing the assembly in his opening speech, AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine said: "We stand together this week and for all time, as a moral, social and political force, divided by locality but united by common origin and destiny".

He went on to say, "our joint protocol promises one day to be referred to a an

historic document, one which set into motion a process of reunification which ultimately led to the collective, sovereign benefit of all Indigenous peoples of North America."

Ron Allan, President of the National Congress of American Indians said in his opening, "The speakers before me, including National Chief Phil Fontaine, have emphasized the importance of unity, the importance of strengthening our capacities as governments, because we are here to strengthen that sovereign-

ty. And the cause, in the nations of Canada and the United States, is to live up, to the honour and the commitment and the integrity that these [ideals] have to the Indian peoples of this great continent".

Declaration signing

The main focus of the conference, at least from the political side, was the signing of the joint protocol agreement on the last day of the conference. AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine and NCAI President Ron Allan signed the *Declaration of Kinship and Cooperation among the Indigenous Peoples and Nations of North America through the Assembly of First Nations and the National Congress of American Indians* on Friday. It is meant to strengthen political and economic ties between the two national organizations.

Fontaine called the document "an enabling document that will allow both parties to move forward together or separately," adding that he was "certain we will all remember this moment for the rest of our lives".

Allan said, "a lot of work by both parties will be required to put the meat on the bones of the commitment between the nations".

During the signing process Phil Fontaine requested the assembly

stand as a sign of support and unity of the declaration. Then the two leaders joined in reading together the certification of the declaration: "On behalf of the Assembly of First Nations and the National Congress of American Indians, in unity, solidarity, mutual respect and friendship, we the undersigned attest that this declaration represents the collective sentiment of those converged in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada on Friday, July 23, 1999."

Asked what issues or concerns the two leaders saw that this document could allow them to move forward on, however, Fontaine was hesitant not commit to any particular issue, saying only that there are many concerns from poverty to education and culture.

President Allan was a little more forth coming, saying he could see three areas of focus — sovereignty, economics and culture. He also said the document was a "bridge of communication".

It is now up to the two parties to 'put meat on the agreement' and act on the many good words that were spoken. Only time, action and history will tell if this joint protocol has indeed moved Tecumseh's vision one step closer.