

# Initial step toward Mi'kmaq/Maliseet self government in social programs and services

Twenty three Mi'kmaq/Maliseet First Nation communities signed a Political Accord in Social with the Minister of Indian Affairs at their most recent All Chiefs Forum in Halifax on March 27, 1998. The Accord and companion letters from Indian Affairs officials and Chiefs identify specific parameters and issues which will need to be addressed in the coming weeks by both Chiefs and the federal government.

The Political Accord is seen as an initial step toward moving on Mi'kmaq/Maliseet self government in social programs and services. It is anticipated that initial discussions will be community based to allow for full input in ongoing development of a Mi'kmaq/Maliseet nation based approach to social programs and services. Both the Chiefs and the Federal government recognized the need to establish a parallel path of

economic development and employment. APC Co-Chair, Chief Lawrence Paul noted, "Reform and creation of our own system must be tied to real long term jobs for our members. If not, reforms will continue to entrench the high levels of dependence currently at 84 per cent in First Nation communities in Easter Canada."

APC Co-Chair Chief, Second Peter Barlow, noted "We must start at the basic level communities are at and move forward together."

With regard to specific initiatives, the Chiefs agreed to work with Canada on the Child Tax Benefit reinvestment strategy, alternative uses of social, youth initiatives, social administrators training and other items as mutually agreed upon. The Accord opens the door to participation of other relevant federal departments and provinces as required and agreed. Proposals coming out of this new partnership must be

approved jointly through an agreed process set out on the Accord.

The time frame for the Accord is set for three years and can be renewed, amended or terminated with the consent of parties.

In discussions with Chiefs at the Forum various concerns about the initiative were raised. Such concerns and the addition of various appropriate clauses will be the subject of efforts in coming weeks between Canada and the Chiefs. In spite of the Accord, Indian Affairs is still obligated to ensure that bands follow provincial changes in policy, rates and conditions. Chiefs expressed serious concerns over the federal governments unwillingness to delink our communities from provincial systems. Chiefs noted that the provincial systems have not allowed for a social program and services which is consistent with First Nation values, beliefs and culture.

Specifically, the Minister has agreed to incorporate the following changes to the Accord in the future:

(1) Inclusion of Listuguj Mi'kmaq community in Quebec

(2) Non-derogation clause

(3) Clause on the Crown's fiduciary relationship and duty to the Mi'kmaq/Maliseet First Nations.

Minister Stewart expressed her support and commitment to the efforts of the Chiefs to work in partnership and moving one step on the road toward assuming jurisdiction. Such efforts are Minister Stewart noted "a sign of the new relationship and partnership efforts of the Agenda for Action with First Nations."

Work toward allowing full input, cooperation and consensus building from the community level is the key in the next steps. Efforts will begin shortly to ensure all Mi'kmaq/Maliseet communities and leaders have a say on the creation of a new future for two nations the Mi'kmaq/Maliseet. Each First Nation community's special contribution to this effort will and it is expected to allow for the real strength of Mi'kmaq/Maliseet people to be clearly demonstrated.

Input is welcomed. Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs Secretariat Inc. (902) 667 - 4007.