

Assembly rejects federal policy on self-government

By Clyde Graham

OTTAWA (CP) - The Assembly of First Nations formally rejected Monday the Chretien government's new policy for negotiating self-government agreements, saying it's demeaning and a step backwards.

Vice-chief Gordon Peters said the policy announced last week by Indian Affairs Minister Ron Irwin offers less control and sovereignty than deals put forward by the former Tory government.

"This government's approach is even more regressive than any of our worst fears," he said.

Peters said Irwin talked about turning a page in history, but "we are turning the page backward."

The rejection was no surprise. The Assembly had already condemned leaked details of the policy paper.

Irwin has argued he consulted widely and has the support of many chiefs.

Indians clearly are not united

in opposition. For example, Quebec Mohawks have already started discussions with Irwin's department.

And the document is likely to have little effect on first nations in Manitoba, where a self-government process is already under way.

Irwin's plan would allow Indian bands the power to run their own affairs in much the same way municipalities do, with some of the powers of a province.

Bands would get authority over education, health, social services and enforcement of aboriginal laws.

Powers not up for grabs include immigration, national defence, monetary policy and intellectual property.

In areas of gambling, fisheries management, environmental protection and the enforcement of criminal law, provincial and federal laws would override abo-

original laws.

The Charter of Rights would still apply and Ottawa would be able to override any law.

Peters said aboriginal peoples already have all the rights of a nation and Ottawa can't impose these limits.

He said they want to ensure they would have the power to set up international trade agreements or seek foreign aid.

"If you're talking about the future for our children - we don't have that right to be able to say that you can close the door on what the future might bring."

The Assembly will call for a national summit of Native organizations to discuss the government's proposal and will write the prime minister.

But Peters said there is little they can do other than try to change the government position.