

Nault out - Mitchell in as new Minister of Indian Affairs

OTTAWA

It came as no surprise but Robert Nault was removed from his office as Minister of Indian Affairs in last week's cabinet shuffle under the leadership of new Prime Minister of Canada Paul Martin.

It has been long rumoured that Nault's policy's and agendas were not in keeping with Martin's way of doing things and that the two could not coexist once the reigns of leadership were transferred.

Taking over until the next federal election will be interim Minister Andy Mitchell, Member of Parliament for Parry Sound-Muskoka region. Mitchell was born in Montreal and educated in Ottawa and presently lives in Gravenhurst.

In 1993 Mitchell was elected to the House of Commons and has focused much of his attention towards rural Canada and Northern regions. He gained experience with economic development of rural and remote areas when, in his first term of office he spearheaded a cross-country study he included in a report called the Think Rural Report.

In 1997 he was appointed Secretary of State for Parks. From there Mitchell moved on to be Secretary of State for Rural Development and was a member the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario. He also brings with him experience in the banking industry.

Although it is far too early to tell what, if any difference Mitchell will make regarding the relationship between the federal government and First Nations across the country, hopes are high that a much more conciliatory approach to self government and other pressing issues will be achievable under the Martin government.

In a historic gesture, Martin participated



Andy Mitchell

in what is known as a smudging ceremony performed at Rideau Hall as the Governor General and his new cabinet watched.

This marked the first time in Canadian history an incoming Prime Minister affiliated himself with First Nations tradition as closely.

Elmer Courchene an Ojibwa elder performed the ceremony fanning the sage smoke around Martin with an Eagle feather.

"It's a cleansing of the whole spirit and everything that surrounds him," Courchene explained. "So the spirit is cleansed to begin work."

Mitchell promised to take a more collaborative approach than his predecessor with a focus on aboriginal self-government.

Native issues have been at the forefront of Martin's agenda and he has vowed repeatedly to help improve native living standards. And he announced Friday a special cabinet committee on aboriginal affairs that he himself will chair.

Chief Roberta Jamieson who has been one of former Minister Robert Nault's toughest critics welcomes the changes.

"I don't recall a Prime Minister actually chairing a committee of this nature," said Jamieson.

Although she has never had direct dealings with the new Minister, Jamieson is optimistic.

"I don't know Andy Mitchell," said Jamieson. "But I do know some things about him. I know he was instrumental in bringing about a positive shift at Parks Canada in relation to aboriginal rights and if that is a signal of how he will be doing things, I am pleased."

In fact, one of the first letters Mr. Mitchell would have received as Minister of Indian Affairs would have been an invitation to visit Six Nations.

"We are looking forward to developing a

productive relationship," says Jamieson.

Martin's willingness to participate openly in a smudging ceremony sends a strong

symbolic message but Jamieson is still awaiting the substance of the promise but with positive expectations.