



Opening Statements
on the Occasion
of the Launch of the
Public Hearings
of the
Royal Commission
on
Aboriginal Peoples

Winnipeg, Manitoba
April 21, 1992



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The Right Honourable Brian Dickson
Former Chief Justice of Canada
and the Co-Chairs of the
Royal Commission
on
Aboriginal Peoples,
Georges Erasmus and René Dussault,
on the occasion of the
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Justice Sinclair, Co-Chairmen, members of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Elders, Chiefs, Ladies & Gentlemen. I have been asked to speak to you this morning on *The Genesis of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, in other words, how did the Commission come to be created.

On April 23, 1991, the Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Brian Mulroney, delivered a major address at the First Nations Congress in Victoria, British Columbia in which he announced that the government would establish a Royal Commission to examine certain Aboriginal issues. He said:

The government will proceed to appoint a Royal Commission to examine the economic, social and cultural situation of the Aboriginal peoples of the country. The Royal Commission should not be seen as a substitute for constitutional reform which is another important part of the answer in resolving the problems of the Aboriginal peoples.

The government acted upon that announcement in the Speech from the Throne to open the Thirty-Fourth Parliament of Canada on May 13, 1991. The speech stated:

The full participation of Canada's Aboriginal peoples in Canada's economic prosperity and political life is a goal shared across the country. To put itself in a position to respond more effectively to the needs of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada, my government will appoint the Right Honourable Brian Dickson, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, to serve as a special representative of the Prime Minister in order to consult widely on the terms of reference and membership of the Royal Commission announced recently and report back to my government.

Particular care will be taken to ensure that the Commission neither delays nor negates constitutional, legislative or other reforms already under way. These reforms include land claim settlements, community development initiatives, education and other activities launched during the second session of the Thirty-Fourth Parliament. In cooperation with Indian people themselves, my government will explore alternatives to the Indian Act, especially concerning land, monies and self-government. Finally, my government will consult Aboriginal Canadians on changes in the system of administering justice. The goal is to work with Canada's Aboriginal peoples so that they control their own lives, can contribute to Canadian prosperity and can share fully in it.

The Speech from the Throne mandated me to "consult widely" on the terms of reference and membership of the Royal Commission. I took very seriously this instruction to consult widely. I explained the nature and extent of those consultations to the Prime Minister. I began by requesting meetings with six major national Aboriginal groups. All responded affirmatively to my request. Within two weeks of my appointment I held long and productive meetings with the leadership of the Assembly of First Nations, the Native Council of Canada, the Metis National Council, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, the National Association of Friendship Centres and the Native Women's Association of Canada. I also attended, at the invitation of the national leaders, the annual meetings of the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Council of Canada here in Winnipeg last June 11-12, and met with the full board of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada in Ottawa on June 13. On the morning of June 12 I had breakfast with Ovide Mercredi, elected a few hours earlier as Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and his executive. After breakfast I met with some hundreds of chiefs who attended the meeting.

After those first meetings, I kept in close contact and held many additional meetings with these representational Aboriginal groups.

I thought it important also to solicit the views and advice of native leaders and other natives not connected to the national organizations. I did this in two ways. First, I asked the national organizations for lists of local groups and leading native individuals so that I could write to all of them. Secondly, I adopted an open-door policy at my Ottawa office – in late May and throughout June I met with every native group and individual who requested a meeting.

I also formed the opinion that I needed the benefit of the views of acknowledged experts in many aspects of native life. I asked various native leaders and a number of leading academics to identify those experts for me and I then wrote to all of them.

Additionally, the Privy Council Office placed an advertisement in the major national newspapers and in all of the native newspapers of which we were aware. As well, I issued a press release on May 27. Both the advertisement and the press release invited Canadians to write to me with their advice about the mandate and composition of the Royal Commission.

The results of this consultation process were that between May 18 and July 5 I held meetings with 57 native groups or individuals, experts, federal cabinet ministers, all seven native parliamentarians, senior public servants and other Canadians. I sent 1,682 letters to individual natives and received 165 replies. I sent 12 letters to the provincial and territorial heads of government and received 9 replies. I sent 291 letters to experts and to major organizations interested in native issues and received 153 replies. Finally, I received 207 submissions in response to the advertisement placed in the newspapers by the Privy Council Office.

I did my best to listen carefully to, and to understand the views expressed by, the hundreds of peoples who met with me. I also tried to digest the large number of written submissions that I received. Based on all of these meetings and submissions I was ready to provide the Prime Minister with my advice on the two matters left with me – the terms of reference or mandate of the Commission, and the composition or membership of the Commission.

In my report to the Prime Minister, I said that the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples presented a real, and rare, opportunity to improve the lives of Canada's one million native people, and thereby the lives of all Canadians. I agreed with Mr. John Amagoalik, the highly respected former president of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, who wrote to me in these terms:

I feel the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are at an important crossroads. Things can either begin to improve or else the original citizens of this country will sink further into despair and hopelessness.

I said to the Prime Minister that if the mandate of the Royal Commission were a good one and if the Commission were composed of truly outstanding people, then its report and recommendations should be of great value to governments and to ordinary citizens.

A. Terms of Reference

I became convinced during the process of consultation in which I was engaged that the terms of reference for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples should be broad and comprehensive, as the issues facing the Commission were difficult, multifaceted, and interrelated. Not all regions or groups shared the same concerns. It would be impossible and counter-productive to limit artificially the scope of the Commission's work.

I therefore recommended that the Commission should investigate the evolution of the relationship among Aboriginal peoples (Indian, Inuit and Metis), the Canadian government, and Canadian society as a whole and it should propose specific solutions, rooted in domestic and international experience, to the problems which plagued those relationships and which confronted Aboriginal peoples. I advised the Prime Minister that the Commission should examine all issues which it deemed relevant to any or all of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, and in particular, should investigate and make concrete recommendations concerning some sixteen specific issues including the history of relations between Aboriginal peoples, the Canadian government and Canadian society as a whole; the recognition and affirmation of Aboriginal self-government, its origins, content and a strategy for progressive implementation; the land base for Aboriginal peoples, including the process for resolving comprehensive and specific claims, whether rooted in Canadian constitutional instruments, treaties or in Aboriginal title; the historical interpretation and application, and potential

future scope of S. 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867 and the responsibilities of the Canadian Crown; the legal status, implementation and future evolution of Aboriginal treaties, including modern-day agreements; the constitutional and legal position of the Metis and off-reserve Indians; the special difficulties of Aboriginal people who live in the north; the Indian Act and the role, responsibilities and policies of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development; social issues; economic issues; the position and role of Aboriginal elders; the position and role of Aboriginal women; the situation of Aboriginal youth.

I told the Prime Minister that during my consultations almost 480 people were recommended to me as potential commissioners. Because so many outstanding people were brought to my attention, my final recommendations for membership on the Commission were arrived at only after difficult deliberation. I was confident that the people I recommended were accomplished, forthright and of good will. They were people who would work constructively to find solutions to problems. They came from very different backgrounds, but were widely acclaimed by many people who wrote to me from across the country. They shared a common determination to make this Royal Commission a positive force for change and reconciliation. Everything that I have heard or read about the work of the Commission to date has tended to confirm those views.

I chose to recommend a seven-member Royal Commission, with four Aboriginal members and three non-Aboriginal members. A seven-member Commission allowed for appropriate contributions from the various Aboriginal communities – status Indians on reserve, urban and off-reserve Indians, Metis and Inuit. It also provided the opportunity to consider the important issues of geographic, linguistic and gender balance. I was confident that the diversity of background and experience of those I recommended would lead to fruitful discussions and broadly-supported conclusions.

I recommended the following people for appointment to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (in alphabetical order):

Allan Blakeney, former Premier of Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan);
René Dussault, Justice of the Quebec Court of Appeal (Quebec);
Paul Chartrand, Head of the Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba (Manitoba);

Georges Erasmus, former National Chief of Assembly of First Nations (Northwest Territories);

Viola Robinson, former President of the Native Council of Canada (Nova Scotia);

Mary Sillett, former President of the Inuit Women's Association of Canada and former Vice-President of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (Newfoundland and Labrador);

Bertha Wilson, former Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada (Ontario).

Finally, I recommended that Mr. Justice René Dussault and Mr. Georges Erasmus Co-Chair the Commission.

On August 26 last a federal Order-in-Council was passed appointing the seven people, whom I have named, to inquire into and report upon the matters set out in my report of August 2, 1991 to the Prime Minister.

Last month I was asked to attend and speak at a conference on First Peoples and the Constitution held in Ottawa March 13 – 15, 1992, co-chaired by the Honourable Joseph A. Ghiz, Premier, Prince Edward Island and Mary Simon, President, Inuit Circumpolar Conference. The conference brought together 184 participants who met in formal and informal dialogue over the course of three days. The four national Aboriginal associations chose half of the participants from their own membership from all regions of Canada. Women made up close to half of the participants. The conference opened one day after Mr. Clark, the Federal Minister responsible for Constitutional Affairs and four premiers invited representatives of the Aboriginal peoples to be full participants in the constitutional process. The conference opened two days after a unanimous resolution of parliament to record the contribution of Metis Leader Louis Riel as a founder of Manitoba and Canada.

In their conference report, Mr. Ghiz and Ms. Simon said:

We think that the conference bears witness to a profound and remarkable change in the position of the First Nations in Canada. It is the fruit of the exceptional efforts and talents demonstrated by the Aboriginal peoples and their chiefs in the last few years. Furthermore, it shows the strength and richness of the Aboriginal cultures and societies, which have survived centuries of injustice. It also proves

that non-Aboriginal Canadians have changed. In the eyes of many Canadians, ensuring that justice is served to Aboriginal peoples is one of the determining factors in the validity of any constitutional renewal. Just a few years ago, such a change would have been unthinkable, on either side.

Mr. Ghiz and Ms. Simon added:

A number of participants pointed out that by establishing strong Aboriginal governments and by respecting the rights of Aboriginals, we will build a stronger Canada. And we must have a stronger Canada, a united Canada, to guarantee justice for Aboriginal peoples, because the well-being of the whole country depends on the well-being of Aboriginals. As one participant said, let's now turn our attention to ensuring that all Canadians are equal.

In the course of my remarks to the conference I noted that on February 13th, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples had published a commentary entitled "The Right of Aboriginal Self-Government and the Constitution" in which it was suggested that any new constitutional provision dealing with the Aboriginal right of self-government should satisfy six criteria. It should indicate that the right is inherent in nature, circumscribed in extent, and sovereign within its sphere. The provision should be adopted with the consent of the Aboriginal peoples, and should be consistent with the view that section 35 may already recognize a right of self-government. Finally, it should be justiciable immediately.

As to the scope of inherent self-government the Commission had this to say:

The right should be described in such a way as to make it clear that it is circumscribed rather than uncircumscribed in its extent; as such it recognizes Aboriginal government as co-existing under the constitution with federal and provincial governments, which also hold limited powers. If it were not circumscribed, Aboriginal governments would possess unlimited competence in all subject areas, including defence and international affairs. None of the national Aboriginal organizations have advocated such a course.

The report of the special joint committee on a renewed Canada, the “Beaudoin-Dobbie Committee”, under the heading of Aboriginal Self-Government, contains the following passage:

The Committee also benefitted from the thoughtful analysis of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which published its commentary on February 13th, 1992. We endorse their six criteria for the entrenchment of the Aboriginal right to self-government.

I read with interest the compendium of reports on the Renewal of Canada conferences held at Halifax, Calgary, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver during January and February.

The report on the final conference, signed by Co-Chairs Rosalie Silberman Abella, L. Yves Fortier and Peter Lougheed reads:

Participants enthusiastically endorsed the idea that the inherent right of Aboriginal peoples to self-government should be entrenched in the Constitution. And, like Quebec’s distinct society, it must be more than an ‘empty box’. It must include not only jurisdictional powers, but also land, resources, and protection of Aboriginal languages. The right to self-government should be exercised within the Canadian federation.

In his concluding remarks Peter Lougheed said:

Clearly, the Aboriginal peoples have made their case, and made their case well, that it is time to recognize their inherent right of self-government. And that’s been done splendidly.

In a recent article John Amagoalik, writing in the Nunatsiaq News said:

Canada is a nation admired and envied by people from all over the world. It is seen by others as a fair nation – a prosperous country – and a land of opportunity and potential. Except for its treatment of its Aboriginal peoples, Canada compares well with almost any nation in the world.

Canada is at a crossroads. We have an opportunity to mature into a nation which respects human rights, respects the rich diversities of humankind, and a nation where different peoples can live side by side and share the wealth of this beautiful land.

I share those views.

An editorial published in the Ottawa Citizen on March 27 reads in part:

Although the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples may have been set up originally as a delaying tactic by the government, the full participation by native Canadians in the constitutional process has changed the picture.

The Royal Commission, with a majority of Aboriginal Commissioners, can issue interim reports and set up its own task forces to examine every facet of Aboriginal life in the country. If Canada's first people want to use it, it could help them find the new place they deserve in their land.

In concluding my report to the Prime Minister I said that I firmly believed the proposed Royal Commission had the potential to be an important instrument of education and reconciliation. I agreed with Sister Anne Campbell of the Presentation Sisters of Newfoundland and Labrador who wrote to me in these terms:

This is a most crucial time with relations between First Nations and the Canadian government. The climate within the Canadian non-native public as a whole would seem to be highly in favour of addressing the injustices suffered by native people.

The Royal Commission must take this crucial opportunity to offer concrete solutions for real social and political change that will translate into a more just and equitable standard of living and preferred future for native people.

I said to the Prime Minister that I had no doubt that if the Royal Commission adhered to some of Sister Campbell's themes – the willingness of non-native Canadians to be educated about and support solutions to the injustices of the past, and a commitment to identify and articulate concrete solutions to those injustices – it would help to fashion a new compact between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

I have no doubt that Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people, working in harmony and mutual respect, through the Royal Commission, will establish for Aboriginal people a more secure place and richer lives in the Canada of tomorrow.

*Opening Statement by Co-Chairs
Georges Erasmus and René Dussault*

Thank you, good morning, and welcome.

Chief Thunderchild was the last of the Plains Cree chiefs to sign Treaty 6; he did so in 1879. As he contemplated that decision, he spoke the following words: "I had a dream – but I did not believe this dream – that there would be white men everywhere, overwhelming this land. Today I see it. I love this land greatly, and what is still the Indian's I am resolved to hold fast."

Chief Thunderchild believed treaties would allow Indians to hold fast to what was theirs. But that has not been the case. Today, Aboriginal Peoples are still struggling to hold on to what is theirs. More importantly, they are reclaiming what was theirs before the treaties were signed.

Despite the greatest of odds, over the past century Aboriginal Peoples have survived policies of paternalism, suppression, evasion and indifference. These policies have created an enormous gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country; a gap that must be bridged by both groups, working together.

Building a new relationship

This hearing – and the many others that will follow – will help bridge that gap. They will contribute to the reconciliation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people; a reconciliation that must occur if Canadians are to build a new relationship between First Peoples and those who have joined them in this land. A relationship based on partnership, trust, sensitivity and respect; one that will form the basis for a stronger, brighter and more honourable future for Aboriginal Peoples and for all Canadians.

It is fitting that our part in this healing process should begin here in Winnipeg. This is the capital city of a province that was brought into Confederation largely through the efforts of the Metis leader Louis Riel. It is also the geographic centre of Canada and of Turtle Island, the name by which many Aboriginal people know North America. Before Europeans moved into the west, Winnipeg was a traditional gathering site for trade and commerce among Aboriginal people, and it has one of the largest urban Aboriginal populations in Canada today.

I am pleased to be joining my co-chair, Mr. Dussault, and our fellow Commissioners as we launch the public hearings phase of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. We would like to take this opportunity to outline the Commission's role in re-establishing the relationship that was present in early contacts with Europeans, that was formalized in the treaties, and that was confirmed in the Royal Proclamation of 1763. And that was a relationship between equals.

With the *Constitution Act, 1982*, Canada took an important first step towards contemporary recognition of that relationship. Aboriginal Peoples are now seeking – demanding – that the next steps be taken.

Learning from the past

There can be no doubt that when Aboriginal Peoples signed treaties, they did so on a Nation-to-Nation basis.

The Ojibway people, for example, believed treaties were based on four principles: kindness, honesty, sharing and growing strong together. These

principles are the four cardinal points of the medicine wheel, and form the basis for many Aboriginal Peoples' relations with all of creation.

But the expectations of the Ojibway and other Aboriginal Peoples were not met, and they have not been met to this day

When Indian chiefs began to sign treaties more than three hundred and fifty years ago, they were agreeing to allow Europeans to live among them and to share some of their land. Indian people understood that they would continue to exercise their own laws and maintain their own systems of government.

Instead, the institutions and practices that had nurtured Aboriginal Peoples for thousands of years were swept aside. Foreign institutions and practices were imposed on them, and their traditional ways of life were suppressed.

The record must be set straight – the facts brought forward – if Canadians are to learn from the past and build for the future.

In many cases, the facts are all too clear.

Legislation that governs virtually every aspect of daily life should never have been imposed on Aboriginal Peoples.

There should never have been residential schools, and the potlatch and Sun Dance should never have been outlawed.

Indian women should not have lost their status because they married a non-Indian, and Indian men should not have lost their status because they volunteered to fight for this country.

Aboriginal people should not have to prove their legal entitlement to land that they have occupied for thousands of years, or to land that was promised them but never provided.

Treaties that allowed for fishing, hunting and trapping should not have been nullified by provincial legislation and international agreements.

Foreign concepts of justice should not have been forced on Aboriginal Peoples, with the tragic results that Manitobans and others know all too well.

The Inuit should not have been made to wear tags that set them apart from the rest of society, and the Metis should never have been made to feel like the forgotten people of Canada.

These are facts – part of the history of this country. But it is not a history that is well understood. And it is not a history that is taught in Canada's schools.

Former Chief Justice Brian Dickson recognized that when he recommended that our Commission be given a strong public education role. And we are grateful to him, for without his foresight and humanity, we would not have been given such a broad mandate.

The public education process

The job of this Commission is to undertake a thorough and objective examination of the facts, and to devise solutions accordingly.

But it is not sufficient for the Commissioners alone to understand the realities of being an Aboriginal person in Canada. These realities must be understood by all Canadians, because all Canadians will have to help us devise solutions. And all Canadians will have to accept and support our solutions if the Commission is to be fully successful.

Such widespread understanding can only be achieved through a process of public education – a process that will be carried out through these hearings, through the media, through research and through dialogue.

As a starting point, this Commission must address the mistaken assumptions and harmful stereotypes that many non-Aboriginal Canadians harbour about First Peoples.

Tomson Highway, the internationally-renowned Cree playwright who was born here in Manitoba, once remarked that “one of the most common visual symbols within the Canadian urban psyche is that of an Indian drunk at every major street corner of every major Canadian city.” Stereotype? Definitely. Fact? Reality? Of course not.

There is the other extreme, as well; those Canadians who think that Aboriginal people are members of a privileged class in society.

After all, Indians don't have to work, they don't have to pay taxes, and the government is looking after their every need. Fact? Reality? Of course not.

So an important part of our job as a Commission is to do away with these and other stereotypes, and to present the realities to Canadians.

Those realities include poverty, deprivation and despair. They include devastating economic and social problems, injustice and abuse. But they also include hope, ability, strength and determination.

This Commission has to communicate those realities.

We have to bring out the fact that Aboriginal Peoples have made an enormous contribution to this country; that they are continuing to make a contribution; and that their contribution can be even greater in the future.

We have to talk about demographics. The Aboriginal population is growing at a faster rate than any other segment of the Canadian population – and it is significantly younger. Canadians must be made aware of the fact that, given the opportunity, Aboriginal youth can be a tremendous asset to this country.

When people are allowed and encouraged to participate in the fabric of a country, they contribute to its well-being and feel a part of it. When they are denied the opportunity to participate as full and equal partners, they are disappointed, frustrated and alienated.

A forward-looking Commission

The public education process will involve looking at the past and learning from it. But neither group – Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal – can afford to dwell on the past. Our hopes for a better relationship lie in the present and in the future.

With this in mind, we are determined to be a forward-looking Commission. Like the Inukshuks – the Inuit landmarks that have provided guidance through the ages – this Commission hopes to show the way forward for Canada.

Certainly we expect and want to hear from Aboriginal people about what government policies and practices have meant for them. But first and

foremost, we want to hear about the future; about solutions that Aboriginal Peoples and others might propose for ensuring that the record of the past is not repeated.

One way this Commission can help show the way forward is by publishing discussion documents, as we did in February when we commented on the federal government's constitutional proposals.

Our objective in issuing this document was to allay concerns over the concept of inherency, which seemed to be impeding progress in the discussion of the Aboriginal self-government issue. There may be similar situations in the future when the Commission will feel called upon to stimulate a dialogue or resolve an impasse by issuing a discussion paper or similar document. The one thing we do not want is to become an excuse for governments to block progress or delay reforms while they wait for our final report.

A listening Commission

Public consultations, combined with solid, in-depth research, will form the basis for future documents issued by the Commission, as well as our final report. As elders tell us, there is a reason people have two ears and only one mouth. It is because they should listen more than they speak. This Commission intends to do that.

One of our fellow Commissioners, Viola Robinson, recently remarked that she has been speaking on behalf of Aboriginal Peoples for the past two decades. Now, she says, her job is to listen.

That is a viewpoint shared by all Commissioners. We want to be a listening Commission and a Commission committed to dialogue.

We know that many Aboriginal people are tired of being studied by others. They want to speak directly to us, and we want to hear from them. We want to hear their views of history and of what the future could or should hold for them.

Similarly, we want to hear from non-Aboriginal Canadians, who have not only a right but an obligation to participate in this debate. They, too, have deep and genuine ties to this land and to many of the institutions and

practices that are distinctly Canadian. They, too, have legitimate viewpoints on how their relationship with Aboriginal Peoples should evolve over time.

The Commission wants to hear the views of all Canadians on how Aboriginal issues can best be addressed. With this in mind, over the next 18 months we will visit more than 100 communities across Canada – more than have been visited by any previous Royal Commission. We will visit large cities in the South, Indian reserves, Metis settlements and Inuit communities. We will crisscross the country not once, but several times. When people cannot come to us, we will go to them by visiting schools, prisons, halfway houses, friendship centres and women's shelters.

Accessible to all Canadians

The underlying principle for the public hearings phase of our work is that all Canadians – regardless of their economic situation, eloquence or education – should have access to the Commission.

We have taken a number of unique steps to ensure that this is the case.

For example, we are determined that language will not be a barrier to communication. In addition to English and French, four Aboriginal languages are being used in the Commission's work – Inuktitut, Nehiyawewin, Ahnishnabe and Dene Yac Tiye.

Among other things, the Commission has set up special telephone lines so that individuals can call free from anywhere in Canada and give us their views in any one of these six languages.

We have also established an Intervenor Participation Program to ensure that a lack of money does not impede the free flow of views and ideas to the Commission. This eight million dollar program will provide financial assistance to eligible recipients who would not otherwise be able to prepare for and participate in the Commission's public hearings. We are pleased that David Crombie, who is well-respected by Aboriginal people and Canadians in general, has agreed to chair this program.

One of the key objectives of this Commission is to bring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together to reflect on the past and to begin to build a new future. The public hearings will contribute to this objective. We also

intend to bring non-Aboriginal decision makers and Aboriginal leaders together in a series of round-table discussions.

The first of these round-tables will deal with issues in major urban centres and will take place in Edmonton on June 22nd and 23rd. Many of the larger cities in Canada have been profoundly changed over the past 15 to 20 years by the influx of thousands of Aboriginal people from Indian reserves and Metis communities.

The Commission is anxious to explore ways to improve the quality of life for urban Aboriginal people, and we are pleased to have the cooperation of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in this endeavour. The round-table will provide an opportunity for those who deliver public services in urban areas and those who receive them to foster a new partnership, and for Aboriginal and municipal leaders to develop new models and approaches that work. Over time, round-table discussions will also be held on treaties, Inuit and Metis issues, the North, Aboriginal youth and women, economic development and other topics.

The capitals tour

A great deal of thought and effort has gone into planning the Commission's consultations. We want to ensure a process that will be open and that will involve all Aboriginal Peoples and all sectors of society.

We have had the benefit in making our plans of assistance from a number of sources.

Late last year, the Commission undertook a tour of provincial and territorial capitals to seek input on the public hearings phase of our work. We met with many provincial Premiers, territorial government leaders, cabinet ministers responsible for Aboriginal matters and representatives of more than 100 Aboriginal organizations.

The counsel we received during this capitals tour has made an invaluable contribution to the planning of our consultations. The tour enabled us to lay a strong foundation for cooperation with provincial and territorial governments. We intend to build on this foundation over the coming months.

The public hearings and special consultations are the backbone of the Commission's work. They will be bolstered by the most comprehensive research program ever conducted on Aboriginal issues in Canada.

A solutions-oriented Commission

These different streams of information will flow into a single river. In the end, our greatest challenge as a Commission will be to draw from that river of information to produce recommendations that are broadly acceptable to all Canadians.

Two yardsticks will be used to measure this Commission's impact. The first will be our ability to foster a better awareness and understanding of Aboriginal Peoples and the issues that concern them. The second will be the extent to which our proposals are implemented. We believe the two are inseparable; that they go hand-in-hand. Without public education and a new public mind-set, the environment will not exist to support and endorse the changes we will propose.

There are a number of steps this Commission can and must take to encourage the implementation of our proposals.

First, we must go far beyond stating general principles. This Commission will have to address specific and often difficult issues.

The second thing we will have to do is show how our proposals will work and what they will mean for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Third, we must ensure that our proposals are fair; that they reflect what we have heard and what we have learned from the many streams that will flow into our river of information.

There are many examples of Royal Commissions that have had a major impact on the political, economic and social lives of Canadians. The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism comes immediately to mind. It is no exaggeration to say that the report of the B&B Commission has literally changed the fabric of this country. We hope the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples will contribute to equally dramatic change in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

Conclusion

The time is right for change, and this Commission has an extraordinary opportunity to carry on a fresh and enlightened dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

As we approach the International Year for Aboriginal Peoples in 1993, the Commission can help Canada become a world leader in addressing Aboriginal issues.

But we cannot do that alone. The Commission requires the support and participation of all Canadians. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. Those who exercise power, and those who feel powerless. The wealthy and the dispossessed. The business people and the unemployed. The formally educated and the unschooled. We can learn from everyone's experience, and we must take everyone's aspirations and viewpoints into account.

More than three years before Chief Thunderchild signed Treaty 6, Louis Riel wrote in his diary that "Every step the Indian takes is based upon a profound sense of fairness."

We believe this is true of all Aboriginal Peoples. And we would remind Canadians that fairness has been one of the building blocks of this country.

Canadians take pride in the fact that our society allows different cultures and communities to thrive and grow. That is what Aboriginal Peoples are now asking for: the opportunity to thrive and grow, and to participate and contribute to the development of our country.

Surely Canada can allow for that. Surely Canada can make room for First Peoples in their own land. Surely we can work together – all of us – to build a better future.