

**REMARKS
BY
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**ON THE PROPOSED
GOVERNANCE AGREEMENT**

Ouje-Bougoumou, March 13, 2017

I would like to begin my remarks about the Governance Agreement that has been presented to us by sharing a very short recollection about one of Ouje-Bougoumou's late members.

One of the principal tallymen in the Chibougamau Lake area was a very respected and highly-regarded hunter and trapper by the name of Philix Couchees. Philix was not only a tallyman, but also a very respected "leader". He was a leader in the very traditional sense of that word and as that word is understood in Cree. He was an *Endoohoo auchimaw*. He showed great respect to everyone he met, he shared generously and he was truthful and honest, he shared his hunting territory with all Ouje-Bougoumou people and other Cree and Innu hunters around him..

He was active, and was a skilled hunter at a time when non-Native people began to pour into our traditional territory setting up mining camps, forestry camps, and eventually the towns of Chibougamau and Chapais. During that time in history, we were regarded as "savages", we were seen as being in the way of the resource development that was increasing day-by-day. We watched as our land and the environment was being destroyed by the resource development, and we were pushed to the side. We were seen as squatters on our own land who had no rights, no role to play the development of our land and the resources on our land, Eenu children were sent to residential schools, I am one of the Indian residential schools survivors, and our homes and villages were bulldozed to make way for more development.

Very sadly, and very tragically, in the mid-sixties Philix Couchees passed away when he was hit by a truck that was working in one of the mines in our territory. There was no investigation, no inquiry and no charges were laid against anyone. It was as if it did not matter to anyone that it was a Cree person who was killed. He was just another Indian.

I have often thought that there was something very symbolic in the way that Philix passed away. It was a very strong and a very graphic expression of what was happening to our people. It was as if our way of life, our Cree culture and traditions were being obliterated by the resource development taking hold in the region. It was

as if Philix represented all that our Cree tradition was—the importance of the connection with the land, the importance of the knowledge gained by growing up on the land, and the values that came from living on the land. All that seemed to be killed in that one moment when Philix was struck by the truck hauling resources out from the land. And there were no consequences, no apologies, no regrets.

And in a very deep sense, that is really where our Cree Nation comes from. At the time that Quebec announced its intention to develop the James Bay Hydroelectric Project—a project which at the time was the largest hydroelectric project in the world—we Cree people were also seen to be in the way. We were regarded as a potential obstacle to development, and it was believed that we had no rights to be where we had always been.

But at that time, our leaders such as Billy Diamond, Robert Kanatwat, Smally Petawabano, Philip Awashish, Ted Moses, Peter Gull, Jose Sam Atkins, Fred Blackned, Abel Kitchen, Bertie Wapachee, Edna Neeposh, Roderick Pachanos, Albert Diamond, Violet Pachanos, Ann-Marie Awashish and our Jimmy Mianscum refused to accept that description of our reality. They refused to accept that we had no rights and that we could be pushed off our traditional lands by forces that wanted to exploit our territory for its potential wealth. Our leaders then were guided by our Elders—Elders in every community who understood the importance of our maintaining our connection with the land and who had a vision of how we could share the wealth of the land with others, how we could co-exist, and how we could thrive.

What our leaders at the time recognized was that the situation that looked like a deep tragedy, which of course it was, could also be an opportunity to change some things for the better. They saw an opportunity to have indigenous rights recognized, they saw an opportunity to get us out from under the *Indian Act* and they saw an opportunity for us to unite and create a strong Indigenous Nation, and they saw an opportunity to improve the standard of living in our communities. And that is precisely what the last 40 years of Cree history has been all about.

When the call came in the 70's for our people to rise up and to defend our Cree rights and Eenu/Eeyou Istchee, Sophie and I left our comfortable home in Chibougamau

and joined the Grand Council of the Cree in 1977. We had no idea where our paths would lead us and we had no idea if we would succeed in implementing the JBNQA. But what I witnessed were leaders that got up every morning, many times leaving their families back home and pushing the Cree agenda.

I also witnessed the new leadership step up such as my friends like Matthew Coon Come, Walter Hughboy, George Wapachee, James Bobbish, Romeo Saganash, Rusty Cheezo, Bill Namagoose, John Kitchen, Matthew Mukash, Alan Happyjack, Kenneth Gilpin, Robert Weistche, Henry Mianscum, Reggie Mark, David Masty and the list goes on.

What our Cree Nation has accomplished since the signing of the *JBNQA* is a **revolution**. We have accomplished what, in other parts of the world, would require armed struggle. We have completely turned things around. We have gotten out of the *Indian Act*, and the current *Governance Agreement* represents another step in that process. If we believe that the "Chief-and-Council system" is a tool of the government to control us, we now could have the power to change that. If we believe that our system of democracy would benefit from more traditional Cree elements, we now could have the power to do introduce just that. With this *Governance Agreement* the power would be in our own hands.

We now determine what happens on Cree Territory. We run our own institutions to provide health services and education through our Cree Health Board and Cree School Board. We govern our communities ourselves without the interference from a paternalistic government. We have **nation-to-nation** relationships with both the province and the federal government. And we have vastly improved the living conditions in our communities.

These are all things that national indigenous leaders have talked about for decades as what should be present for reserves across the country. These are the things that were recommended in the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. And these are the things that are described as aspirations and hopes in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. And we here in Eeyou Istchee have already achieved all of them. Over the last 40 years we have stayed

focused on our rights and we have struggled to translate the recognition of our rights into benefits for our communities and our people.

If anyone believes that the *Governance Agreement* we are currently considering is not a huge step forward, I would invite them to spend a month in a typical Canadian aboriginal reserve and see what life is like there and compare it to what we have, and what more we could have, with this *Governance Agreement*. I invite them to live with boiled-water advisories, with poor sanitation infrastructure, with insignificant annual operating budgets, with having to obtain Indian Affairs approval for everything, with no control over what happens in their traditional territories, with skyrocketing youth suicide rates, with no control over anything.

When I look back at the last 40 years of Cree struggles and the agreements that have come out of that long struggle, what I see is that... the truly remarkable thing that the Cree Nation has achieved is that we have gone along a very special path of **recreating our original sovereignty**.

With all of our agreements, including the one which is currently in front of us for our approval, we are doing something which is blazing a trail in the history of Indigenous Peoples around the world. What we are doing is re-capturing what was lost during several hundred years of colonization and exploitation by European powers—we are re-capturing our status as a Nation with our own laws, we are in control over what happens on our traditional territory, we have our own institutions to deliver essential programs and services, we will write our own Cree Constitution, and we have done all this while preserving our culture, our values and our language.

When our leaders of 40 years ago signed the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement*, they were sometimes called “sell outs” by other aboriginal groups. There was concern that by agreeing to the hydro project described in the *JBNQA* we were giving up too much. For a time, we were outcasts among national indigenous organizations. Even our own leaders, burdened by the heavy weight of having to make decisions about the fate of our future generations, sometimes wondered if they made the right decision. This doubt was reinforced when the *JBNQA* was not

respected and not implemented properly by both the Province of Quebec and the Federal Government.

But throughout it all, our leaders remained true leaders. They kept their eyes and they kept their focus on the vision and had faith that our people would continue to stand behind them—united and strong—to achieve the noble vision underlying the Cree approach to the *JBNQA*. They remained real leaders by having faith in a vision and having the courage and strength to stay true to that vision.

All of our struggles over the last 40 years have paid off. Where we were once colonized and oppressed, we have now decolonized ourselves and we are the authors of our own future. We are no longer victims, but instead, we are proud builders of an Indigenous Nation. What we have achieved is a model for other groups to learn from and work with in their own realities.

It is now time for our people, and especially our leaders at the local level, to come together to continue to move us forward. It is now time for us to seize yet another historic opportunity for the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee to advance the cause of Indigenous rights and the cause of Indigenous nation-building. It is time for our leaders to be true leaders.

Real leadership is not about being **against** things. Real leadership is about having a vision of what could be and working to bring that vision into reality. The Cree vision is a noble and honourable vision and worthy of our best efforts to bring it about.

Tearing down is much easier than building up. Real leadership is about building for the future while, at the same time, taking care of each other.

Criticizing is easier than trying to understand. Real leadership is about appreciating our history and knowing when it is time to move our vision forward.

Real leadership is about passion....it is about compassion....it is about good judgment....it is about having sound principles and values....it is about being humble

and working in a way that brings out the best in others....and it is about having courage to walk the talk.

I was totally shocked and appalled to hear that some of our local Chiefs and Deputy Chiefs have sought out opinions on this *Governance Agreement* from a legal firm that in the past has worked actively against Cree interests in representing other clients. This is a firm which we in Ouje-Bougoumou fired several years ago because of several conflicts-of-interest which they themselves did not report to us, and thought that we would not notice. This is a firm which represents other aboriginal groups who are being encouraged to sign agreements which result in important rights being surrendered. This legal firm has no historic association with the Cree Nation and has no deep understanding of our history. To me, this makes no sense. This is a firm which will give an opinion that they think the people who engaged them will want to hear, while at the same time, furthering their own opportunistic interests. I, for one, am very skeptical of their conclusions.

For me, this *Governance Agreement* is a further step in the very special history of the Cree Nation. It is a further step in achieving the noble vision of recreating our original sovereignty in a contemporary context. It is a further step in the progress of Indigenous Peoples world-wide. And, it represents a reversal of the fate of Philix Couchees which is where we would all be today if not for the vision, the determination, the hard work and the struggles of our leaders and partners which have moved us away from such a future, and toward a very different and a healthier and more honourable path.

Meegwetch.
