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SESSIONAL PAPER
(1983 First Session)

THE FIRST MINISTERS' CONFERENCE
ON ABORIGINAL RIGHTS

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After tabling the paper "Aboriginal Rights and the Constitution" with the Legislative Assembly in November 1982, the Executive Committee undertook to return to the Assembly with a second paper when the issues for the First Ministers' Conference on aboriginal rights had crystallized. At this time, the Executive Committee is putting forward this paper to seek direction from the Assembly on the issues which have evolved from the preparatory meetings of government Ministers and officials with leaders of native organizations.

At the Ministers' meeting held in Ottawa on February 28th to March 1st, 1983, an agenda for the First Ministers' Conference was jointly introduced by the leaders of the organizations representing the aboriginal peoples. This agenda has been given approval and will be recommended to the First Ministers as the working document for the Conference. However, it does not necessarily mean that these are the only items which will be discussed, or that all of the issues on the agenda will be dealt with. Only two days will be devoted to the discussion of aboriginal rights topics.

Many of the issues which were identified in the paper "Aboriginal Rights and the Constitution" appear on the current agenda and the positions adopted by the Assembly with regard to those items are still valid. However, due to the complexity of some of these issues, such as guaranteed representation in Parliament, several will be seen as items best dealt with in an ongoing process where the matters can be reviewed in greater detail.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to apprise the Members of the current status of the talks, and to seek direction on certain issues which will be discussed at the First Ministers' Conference. This paper consists of a short review of the agenda items and an indication of how some of the items will likely be dealt with by the First Ministers.

1. CHARTER OF RIGHTS OF THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

The Government of the Northwest Territories has indicated that it favours Part II of the Constitution Act 1982 being entitled the Charter of Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples and

being expanded to include a non-exhaustive list of rights which are identified as belonging to the aboriginal people.

a) Preamble

The G.N.W.T. has supported the idea of including in Part II a preamble recognizing the unique status of the aboriginal people and their contribution to the history of this country. The precise wording would have to be developed. There has been some opposition by the provinces to the idea of a preamble on the ground that it may be premature until such time as rights are identified.

b) Removal of "existing" in section 35

Section 35(1) of the Constitution Act 1982 provides that the "existing" aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are recognized and affirmed. Despite repeated questioning by native leaders, Federal and Provincial representatives have not been able to clearly articulate the reason for the inclusion of the word existing. The presence of the word is a legitimate cause of concern to the native people, and in particular to the native people of the north. Not only does it mean that rights which existed prior to the enactment of the Constitution will still be subject to existing Federal legislation,

but if the rights which are given constitutional protection are deemed to be only those rights which existed as of the date of the enactment of the Constitution Act 1982, any rights which may evolve from future land claims settlements would not be protected. The Federal government has indicated that it will not consent to the removal of the word "existing" until rights are identified by the First Ministers' Conference as contemplated by section 37 of the Constitution Act 1982. As well, several provinces have stated that they will not consent to the removal of the word. Although at this time it is doubtful that this item will be resolved at the First Ministers' Conference, the G.N.W.T. sees the removal of existing in section 35 as a matter of vital importance to the native people of the Territories where land claims settlements will be concluded which provide for rights for the beneficiaries of the settlement.

Recommendation: That the G.N.W.T. support the proposal to delete the word "existing" from section 35 of the Constitution Act 1982.

c) Statement of Particular Rights and Statement of Principles

The Government of the Northwest Territories has favoured the entrenchment in the Constitution of as many rights as can be agreed upon at the First Ministers' Conference. Results of the preparatory meetings have indicated that several of the

provinces might be prepared to recognize some general principles, on the understanding that these principles would not be immediately translatable into enforceable rights. Rather, the statement of principles would provide the guidelines for discussion to take place under the ongoing process.

The G.N.W.T. would favour immediate entrenchment of rights such as the right to custom and language and the right to practice customary family law. Recognition could then be given to these rights in Provincial and Territorial legislation, thereby accommodating regional differences.

If a statement of principles is to be adopted, it should apply to those items on which agreements cannot be reached at the First Ministers' Conference and should be seen as interim measure until the matter can be thoroughly dealt with in the ongoing process.

d) Equality

There would appear to be general agreement by all parties that aboriginal rights should apply equally to male and female persons. The Federal Government has suggested an amendment to section 25 of the Constitution Act 1982 to accomplish this end, and has indicated that it would not oppose the inclusion of appropriate wording in section 35 and it is suggested that

amendments to this effect be made to both sections.

Recommendation: That section 25 and section 35 of the Constitution Act 1982 be amended to provide that aboriginal rights apply equally to male and female persons.

e) Enforcement and Interpretation

The item of enforcement refers to the inclusion in the Constitution of a clause similar to section 24 giving any person whose aboriginal rights are infringed or denied the right to apply to a court for an appropriate remedy.

The native organizations have suggested a clause be added to section 35 to provide that a fair and liberal interpretation be given to the aboriginal rights clauses.

Recommendation: That the G.N.W.T. support the inclusion in the Constitution Act 1982 of the following:

- a) a clause giving aboriginal persons the right to seek redress in the courts for an infringement of aboriginal rights; and
- b) a clause providing that provisions dealing with aboriginal rights be given a broad interpretation in keeping with the spirit of the Constitution.

2. AMENDING FORMULA

The Government of the Northwest Territories has favoured the inclusion of a clause in the Constitution to provide that amendments to the aboriginal rights provisions could not be made without the consent of the aboriginal people. It has become evident in the course of the preparatory meetings that the First Ministers will be reluctant to grant a veto to a non-legislative body, especially since only the Federal government has a veto under section 38 amending formula.

There appears to be a general consensus that the First Ministers would be prepared to consult with native leaders before introducing any amendments affecting aboriginal rights. The Federal government has suggested the convening of a First Ministers' Conference to which aboriginal leaders would be invited when amendments to the aboriginal rights section were contemplated. The Federal draft does not provide for participation of the Territories in such a Conference despite the fact that several provinces have expressed support for territorial involvement.

Recommendation: In light of the opposition to a consent provision for aboriginal people in the amending process dealing with aboriginal rights, the G.N.W.T. should be prepared to support

a mandatory consultation process which would include the Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

3. SELF-GOVERNMENT

This item has caused some confusion at the preparatory meetings. Several provinces have given an outright rejection to the concept of sovereignty while others have been non-committal on the basis that they do not understand the issue.

Self-government will probably be an item which will be referred to the ongoing process. The Federal government has proposed that a principle such as an entitlement to institutions of self-government be included in a preamble to a new section 37. Such a statement in the Constitution, while not enforceable in the Courts, would represent a political commitment of the governments of this country to address this issue which is of fundamental importance to the aboriginal people.

4. REPEAL OF SECTION 42(1)(e) and (f)

It has been the position of the G.N.W.T. that section 42(1)(e) and (f) should be repealed. Section 42(1)(e) speaks of the possible extension of provinces into the territories without Territorial consent. Section 42(1)(f) makes the

establishment of new provinces subject to the general amending formula in the Constitution Act 1982.

Although the Federal government has supported the repeal of both of these subsections, the provinces have resisted the attempt to limit the power which they acquired through the enactment of the Constitution Act 1982. Several provinces have suggested that the two subsections be treated differently. There has been some provincial agreement on an attempt to modify the language of section 42(1)(e), but there is a disinclination on the part of most provinces to assent to the repeal of section 42(1)(f).

At the last meeting of Ministers, the G.N.W.T. circulated to the delegates proposed alternatives to these two subsections for discussion purposes only. With regard to section 42(1)(e), the alternative for discussion was the repeal of this subsection and the rewording of section 43 to provide for the consent of the legislative authority of the applicable territory prior to the alteration of the boundary between a province and the territory. There appears to be general support for such a rewording of section 43. However, if the proposed wording were not seen as acceptable from a provincial perspective, a similar objective could be obtained by allowing section 42(1)(e) to remain in its present form, but making it a precondition that a resolution of

consent be adopted by the appropriate legislative authority of the territory prior to any amendment being made which provided for the extension of a province into the territory.

In the face of strong opposition from the provinces to the repeal of section 42(1)(f), the G.N.W.T. has proposed for discussion a three part amendment involving the rewording of section 38, section 42 and section 46. The proposal involves the amendment of section 46 to permit a territory, in addition to Parliament, to initiate an amendment to establish a new province in a territory. In addition, section 42 would be amended to provide that no amendment to establish the new province could be made unless a constitutional conference were held consisting of the Prime Minister, the First Ministers of the Provinces and the elected representatives of the government of the territory seeking provincehood. Finally, any such amendment would still be subject to the amending formula, but the territory seeking provincehood would be deemed to be a province for the purposes of giving consent under the amending formula. On the last point and on the ability of the territory to initiate the amendment, there may be provincial opposition and it may be necessary to seek a compromise on this position.

One further aspect of this issue requires mention. By the terms of section 41 of the Constitution Act 1982, any amendment to Part V (which includes section 42) requires the

consent of the Senate, the House of Commons and each of the provinces. It is important to note that if one province refused to pass a resolution, or refused to put the matter before its legislative assembly, the G.N.W.T. proposal would fail notwithstanding that it has support from the Federal government and all other provinces.

Recommendation: Re: section 42(1)(e) That the G.N.W.T. seek an amendment to section 42(1)(e) of the Constitution Act 1982 as follows:

- a) the repeal of section 42(1)(e) and the rewording of section 43 to provide for the consent of the legislative authority of the territory prior to the alteration of a territorial-provincial boundary.

Recommendation: Re: section 42(1)(f) That the G.N.W.T. seek an amendment to section 42(1)(f) of the Constitution Act 1982 to provide:

- a) the right of a territory to initiate an amendment for the creation of a new province in a territory;
- b) the holding of a First Ministers' Conference to include the elected representatives of the government of the applicable territory prior to any amendment being made to create a new province out of a territory;
- c) in the case of an amendment to create a new province, the territory seeking provincehood to be deemed to be a province for purposes of the amending formula.

5. Amendments to Part III

This agenda item addresses the issue of equalization payments, cost sharing and delivery of services to aboriginal peoples. The issue to some extent involves a dispute between the Federal government and the provinces as to the degree of responsibility in providing funding and services to native people.

The aboriginal groups have proposed that these items be included in Part III which speaks of political commitments to principles. Such commitments do not create rights and are not enforceable in a court of law. These matters will not be resolved at the First Ministers' Conference and will possibly be referred to the ongoing process. It would be hoped that ultimately, such commitments would be inserted in Part II so as to create enforceable rights.

6. ONGOING PROCESS

The G.N.W.T. has supported the entrenchment in the Constitution of an ongoing process to provide for future First Ministers' Conferences to deal with aboriginal rights. The Federal government and some provinces have suggested amendments to section 37 to provide for a series of conferences within

the next few years. At this point, the suggestions have ranged from one conference every year for five years to one every two years for six years. The exact number and time frame appear to be negotiable. The G.N.W.T. has supported the proposals which provide for more frequent meetings, on the understanding that such First Ministers' Conferences should not preclude work at the officials level as well as bi-lateral negotiations between governments and native organizations.

While the Federal government and most provinces have indicated that they favour an entrenched process, British Columbia has suggested that in lieu of an amendment to the Constitution, an accord be signed by all parties at the conclusion of the First Ministers' Conference. The terms of the accord would commit the parties to participation in an ongoing process. The Executive Committee proposes that the Legislative Assembly agree to such an accord on the clear understanding that it was an interim measure until such time as an amendment to the Constitution could be passed. In this sense it might be useful in light of the time delay involved to effect an amendment. Furthermore, section 39 of the Constitution Act 1982 provides that a proclamation shall not be issued amending the Constitution before the expiration of one year from the adoption of the resolution initiating the amending procedure, unless the

Legislative Assembly of each province has previously adopted a resolution of assent or dissent. If one province refused to refer a proposed amendment to its legislature, the amending process would be in limbo for a minimum of one year.

Recommendation:

- 1) That the G.N.W.T. seek the entrenchment of the ongoing process in the Constitution Act 1982.
- 2) That if an accord is to be signed, it should state that it is an interim measure and the accord should also contain an undertaking by governments that they will, at the earliest possible time, refer the matters contained in the accord, including the entrenchment of an ongoing process, to their respective legislatures for consideration.

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