

HANSARD

UNEDITED TRANSCRIPT

THURSDAY, MAY 16, 1996

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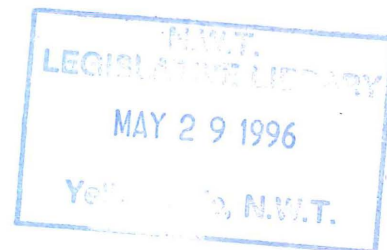
(As this is an unedited transcript, direct quotes may not be used as Members and witnesses have until 10:00 a.m. the morning following receipt of transcript in which to make corrections in the event they have been misquoted.)

CORRECTIONS: \_\_\_\_\_

- Speech made by Stephen  
Kakfui, MLA Saktu in  
the legislative Assembly  
Thursday May 16, 1996.

"Not A Name But A Geopolitical Description"  
The Northwest Territories"

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Hansard - Thursday, May 16, 1996

**ITEM 9: REPLIES TO OPENING ADDRESS**

**Hon. Stephen Kakfwi's Reply**

**HON. STEPHEN KAKFWI:** Mr. Speaker, I wish to speak to the issue of the name for a Western Territory; not a name but, rather, a geopolitical description. Our leaders all have a responsibility to help set the proper context for discussion on a wide range of issues -- abortion, death penalty, homosexuality, euthanasia -- and some of those issues are current today. These issues affect each of us so profoundly that we are taxed mentally, psychologically, socially and morally to our very human limits and struggling to come to terms with them; individually, as families, as communities and even as a country.

The issue of what to name ourselves, our home, our lands and jurisdiction after division in 1999 is perhaps not so profound, but it compels us to try to think and accept certain realities. It compels us to reach to our inner courage, to accept the changes we have created and to move on to a new phase in our history. We owe it to ourselves to move on and to accept that change has come. We can no longer regard ourselves as a child, a colony of Ottawa, a territory. We have come to a point in our history when we have no choice but to seize the opportunity to become something more. It is our duty, I believe, to ourselves for everything we have fought for, for all that has changed in the last 25 years. It is our duty to move on for the future of our youth, for the future of our children. We must not ever make it necessary for our children to have to go through the hardship and the pain that so many of us have gone through in our struggle to assert our rights, our identity and our self-determination. Why would we work so hard for change, only to tell Ottawa in the end that we now want to maintain the current status quo?

It was only in 1986 that the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, John Parker, turned to Nick Sibbeston in an Executive Council meeting and handed him the gavel to chair meetings of the Council. This Council has since evolved into a Cabinet of a government which has responsibilities very similar to those held by provincial jurisdictions. Since that time, the pace of change has been unrelenting. I believe that the intensity of change will become even more demanding in the months ahead, now that the process for division of the Territories has begun to accelerate.

For those of us in the western part of this place, known by most as the "Northwest Territories," I think the reality that change may be passing us is beginning to sink in. I'm not entirely sure just what caused this but it may be the day that Iqaluit was designated as the future capital of Nunavut. That event made the emergence of Nunavut seem to be just that much closer, that much more real for some people here in the West to sit up and take notice. The way I see it, our colleagues in the East have, for quite some years now, had a pretty clear sense of where they're going and how they propose to get there. There are a few details to work out yet but, for the most part, there is an incredible rising sense of pride in this entity called "Nunavut," which I am told means "our land."

Much of this extraordinary collective commitment to carving Nunavut out of what is the eastern NWT can be attributed to the fact that the name itself conveys so much. "Nunavut," our land, our sense of ourselves, our collective commitment to a sense of purpose and direction that is distinctly ours and that no one shall divert us from. We could use a bit of

that here in the West. In fact, I think we could use a lot of it. Without a clear sense of who we are, what we want and where we are going, we run the risk of being a little more than a rudderless ship.

There is a joke going around these days that maybe those lands west of Nunavut and east of Yukon should become known as "Rest-Of-It." I am sure that not too far below the surface of that unhappy designation rests a good measure of truth. Without a pure sense of purpose, we are in danger of becoming geopolitical leftovers. Surely we can, should and must do better than that. I believe we will and I believe we can begin with the creation of a new name for our area of this great country.

I know there are some out there who have an almost pathological commitment to the designation of this place as the Northwest Territories. I am sure there are many others who share that. I have little doubt that as little political development pushed westward from Upper and Lower Canada to the wilds of what is now Manitoba, there were people who having made the transition from being residents of Rupert's Land, then became proud citizens of the Northwest Territories. I am sure many people at that time felt they wanted to leave things just the way they were.

Fortunately, for those who advocated the value of establishing new and distinct society and making new additions to confederation, there wasn't the excuse of the large stacks of unused stationery around to provide the argument that we should maintain the status quo. It is significant that the trend continued as the Northwest Territories was whittled away to create new provinces and the Yukon. Saskatchewan and Alberta saw the value of communicating the message that there was something new, different in nature from what had gone before. Although each might have laid claim to the designation "Northwest Territories," none of them did.

I suggest that in each case, this resulted from an appreciation of the fact that there was much to be gained from entering the confederation club as a full partner. There wasn't much at all to be said for being a territory which, by definition, contemplates status as an administrative zone of a distant central government. It is also significant that as it became apparent that the map of Canada was about to change; this time, with the division of the Northwest Territories in April 1999, there was no hint of any argument over which side would be entitled to lay claim over the name Northwest Territories. Inuit and other people living in the region understood and embraced the examples of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Yukon. They knew the value of establishing a distinct identify for themselves as they moved towards the realization of their aspirations for something new and something bold; a new beginning that would cause Canadians to sit up and take notice.

Here on the western side, we have had a difficult time getting people to realize that division is about more than just the creation of Nunavut. It is and it must be about the creation of two new, viable, political jurisdictions north of 60. In a way, we are our own worst enemies in advancing our interests. Mired as we are in our commitment to the status quo, we have been unable to capture the imagination and attention of Canadians. Selecting a new name which conveys a sense of who we are and our vision of where we may be going surely won't resolve every issue confronting us, but it will be the best start and the only start we can give ourselves. It is also a piece of business which is long overdue.

I believe it is useful to reflect a bit further on just how we came to have the name "Northwest

Territories" in the first place. As the name has been handed down from our provincial siblings like an old, threadbare sweater, we have perhaps lost sight of the fact that it originated with civil servants in Ottawa who, believing themselves to be the centre of the Canadian universe, felt the need to name everything they considered within their dominion. When faced with the task of giving an appropriate designation to that large blob of land to the west and north of Ottawa, the best they could come up with was the Northwest Territory which, over time, was simplified to Northwest Territories. It was the easiest, most convenient name to give it and, for bureaucrats preoccupied with far more pressing matters of state, it was certainly easier to remember than anything that might have been actually more appropriate, both to the land and to the nature of those people who occupied and owned those lands. The name was also useful because it conveyed a very clear sense about who was in charge. The lands might have been a long way from Ottawa, but Ottawa was careful to express the point that they were the masters of any undeveloped territories, which they might choose to have greater use of at some time in the future.

If I could borrow a phrase from my friend Zebede Nungak, who has a renowned talent for illustrating the absurdity of some of our more recent history, he says our ancestors "woke up one morning to find themselves newly-minted citizens" of the Northwest Territory. No one had asked any of the original occupants of those lands what they thought about the idea of such a name. Those lands had names already. It was likely that many people simply went on believing that nothing had changed, but it had. It took a little while for the full weight of those changes to become apparent. Many of us feel that weight today. Some, unable to see any glimpse of the vision of the future in this thing called the Northwest Territories, have simply elected to go back to ignoring that the place exists at all. Leaders such as Gerry Antoine, Jerry Paulette and others have done that. I don't believe they are alone.

Those with a passion for preserving the name Northwest Territories will do well to reflect on just what that might mean. From my perspective, it isn't particularly complicated. We have members of the family who no longer or never did see themselves in the picture. We are fools if we persist in ignoring the reality and the legitimacy of that viewpoint.

Why do we name things anyway? What does it say to those who come into contact with us? What does it say about how we view ourselves? We name ourselves, or our parents do, to convey a sense of who we are. When my wife and I had our children, we worked, researched and did a lot of soul-searching. We named our first daughter, Kyla. In Dene, it's Kyla. It means willow tip. The name was meant to signify that it was a new season for us in our life, a new beginning. We gave her the name Marissa, which is "Dene-ized" to mean "little Marie."

Our second daughter is Daylyn. It is a Dene word that refers to rapids or where the water flows. It is in reference to the power and the beauty of water; rough, gentle, powerful.

Our son's name, Keenan, comes from the Dene name Kee'hay'nee which means one without arrows, a man who needs no weapons. He came to us in a time of global peace and a move towards disarmament. His name is meant to reflect that.

I give you examples to say that I believe once we give some thought to the dimensions of this exercise we are engaged in, perhaps we have to do a lot more work, look within ourselves, look to our elders and our history and look forward to the vision we have together. That will give us the name. For now, I focus on the arguments as to why I think Northwest Territories

is not a name and not a choice we can afford to entertain.

Ottawa has named us in the past, in many ways. It has exercised control over other matters which should have been left to us. Now is the time we can take greater control and we must continue to do so. We have moved well beyond being an administrative zone of a distant government, to the point where we want and need a new relationship, a partnership, with the federal government and a partnership with the provinces, the Yukon and Nunavut. There was a time in the past when Manitoba also reached that conclusion. Saskatchewan and Alberta followed. Yukon carved out its own identity. Nunavut has now done the same and we would be wise to do likewise. We should be realistic in giving the changes that have taken place as new provinces that joined confederation. The descriptive term, "Northwest Territories," is no longer even an accurate description of where we are, let alone who we are. That alone ought to give us the incentive to make the change.

Yukon is in the northwest corner of this country, but we are unlikely to hear a plea from them that they have the most logical claim to the name that we are all too determined to cling to. There is a reason for that. We should take the time to consider what that reason might be. For me, the answer is simple: It would be a step backwards. Let there be no mistake, I believe we must choose our own name. We must take the time first to debate the relevant issues and implications and then take an informed decision on where to go from here.

It is important to remember as well that we are still largely an aboriginal population here in the western part of what is still the Northwest Territories. We should appreciate the fact that provinces with considerably smaller aboriginal populations had, in selecting new names to express themselves, selected aboriginal names. Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Canada. This country itself takes its name from its aboriginal foundation. Over the course of the last few weeks, I have been talking to people about my view that we should be moving towards selecting a new name and giving ourselves a new beginning. It should come as no surprise to all of you that there are many, perhaps too many, who disagree with my perspective and have made it clear that they would prefer to leave things as they are now.

I believe that some of the arguments that have been advanced have been largely because there is some political apathy that has set in to this part of the Western Territory. We have been buffeted by a lot of reactionary views in recent years and are lacking in a single visionary approach to the many issues that are confounding us at this time. You should be interested to know that Yukon is a Gwich'in word which, roughly translated, means "big river." No one goes over there and calls them a territory. They despise that word. They don't want it used. They prefer to be called "Yukon" or, at least, "the Yukon." They are trying to drop that word. They are trying to stop using the word "the" in describing themselves and they are trying to drop "Territory." They would simply be Yukon, like Alberta. We are now the only jurisdiction in Canada that still uses the word "the" in describing ourselves.

These are important points of debate that I wanted to raise today. I also want to bring out the point that there are some leaders in the West who are content with things as they are because they appreciate that as long as we are a territory or territories, we are, by nature and by definition, divisible. For those who see value in bulcinizing the western part of the Northwest Territories, maintaining the status quo is in their best interest. As long as we view ourselves as nothing more than a territory, we will be nothing more than a territory. If we act in a manner that makes it clear that we think of ourselves and for ourselves in good terms and clear terms, then we can expect to be treated differently. It is unacceptable to me that we

should try to do anything less. If we are prepared, as we say we are, to accept responsibility for our own destiny, we should be prepared to take a place at the table of confederation in a manner which makes it clear to everyone that we have long since overcome our territorial inferiority complex. I would like to mention that if we fail to see the agenda and get this important business behind us, we will be vulnerable; not only internally, but also from an external perspective.

Territories are fair game. It has always been that way and it remains that way still. We saw the point illustrated rather recently when the federal government moved through Bill C-110 to establish a legal process for lending of the federal veto power on constitutional reform to the various regions of the country. The North, once again, wasn't in the equation at all. Territories are the only regions into which provinces can expand and extend their territorial boundaries. We need to act to lessen that risk. Some will say it could never happen and I hope they are right, but I believe we must do what we can to lessen that exposure. That is the duty and the essence of government.

The fact that faceless bureaucrats from Ottawa named everything that they became aware of up here shouldn't come as surprise to any of us who live here. We have been compelled for generations to live with places named after people who have never set foot here or lived here. Our communities have been successfully and systematically unravelling that chain for several years now. Fort Franklin and Fort Norman have changed their names to Deline and Tulita. Arctic Red River is now Tsiigehtchic. Lac La Martre is now Wha Ti.

What I am saying today is the time has come to follow the lead of our communities in making sure that we adopt a new name which, rooted in our true past, would speak to our strength of vision for our collective future. I am personally very impressed by the will and spirit of the people in our communities who have had the courage to challenge the status quo and to make the change. They have dedicated extraordinary time, wisdom and energy to making these changes happen, and I see no reason why Members of this Assembly or the people in our communities ought to work to a lower standard.

The Northwest Territories is not a name. It is, rather, a description, a geographic/political label in relation to Ottawa. A proper name would not be prefixed with the word "the." Try dropping the words "the" and "Territories." Does Northwest stand alone as a name for our people? Does it make you feel proud? Listen to it: "Northwest." What does it say? To complete the name, it really needs the word "territories" after it. Then think about it again. We would be the only jurisdiction in this great country known by its political and geographic location and as a territory in relation to Eastern Canada, not by something inspirational, meaningful or relevant.

The name Northwest Territories has served us all well, but like everyone else, we must face up to the fact that it is now time to retire it with the dignity and respect it deserves. It was an honourable name and, out of it, great new provinces were carved; provinces which have never forgotten they were part of the Northwest Territories but have now had the courage and the maturity to move on to establishing their own unique identity, ever mindful of their own history.

In the Globe and Mail on May 14th, the writer, Michael Valpy, said: "History is a battleground. Whichever side wins gets to tell the story of a place with the prism of its own culture. The losers get erased." I say to the Dene, the Metis, the Inuvialuit and the non-aboriginal people

of the Northwest Territories, we were erased once when we were named the Northwest Territories. Let us, along with the people of Nunavut, now put our new name on the map of Canada. Let us finally complete the map of Canada, once and for all, properly.

I am confident that, with time -- and we don't seem to have a lot of it -- we will come to the conclusion that we should manage change; that, with time, we will elect to exercise leadership and move towards division in a manner which recognizes the distinct nature of the western part of the Northwest Territories. I believe we will collectively recognize the value of giving that vision a name. Our citizens must guide that decision.

So what should the name be? Well, we all know and love this place of extraordinary beauty and have grown to appreciate the tremendous potential that all of us collectively bring to it. There is incredible cultural and geographical diversity, and it's a vast land. I believe what we have to do is collectively look back into our history, look into the future and define what it is that we wish for our children and what kind of a vision we have for them in the future. Speaking to the elders, bringing them together to help us look back in order to see ahead will give us the name that we seem unable and unwilling to entertain at this time. Thank you.

--Applause