

Government Orders

Yukon, virtually all of which have a significant aboriginal population.

Finally the Yukon self-government legislation is the first under which the First Nations will be empowered to provide certain programs and services not only to residents living on settlement land but also to First Nation citizens living off settlement land. This is another first.

Given these unique features, it is not surprising there were fairly protracted negotiations before the final agreements were reached. Because of the complexity and diversity of Yukon's aboriginal communities, the government agreed to negotiate and sign individual self-government agreements with each of 14 separate First Nations. Four such agreements have now been finalized. Active negotiations are currently being pursued with five others.

The government is confident this process will be completed satisfactorily over the next few years. While each agreement will have certain unique provisions reflecting the particular characteristics and needs of individual First Nations, there are certain common areas covered in all the agreements negotiated to date.

These include first, the recognition of First Nation governing structures. Unlike the previous band structure under the Indian Act that they will replace, First Nations will have broad powers similar to those of other governments to enter into contracts, acquire and hold property, and form corporations. These powers are vitally important if the First Nation is to effectively administer self-government and develop initiatives to improve the economic and social conditions in its communities.

Second, these agreements will replace the Indian Act. Under the agreement the Indian Act will no longer apply to a Yukon First Nation, its citizens or its land, except for some minor provisions which deal with for example the question of which citizens are Indians within the meaning of the Indian Act, how reserve lands are to be treated under a self-government regime, and provisions respecting the treatment of trust moneys for minors.

Third, the agreements provide for an ongoing process for transferring programs to the First Nations, that is transferring programs from the department of Indian affairs to First Nations. It is inherent in these agreements that First Nation governments will assume responsibility for administering a number of programs and services now provided by either the federal or territorial governments. These will include social services, health services, and educational responsibilities.

This will be done on a transitional basis in which the First Nation will take the initiative in determining which programs it is prepared to take on and in what order. Annual meetings will be

held between government and First Nations to review priorities and agree on the timing and financing of these transfers.

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Although this process will take time, the government is confident that over the next several years the minister will be able to downsize the department of Indian and Inuit affairs operations in Yukon by some 75 per cent from present levels. Only a small staff will remain to handle responsibilities and obligations directly related to the implementation of federal responsibilities emerging from self-government. I want to congratulate the minister on the actions he has taken in that respect.

Fourth, the legislation provides for the establishment of law-making authority of First Nations over their citizens and settlement land. Although federal laws of general application will remain paramount, First Nations will have authority to pass legislation dealing with internal management, the provision of services, taxation on settlement land and similar matters.

Fifth, with respect to the funding of Yukon First Nations, self-government will be by means of new five-year comprehensive financial transfer agreements which will replace current funding agreements. These will give First Nations much more scope and flexibility within which to set priorities and plan for the orderly development of their communities.

These are the key general provisions in the legislation that will be common to all the self-government agreements in Yukon. However, some differences will exist from one First Nation to another in Yukon, for example, in procedures established for ratification of the agreement and in the specific provisions dealing with the application of self-government powers within community boundaries.

The most compelling aspect of self-government is the opportunity it provides for economic development within aboriginal communities. Both aboriginal leaders and the government are seriously concerned about the continuing high rates of unemployment among aboriginal Canadians. This is clearly one of the major stumbling blocks to improving the economic and social conditions among Canada's aboriginal population. As the government has stated, this is a matter of national concern. The untapped potential of aboriginal people is untapped potential for all of Canada.

Yukon's aboriginal population is young with more than half of that population under 24 years of age. Like the aboriginal population as a whole, it is growing at a faster rate than the national average. Compounding this situation is the fact that young aboriginal people in all parts of Canada, including Yukon, are seeking greater educational opportunities in recent years. Across Canada, the number of young aboriginal people staying in school until grade 12 has doubled in the past decade. The