

SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR INDIAN FIRST NATIONS

The First Ministers' Conference on Aboriginal Constitutional Matters, held in Ottawa in March 1983, marked an important step toward the recognition of Indian First Nations in the Canadian Constitution. As Prime Minister Trudeau observed in his opening statement:

Clearly our aboriginal peoples each occupied a special place in history. To my way of thinking, this entitles them to special recognition in the Constitution and to their own place in Canadian society, distinct from each other and distinct from other groups who, together with them comprise the Canadian citizenry.

The Committee fully endorses the Prime Minister's remarks. The Committee further believes that special and distinct recognition can best be manifested by Indian First Nation governments having a unique place in the Canadian political system and the Constitution.

The Need For A New Relationship

For thousands of years prior to European immigration, North America was inhabited by many different self-governing aboriginal peoples, speaking many languages and having widely differing cultures and economies. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, which formalized British colonial policy for North America, recognized this situation.

Over the years, however, the initial relationship between Indian people and the British Crown changed. In the evolution of Canada from colonial status to independence, the Indian peoples were largely ignored, except when agreements had to be made with them to obtain more land for settlement.

The Indian peoples played no part in negotiating Confederation, or in drafting the *British North America Act* of 1867 which, under section 91(24), assigned legislative authority