

*Government Orders*

are talking about giving aboriginal peoples the tools to do what they need to do.

One of the key commitments made by our party in the last election was to act on implementing the inherent right to aboriginal self-government. We did so because we saw the place of aboriginal peoples in Canada as a litmus test for our belief in fairness, in justice and in equality. Sadly, it is a test which we as a nation have too often failed.

In the red book we promised to implement the inherent right of aboriginal peoples to govern themselves by negotiating self-government agreements. On August 10 we delivered on that commitment. We released our policy on aboriginal self-government and presented the principles which will guide the negotiations. This is a pragmatic and practical policy, one which we believe will work.

One of the key reasons we think it will work is that it is the product of some 18 months of consultation with aboriginal groups, provincial and territorial governments, as well as others on what they thought our policy should be in this area. In co-operation with provincial and territorial counterparts, our policy aims for direct negotiations with aboriginal people in their communities on issues directly affecting their lives.

As a government we believe the time has come to stop the endless, fruitless debates about how many angels can dance on the head of the constitutional pin and get down to negotiating practical, pragmatic and realistic arrangements that implement the inherent right of self-government. Our approach is new but it is animated by principles as old as our country, principles of respect, of tolerance, of fairness and of compassion.

In the case of British Columbia the policy provides that negotiations on self-government will take place at the same table as discussions on land and resources. The process and structures already in place for treaty negotiations and confirmed by Bill C-107, the British Columbia Treaty Commission act, will also be used to negotiate self-government issues.

These two sets of discussions, self-government on the one hand and land and resource uses on the other, complement each other perfectly. It means that for the first time the parties will be able to have all the issues dealt with at one table under one set of negotiations. This will be more cost effective, something I am sure members of the third party will herald as a great achievement. It eliminates overlap and duplication and permits a much more comprehensive approach to achieve progress, something I also hope they will herald. We are committed to ensuring that the same principles and practices of openness which have characterized the B.C. treaty making process will also be applied to the self-government decisions and discussions.

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There seems to be some confusion on the part of members opposite, particularly in the third party, as to just what our inherent rights policy is all about. Let me lay down the main elements so they can see for themselves how the BCTC process can be utilized to negotiate fair and meaningful self-government agreements.

As a government we propose to negotiate self-government agreements with aboriginal groups and the province or territory concerned. These negotiations and the agreements they produce will be based on a number of principles.

We begin with the premise that the inherent right of self-government is an existing aboriginal right under the Constitution. What does that mean? It means we will recognize that aboriginal peoples were self-governing before the arrival of Europeans and that they never gave up that right to govern themselves, even though that right has been ignored or suppressed for many years.

Because this right is in the Constitution, it is enforceable in the courts. Litigation, as we know, is lengthy and costly and often serves only to create conflict rather than engender understanding. It can discourage a willingness to work together as Canadians to build a better, stronger future for our country. Is that not what we are here to do?

In the end, it is unlikely that the courts would go much beyond providing broad principles, leaving the details of self-government to be negotiated by the parties who would have to live with those agreements anyway. It is far better, this government believes, to negotiate practical ways of implementing this right at the outset, tailoring each agreement to the unique circumstances of each community or region.

Bill C-107 is not a one size fits all exercise. That approach has been tried and it only led to gridlock and frustration on both sides. What we need is an agreement and a process that is flexible enough to accommodate the diverse needs of diverse communities. This policy will do that.

The second guiding principle in our negotiations is that aboriginal self-government will be exercised within the existing Constitution. As a consequence, the right of inherent self-government does not include a right of sovereignty in the international law sense and it will not result in independent aboriginal nation states.

Our goal is to enhance the participation of aboriginal people in Canadian society, not place them outside it. The policy will not create little enclaves dotted across the country. It will provide aboriginal people with the tools they need to manage their own affairs and realize their own potential. It will mean an end to conflict and it will open the door to progress for all Canadians.