

Address by the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

Presented by Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Bernard Valcourt

Good morning to His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada, Elders, leaders, members of the Land Claim Agreement Coalition, ladies and gentlemen. I am honoured to be here on Algonquin territory for this event and to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Royal Proclamation.

I would like to thank the Land Claims Agreements Coalition for organizing this symposium. I have a special connection with the LCAC – you were the first organization I met with when I was appointed Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. At that meeting, I appreciated the opportunity for an open and honest dialogue on our shared priorities of healthier, more prosperous and self-sufficient Aboriginal communities.

But I will also add that I was surprised a bit, because I had in my previous incarnation as a Member of Parliament in a previous government, been a witness to these negotiations, to these agreements, these modern treaties being reached. And kind of coming back 20 years later, I was surprised, about this Land Claim Agreements Coalition. So I inquired immediately to my officials, my people, “What’s this?” “Well,” they said, “This is the group of the modern treaties.” I said “They have modern treaties, why do they need a coalition?” And they said “Well, it’s about implementation.” And of course, I said “I want to go meet with them.” And that’s how we met barely seven days after my appointment.

And I was surprised that 20 years after my first stint with Aboriginal Affairs as a Minister of State in the ‘90s, that we had issues on the implementation of modern treaties. I was also fully cognizant of the fact that these modern treaties will be historic treaties pretty soon.

The successful negotiation of modern treaties and self-government agreements results in greater self-sufficiency, certainty, and economic opportunities for First Nations in a manner that balances the rights and interests of all concerned. I think the living proof of that statement are the

beneficiaries, and the leaders and the communities that have reached these land claim agreements or self government agreements.

Today we commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Royal Proclamation of 1763. This is a unique opportunity to recognize the importance of this foundational document to all Canadians and its crucial role in the development of our territories, and to the treaty relationship that continues today.

The anniversary of the Royal Proclamation is an occasion for all of us Canadians to reflect on our shared history, and the essential role First Nations and all Aboriginal people have had and continue to have in the cultural identity, economic success and military defense of our country.

Britain's military alliances with First Nations, we have to remember, were a key part of the defensive network of British North America. During the War of 1812, First Nations warriors and Métis fighters played important roles in the defence of these British territories against invading American forces. And during the First World War alone, at least 50 medals were awarded to Aboriginal people in Canada for their bravery.

We can also reflect on the principles embedded in the Royal Proclamation, the duty our Government has to consult with and work alongside First Nations peoples but also to protect Aboriginal rights across Canada. Today we consider how these principles have influenced, and continue to influence, the relationships between Aboriginal peoples in Canada and the Crown.

The anniversary of the Royal Proclamation is also an occasion to reflect on our shared history. It brings a greater understanding of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, and an opportunity for us to continue to move forward on a path of reconciliation. The Royal Proclamation has served as a basis of the treaty-making process throughout Canada. The protocols and procedures it established led to the orderly opening of the lands of what is today Southern Ontario, and eventually Western Canada. While its intent was to control western expansion of the colonies and formalize the relationship between First Nations people and colonists, the Royal Proclamation also became the first public recognition of First Nations rights to lands.

The issuance of the Royal Proclamation and the accompanying promises made at Fort Niagara in 1764 laid the foundation for the constitutional recognition and protection of Aboriginal rights in Canada. This understanding was formally enshrined in the *Constitution Act* of 1982 which guarantees that the Charter would not impact any Aboriginal and treaty rights.

Fundamentally, the Royal Proclamation laid out the procedures for acquiring First Nations land as well as the necessity of concluding agreements with First Nations people, which allowed for the peaceful and prosperous development of Canada. Prior to the 1970s, the treaties concluded covered nearly 50 percent of Canada and established a firm and ongoing relationship between the Crown and Treaty First Nations.

It is through the Royal Proclamation that treaties became an important element of nation-building. Treaties remain, and they are, the highest expression of a respectful relationship between the Crown and Treaty Aboriginal people – a living, breathing relationship that compels us all to work together to find practical solutions to shared goals.

Two hundred and fifty years after the Royal Proclamation was issued, the guiding principles of that decree continue to guide the negotiation and implementation of modern treaties in Canada today. Our goal is to move forward to find joint solutions that help reconcile relationships, promote self-sufficiency, and unlock economic opportunities for Aboriginal people and communities. While progress is being made, we know there is much work to be done and that requires commitment and cooperation on all sides. We all want results that make a real difference, and we need to see those results faster.

The Royal Proclamation and its principles began to guide Canada along a historic path that distinguished it – and we have to all realize this, these principles began to guide Canada along a path that distinguishes us from many other places on Earth where indigenous people are found to live and have been living there for a long, long time – such as the Doctrine of Discovery, under which states claimed to acquire sovereignty over newly encountered lands. Well it is important to note that here in Canada, there is no place for the Doctrine of Discovery. It plays no part at all in our relationship with Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

The anniversary of the Royal Proclamation is an occasion for honest reflection on the past 250 years, and an examination of the forces that helped shape modern-day Canada. It is also an opportunity to talk about the way forward for Aboriginal people and all Canadians based on the knowledge of our shared history.

Following the Royal Proclamation was the meeting in 1764 of Sir William Johnson, Superintendent for Indian Affairs, with First Nations estimated at 20,000 people, to renew the relationship with First Nation allies and to form new alliances with the former allies of France. As we approach the anniversary of that historic meeting next summer, we need to continue to work together to strengthen the foundation of our relationship.

The Government of Canada remains committed to improving our relationships stemming from historic treaties, and we believe that by working together with Treaty Aboriginal people, provinces and territories, we can revitalize and enhance the treaty relationship to bring forward positive and practical outcomes. And together, we can work to build a stronger, more prosperous Canada.

The Government has heard the calls from across the country; that we must take steps with our partners to move ahead on modern treaty implementation. Negotiating treaties is key to renewing and reconciling relationships with Aboriginal people in Canada. But as I was told when we first met, some of them feel like, it's a solemn occasion when you sign the treaty, and it's like a wedding. But then the bride remains alone, and the other is gone, and doesn't seem to be there to ensure that the promises are kept. So we have to, and we are working as I speak, on this implementation issue, and we are doing this in good collaboration with the Land Claims Agreements Coalition. And it is important that we keep that good work, so that we can get those results – as I said earlier – faster. And that's our commitment, to keep working with you.

It is in a spirit of mutual respect and reconciliation that Canada continues to work with Aboriginal partners, to build and renew our historic relationship. I look forward to our ongoing work together. And I wish you all a very successful symposium.

Thank you very much.

