

Address from NCN Chief Jerry Primrose to the Clean Environment Commission on the opening day of the hearing on the Wuskwatim Generation Station and Transmission Project.

I speak with pride today for the people of Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, the descendants of our Cree ancestors who have lived in Northern Manitoba for 7,500 years. I would like to give you some background about our people. Until the 20th century, our people had a thriving lifestyle supported by fishers, hunters and gatherers. Over the past 100 years, our once thriving way of life was almost eliminated by groups who had no respect for our environment and our traditional ways and also our culture. Reserves were created and Indian agents controlled our day-to-day lives. Our children were taken away to residential schools. Lobbyists destroyed the fur trade, an economy that sustained us. And finally, the Churchill River Diversion flooded our lands. We have suffered but slowly we are putting the past behind us through new treaties and agreements and by taking responsibility for our own destiny. In 1908, Nelson House Indian Reserve was created as a result of the adhesion by the Nelson House First Nation to Treaty number 5. We were then an isolated community but fully dependent on the surrounding land and resources.

Until the late sixties and early seventies, our community didn't have electricity or telephones nor running water. But when we got them, we embraced these modern conveniences with open arms. I still remember in the late sixties when we first got electricity, looking out at the lights in our small community. I remember the first time I phoned my mom from high school in Portage La Prairie. When I first got there, I phoned home. This is 1974.

Prior to 1977, our people continued to depend on our traditional economy but the massive flooding caused by the Churchill River Diversion meant people could not fish and hunt as they used to.

In the early eighties, the fur lobbyists began its campaign and the price of fur plummeted, taking our industry with it. It didn't take long for social chaos to set in with an increase in alcohol consumption, suicides and other related social problems. In 1977, the Northern Flood Agreement was signed and it brought a lot of hope to our people. But the implementation of this agreement was slow and very frustrating. By the fall of 1992, we felt we had to decide to look for a new approach in order to bring benefits for our community.

Our community took charge. We appointed a local negotiation team from Nelson House and we hired consultants and advisors. We worked

to find solutions. We didn't listen to people who had never even visited our community but who still thought they knew what was best for us.

We looked after our own best interests. We entered into comprehensive negotiations and finally in 1976, we settled our negotiations and developed a compensation package, which not only provided economic support but gave us control over development of resources in our traditional lands. We will never be fully compensated for our losses but we have moved forward to create a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

We cannot forget the past but we must focus on our future. With close to 5,000 members, we have a rapidly growing population. Over 60 per cent of our people are under 30 years. Half of our members are of school age. One-third of our adults have less than a grade 9 education.

Our rate of unemployment is five times the provincial average. We must address these issues. Today is an important step in this process. What we have gained through long negotiations and hard work over the past few years has given us the ability and the means to be in a position to jointly develop the proposed Wuskwatim Generation and Transmission Project with Manitoba Hydro.

We are very proud that our proposed development respects the environment and our

traditional way of life while providing opportunities that will offer a brighter future for our people and be good for Manitoba's economy. And we believe this project proposed to be built within our traditional territory will help provide after our own interests towards self-sufficiency.

It will also provide for our young people as they deserve to have basic opportunities other Canadians take for granted. We believe this project will be among the things that will help us fulfill our dream of self-sufficiency.

We also believe this project will be safe for our water, lands, plants and animals and for the people of Northern Manitoba where we live. This is important to us because the north is our home, our backyard. Just as the south where your cottages and lake homes provide you with a spiritual place to be, the north is our spiritual place.

So in approaching this project, we have been especially concerned to do it right. We have made our decisions independently to serve the interests of Nisichawayasihk people whom we represent.

Since we began this process, we have heard more radical opponents to the projects speak of environmental terrorism, racism and a new colonialism implying that we are incapable of looking after our own interests towards

self-sufficiency. Whatever the motivation for proposing this development, I think these groups are engaged in what is for us economic terrorism.

The Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation stands to lose a once in a lifetime opportunity to be self-sufficient because of the interference of these outside sources. Big corporations are not exploited in the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation as some opponents of this project have alleged. We have firsthand experience with hydroelectric developments. We understand what can happen when the environmental issues are not fully considered and provisions aren't made for people to prosper with training and job opportunities.

Everything gained from our experience is part of where we are today. We have been cautious. We have been very careful and I'm sure to Hydro's frustration, sometimes we have not just accepted Hydro's plans, in many ways we have modified their plans in important ways. As an example, our First Nation was influential in the decision for the low-head design chosen for Wuskwatim. It is a design that would create the least amount of flooding of any hydroelectric project ever developed in Manitoba. Less than one-half square kilometre. Or for people in the city that understand maybe same size as an average golf course.

We played a direct role in undertaking environmental impact assessment studies, which are at the centre of this Clean Environment Commission hearing. Not only did the assessment involve the latest scientific methods but the process incorporated the traditional knowledge of our elders and resource users and other Aboriginal people in the area. Our spiritual beliefs and culture are part of this traditional knowledge. For example, two possible routes for an access road to the generating station were eliminated because one was too close to a spiritual site while the other route would have been too close where there was an area where Caribou had been sited. Like any development project anywhere, there will be change. But our studies prepared cooperatively with Manitoba Hydro show the project will have little impact on the lands, plants and animals.

I am thankful our First Nation and our Cree people were shown this respect for our knowledge and for our culture. That was a crucial factor in our decision to participate in this project. Because based on the our past experience resulting from the Churchill River Diversion, we are not prepared to move ahead at any cost although we believe we are a very progressive First Nation, economically and socially.

We face many of the same challenges of other First Nations in Manitoba and across Canada, poverty, inadequate health care and social services, poor housing and lack of training, skills and jobs. So we need to find ways to develop and sustain a secure economic base for our First Nation that provides the social and community services we need along with meaningful well-paying jobs and opportunities for our people and especially for our youth.

For us, economic support is not abstract. Its absence is a daily soul-destroying reality. This development gives us an opportunity to become a partner with up to 33 per cent ownership of a project in our resource area that will provide us long-term stable revenues. It is a tangible step into a brighter future.

The new Atoskiwin Training & Employment Centre of Excellence in our community is already a direct benefit of the development process leading to Wuskwatim. The centre offers training for jobs and skills needed in the north. Whether or not Wuskwatim goes ahead, it provides our people with the opportunity to participate in the broader economy of Manitoba and of Canada. Through the centre, people have already completed training and are engaged in work experience. Once it is fully operational, it will become part of the post-secondary training program

for Northern Manitoba with a capacity of 100 students per year.

Our NCN members and northern Aboriginal people will have the required skills, and will be given preferences for the jobs on the project. Jobs will include heavy equipment operators, carpenters, electricians, labourers, clerical, catering and others. Apprenticeships and journeyman opportunities will provide for long-term skills that will serve our members long after Wuskwatim is built. The project also offers contract opportunities for new and existing First Nation businesses to supply products and services needed for the project.

This may provide incentives for NCN entrepreneurs to establish businesses that provide income and create jobs for others. As Chief in Council of NCN, we establish a future development portfolio, currently held by Councillor Elvis Thomas and also our own future development team that was assembled to work towards the development of this project. We lead and direct our own independent legal team, communication consultants and technical and scientific advisors to ensure the project is environmentally responsible. Any partnership with Hydro is equitable and beneficial to our people.

In 2001, a majority of NCN members voted to approve an Agreement in Principle to develop Wuskwatim with Manitoba Hydro and we have worked with Hydro to prepare and submit what we believe to be possibly the most comprehensive environmental impact statements ever undertaken in Manitoba. We have also just completed a Summary of Understanding or SOU, which is like a preview of the final project development agreement. Even though we are here today at the CEC with Hydro, our people will still have the opportunity to vote on the final project development agreement in a secret ballot referendum to decide if NCN will participate. It will be their decision.

The planning and cooperative work that has gone into this project between Manitoba Hydro and ourselves represents a groundbreaking positive approach that we believe will change the way resource development is done in Manitoba forever. We wanted to dispel the issues of the Churchill River Diversion and replace litigation, confrontation with cooperation, understanding and trust.

In conclusion, we believe this is a good project and an opportunity for our First Nation, everyone in the north and all of Manitobans. We ask that you consider the hopes and aspirations of our people when you hear from the groups opposed to this project. They may be well-intentioned but

in my mind, they are misguided if they think they represent our best interests. The evidence we present you with today will demonstrate that the extensive joint planning undertaken by NCN and Manitoba Hydro can positively impact resource development to the benefit of all Manitobans.

Wuskwatim can create the conditions to allow our people to bring their full talents to the world.

This will help everyone in Manitoba. It can be our gift and our legacy to our children and grandchildren and their children for many generations to come.

That is my vision and a dream of our council and of my people. With that, Mr. Chairman, I thank you.