



FIRST NATIONS SUMMIT

***Generation to Generation:
People to People***

**Statement by Akile Ch'oh (Grand Chief Edward John)
at the Simcha Gadolah - the Big Celebration
and opening ceremonies of
Congregation Emanu-El Jewish Educational and Cultural Centre**

**Sunday April 6, 2003/4 Nisan 5763
Victoria, BC**

Thank you for inviting me to the opening of your new “Jewish Educational and Cultural Centre” and the “Simcha Gadolah - the Big Celebration”. On behalf of our people and the Chiefs and leaders of the First Nations Summit, I graciously accept your invitation and come here in the spirit of friendship, respect and humility.

As is with the custom of our people I wish to recognize and acknowledge the Salish people of this coast, on whose ancestral lands we gather.

I wish also to thank those who organized this celebration and all of you who made this centre a reality - a place, generation to generation, to share, to learn and to support each other. Each generation, though it meets its survival challenges in its time and in its own ways, stands stronger and more confident when it recognizes and builds on the strengths of the teachings and beliefs of its ancestors. This is the harmony between the generations.

I am Akile Ch’oh - a Hereditary Chief among my people. We call ourselves Tl’azt’enne. We share a common language, culture and history with other Dene in the northern half of this province. This great land is also shared with many other Indigenous Nations. Now, it is the home of peoples from many different races, lands, cultures and languages.

Canada is a Nation which, despite differences among peoples, has achieved remarkable progress in inclusiveness and tolerance. Notwithstanding this progress we still need to remember, and be mindful, that not all is, or has been, good and well.

There have been serious tests and challenges as new peoples from different lands came here to seek refuge and opportunity. Until the mid 1900’s Chinese were denied access to rights others took for granted - they could not vote and were subject to a head tax as the price of entry into this country. Japanese were indiscriminately arrested, sent to internment camps and their property seized and sold. The Komagata Maru bringing British subjects, Indians from India, was not permitted to land in British Columbia. Fleeing the ravages of Hitler’s regime Jews were not allowed refuge in Canada.

Indigenous peoples in the Americas were denied their ancestral rights, brutally exterminated and systematically dispossessed of their lands and marginalized by colonizing powers. In fact disease alone killed an estimated 95% of pre-Columbus Indigenous peoples. Here on the West Coast, traders provided our people with smallpox infected blankets, virtually decimating entire communities.

Even now there is continued denial of who we are and of our ancestral connection to our lands. In the courts, the governments of this country tell us we must prove who we are and that the onus is on us to prove we have any rights in and to our ancestral homelands. We know this is not right. In time we hope to see recognition and reconciliation.

I do not recall these events to change history, to make people feel guilty, or to feel sorry for ourselves. I recall these because of their influence and impact today and in the hope, the lessons we learn will help shape a better tomorrow. I recall it, because, as Indigenous peoples, we know all too well the ravages of colonialism, racism, intolerance and the denial of a people’s history and heritage.



Ironically, in recent months we heard, with heavy hearts, the cruel and harsh words of insensitivity and intolerance from one of our past national leaders. We felt the sting of the irony. We felt your deep hurt and anger. As much as we would like to we cannot undo his words - but we can, and have, totally rejected the debilitating messages of intolerance, insensitivity and cruelty. And we can reach out to you; understand you and your history. On behalf of First Nations peoples in this province I want to say how deeply sorry we are for the hurt and anger you felt by those words. I cannot think of a better place than here, at Congregation Emanu-El, the oldest surviving synagogue in Canada, to say these words. There are no conditions or excuses to justify the words. They were intolerant. They were cruel. They were insensitive. They were wrong.

We ask you to accept this humble apology and seek your forgiveness.

There are those like Ernst Zundel who have sought to deny your stories and your history. No doubt there will be others. As Indigenous peoples we reject and challenge their venomous words and messages of racism, intolerance, cruelty and denial.

Canada with people from many races and lands with similarly diverse languages, religious/spiritual beliefs and customs exemplifies a civil society based on the ideals of understanding, recognition, tolerance and respect. These ideals are the bedrock of harmony and peace among peoples with diverse backgrounds.

Standing with pride on our respective histories, language and cultures we must continue to build bridges of friendship, respect and humility. In the words of the Salish people we must "lift each other up".

As I prepare this statement I marvel at the sheer beauty of Shasdzuhl - the mountain across the lake - symbol of eternal relations between generations and with the Creator. I recall with pride and humility how "nayyun" - the land and "nakal bun" - the lake, provided nourishment and a homeland to countless generations of our ancestors. It is spring and in accordance with our teachings it is right to remember them.

In the magic moment between the dark of night and the light of day I hear the wondrous songs, prayers and drumbeats of generations long gone. In these songs, prayers and drumbeats I hear the message of harmony between generations and between peoples.

In the words of Inuit singer Susan Aglukark we are all the same - we are family.

Shalom
Soo oh t'eh (Be well)
Thank you.

