

We are all treaty people

The single biggest source of frustration, distrust, and ill-feeling among aboriginal people in Ontario is our failure to deal in a just and expeditious way with breaches of treaty ... If the governments of Ontario and Canada want to avoid future confrontations like Ipperwash or Caledonia, they will have to deal with land and treaty claims effectively and fairly. (Report of the Ipperwash Inquiry, Executive Summary, pg 81)

Land claims are often misunderstood by the public. In the Report of the Ipperwash Inquiry (the Report), Commissioner Sidney Linden clarifies that land claims are about governments fulfilling past promises they made to First Nations on land and resources and compensating them for their failure to do so. Land claims are not about First Nations asking the government to give them more land.

Many flaws exist in the claims settlement process. The Report states that the land claims process in Ontario could be “significantly” improved by establishing a Treaty Commission of Ontario (TCO).

A TCO would not negotiate land claims or decide the meaning of treaties. Rather, as an independent agency, the impartiality and permanence of a TCO would allow it to assist the governments of Ontario, Canada and First Nations to negotiate the settlement of claims.

To assist the land claims process, recommendation Number 6 in Volume 2 of the Report outlines that the TCO should undertake public education about treaties, treaty relationships and land claims. It should also develop programs about treaty history to be incorporated in Ontario schools.

The process to develop a Treaty Commission in Ontario is underway through the Ipperwash Inquiry Priorities and Action Committee (IIPAC). In other Canadian provinces, Treaty Commissions have already been established.

Saskatchewan’s Office of the Treaty Commissioner (OTC) facilitates a process between the Government of Canada and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations to achieve a common understanding on Treaties No. 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10. One of its main functions is to promote the relationship-building process inherent in the Treaties amongst all Canadians (see www.otc.ca).

On a recent trip to Saskatoon, I was inundated with information from an OTC public education display at the airport. It covered the historical context and the present and future significance of treaties. It was good to see the message, “We Are All Treaty People”, designed to capture the mutual benefits of treaties, posted all over the busy airport terminal. I would hope a future TCO will do this and more.



Part of the Saskatchewan Office of the Treaty Commissioner’s display at the Saskatoon Airport.