

**Welcoming Aboriginal Awareness Week on P.E.I.**

More understanding needed between Islanders and the Island's indigenous people

Today marks the beginning of Aboriginal Awareness Week. Since 1992, the four days following Victoria Day have become a week to honour and promote greater knowledge of Canada's Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

Here on Prince Edward Island, we have a great deal of work to do in order to establish a greater understanding of Prince Edward Island's indigenous people — the Mi'kmaq.

Our history, the nature and reality of Aboriginal and treaty rights — including their expression here on P.E.I. — as well as the unique role of Aboriginal people within Canada are important topics for all Islanders to know, understand and embrace.

There are also practical challenges that we face as Aboriginal governments in providing services to our people both on and off-reserve that are equal to those provided by other orders of government to their people that need to be known. We also have some great successes that should be promoted and celebrated. Some of these successes are community-based, some are individual successes, and others are successes that we, as Aboriginal governments, have created in partnership with provincial and federal orders of government.

As chiefs of Prince Edward Island's two Aboriginal governments: Abegweit First Nation and Lennox Island First Nation, we are very pleased and honoured that The Guardian newspaper has chosen to highlight aspects of our Mi'kmaq community and culture during Aboriginal Awareness Week. Relationships cannot be improved, progress cannot be made and success cannot be found without understanding.

All Islanders know that Abegweit (Epekwitk) is the Mi'kmaq name for Prince Edward Island. In the future, our vision is one where everyone also knows the substance that is behind Prince Edward Island's first name. We will provide some basics here to kick-off that discussion.

The Mi'kmaq — or Lnu as we call ourselves — have been on P.E.I. for tens of thousands of years. We are P.E.I.'s only Aboriginal or Indigenous people. Aboriginal rights are inherent rights connected to the practices of our people prior to the arrival of Europeans.

Many Islanders will recall the Sparrow Decision in 1990, which recognized that the Mi'kmaq have an existing right to hunt, fish and harvest. It is the fiduciary responsibility of the Crown to allow for this Aboriginal right to be practised.

Islanders are also aware of the Marshall Decision in 1999. The Marshall Decision affirmed that there is a treaty right — a right promised in a treaty between the Mi'kmaq and the Crown in 1760 and 1761, and a

right protected by the Constitution Act, 1982. Now in our 15th year of commercial fishing, post-Marshall, the recognition of this right has injected millions of dollars and hundreds of jobs into our Island communities.

In the coming years, Aboriginal and treaty rights will become better understood on P.E.I. and they will also be exerted to a greater extent by our people. To date, whether the Sparrow Decision and Aboriginal rights or the Marshall Decision and Treaty rights, the outcome — despite challenges in the early days — has been positive.

There is so much to be gained on Prince Edward Island by embracing the “Mi’kmaq Fact” here on the Island and we welcome a full discussion of this. We also embrace a greater understanding of our Mi’kmaq history and culture and aspire to see greater recognition of Epekwitk’s Mi’kmaq heritage in significant ceremonial activities and symbols. We want Islanders to know that Prince Edward Island’s Mi’kmaq heritage is part of what makes us unique and that we share great opportunities.

Mi’kmaq progress is not something to fear. Whether it is through mutually beneficial partnerships with other orders of government or the private sector, or the injection of millions of dollars into the Island economy through successful Aboriginal economic development initiatives, Mi’kmaq progress is progress for all Islanders and should be embraced. And progress begins with understanding and awareness, so we welcome the 2015 version of Aboriginal Awareness Week.

By Chief Brian Francis and Chief Matilda Ramjattan