
The 100th Anniversary of the First Opening of the Saskatchewan Assembly

by Margaret A. Woods

On March 29, 1906, in Regina representatives of the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary gathered to hear Lieutenant Governor Amédée Forget of Saskatchewan acknowledge the expressions of welcome into the Canadian Federation that were received from Ottawa and the other provincial Legislatures. He then noted that the continued and rapid settlement of Western Canada was "most gratifying" and that his government would "encourage and assist in every way possible those who are seeking homes in our midst". No reference was made to the First Nations who had previously lived on the land nor to the treaties that made land available for settlement. By contrast the ceremony that marked the 100th anniversary of the first session was replete with references to the contribution of aboriginals to the history and development of Saskatchewan. This article outlines some of the highlights of the recent ceremony.

With the traditional Cree word for welcome, "Tansi", Speaker Myron Kowalsky welcomed guests to the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly to mark the 100th anniversary of the first opening. The Speaker's choice of language reflected the central theme of the ceremony to honour the relationship between the Legislature and the First Nations of the prairies.

The day's events began with a sweet grass pipe ceremony on the floor of the Chamber attended by the Speaker and other invited guests. This event was intended to sanctify the Chamber in anticipation of the celebration taking place later that morning. The pipe ceremony itself followed the ceremonial practices of the Cree Elder who led it. Pipe ceremonies are observed in many First Nations cultures and, while there are elements common in all, each ceremony will reflect the individual preferences, practices and heritage of the Elder leading it.

Participants in the ceremony were seated in a circle on the floor of the Chamber. Men occupied the inner circle

while women sat in the outer circle. This reflected the belief of the Cree that women are as powerful as the pipe and that their presence in the outer circle enables them to act as supporters of the pipe and the ceremony. Additionally, the Cree believe that a woman's power exceeds that of a man due to their power to give life. Accordingly men must raise themselves to meet a woman's position by sitting in the inner circle, offering prayers and smoking a pipe.



Official Party
(Digney Photographics Ltd)

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Presentation by Her Honour Lynda Haverstock to Speaker Kowalsky (*Digney Photographics Ltd*)

During the ceremony, the pipe was passed around the circle four times while participants offered prayers and personal stories. Everyone in the circle was smudged with sweetgrass. Throughout the ceremony, a drumming group located in a corner of the Chamber floor performed.

The mace runner presentation ceremony began with the grand entry of the official party and special guests. The entrance of each guest was announced by Chief Helen Ben of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and Legislative Assembly Clerk Gwenn Ronyk, who shared master of ceremony duties.

The procession was led by Lieutenant Governor Lynda Haverstock and her husband, Harley Olsen. Speaker Kowalsky and Chief Alphonse Bird of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) entered next side by side, preceded by the Sergeant at Arms carrying the mace and the Staff Carrier with the Eagle Staff. Premier Lorne Calvert, Leader of the Official Opposition Brad Wall and Treaty Commissioner Judge David Arnot completed the official party.

The grand entry continued with First Nations elders, veterans, chiefs, the artist Florence Highway, representatives of the Judiciary and Members of the Legislative Assembly entering the Chamber and greeting the official party. Each guest then joined the receiving line and greeted subsequent guests as they passed by. Throughout the procession, drummers played the Grand Entry Song.

The presentation ceremony commenced with greetings from the Crown, the FSIN and the Treaty Commissioner. Lieutenant Governor Haverstock spoke on the role played by the Crown in bringing the three elements of state – the Legislative, the Executive and the Judiciary – together with the First Nations. The Crown plays a further role as an enduring symbol of constancy and of the

ideals enshrined in the treaties. In illustrating the longevity of these roles, Ms. Haverstock recalled the words spoken by a predecessor, Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris, who in 1874 as the Crown's representative to the treaty negotiations stated:

The promises we have to make to you are not for to-day only, but for tomorrow. ... and the promises we make will be carried out as long as the sun shines and the water flows in the ocean.¹

Chief Bird addressed the importance of having a symbol of the First Nations in the Chamber of the Assembly. Referring to the mace runner and the cushion, Chief Bird reminded the audience that they were "... meant to represent a foundation upon which the Crown's authority, as represented by the mace, is able to be exercised."² He then noted that while symbols were important reminders of the spirit and intent of the treaties, they could not replace the need to implement the treaty provisions. The Treaties were the basis upon which the First Nations and the settlers established a shared society on the land in which both could live in harmony and with prosperity. Chief Bird encouraged the Members of the Assembly to keep the obligations and duties established by the treaties in mind when debating issues and passing laws and to consider new ways to address the disparities that face the people of the province.

The importance of the First Nation Treaties was also the subject of Judge Arnot's remarks. The entire province of Saskatchewan is covered by Treaties 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10. Judge Arnot stressed that all citizens are treaty people. The ability of immigrants to settle on the land, and exercise their treaty right to do so, was made possible by negotiating treaties with the First Nations who previously occupied the territory. Judge Arnot also spoke of hope – the hope expressed by the signatories to the treaties on what the future might hold and the hope he had as a treaty commissioner that the First Nations, the treaties and the treaty relationship would take their rightful place in the Canadian state.

Unveiling of Mace Runner and Cushion

Florence Highway was then invited to unveil the mace runner and cushion with Chief Bird.³ Together they presented the articles to the Lieutenant Governor who accepted them on behalf of the Crown. She transmitted them to the Speaker who placed them at the end of the Table with the assistance of Premier Calvert and Mr. Wall. The Sergeant-at-Arms then placed the mace on the runner and cushion for the first time.

The gift of a runner and cushion upon which the mace will rest during all sittings of the Assembly will serve as a permanent reminder of the on-going role played by First Nations in the history of the province.



The beaded moose hide runner is entitled “Treaties Forever” and incorporates traditional symbols, craftsmanship and materials. In aboriginal teachings, the Creator gave gifts to man for his nourishment and sustenance. These gifts are represented by the sun, grass and river. The everlasting presence of the sun, grass and flowing river are also representative of the eternal commitment made in the treaties that their provisions would be forever honoured.

The use of moose hide material as the backing of the runner is indicative of the importance played by the moose in the daily life of the northern First Nations peo-

ples. Similar to the sustenance provided by the bison in the south, the moose provided food, clothing, shelter, tools and crafts to northern aboriginals.

The head of the mace will rest upon a cushion made of beaver pelt backed by moose hide. The use of a beaver pelt is symbolic of the important role played by the trading of furs in forging a relationship between First Nations and European settlers and in the expansion of settlement westward. The beaver symbol can also be found in the carved moldings over the Members' entrances to the Chamber and on the Mace itself. A braid of moose hide surrounds the cushion to symbolize a braid of sweetgrass. In the culture of the prairie First Nations, sweetgrass is ceremonially burned to establish a connection with the Creator. Traditional teachings on the brotherhood of man are represented by the beaded tassels attached to the four corners of the cushion and in the intermixing of red, black, yellow and white beads in each tassel.

Premier Calvert was the first to express his appreciation of the gifts on the occasion of the Legislature's first opening. He acknowledged the contribution of Joan Beatty, the first aboriginal woman to sit in the provincial cabinet and the individual who first highlighted the need for First Nations symbolism in the Chamber. Describing the treaties as foundational agreements, he stated that the presence of the runner and cushion would forever serve as a reminder to all who work in or visit the Assembly of the historic role First Nations people and the trea-

ties have played in the creation of the province. In concluding his remarks, Premier Calvert noted the significance of the river and sun on the runner – the name Saskatchewan was taken from the Cree word for swift flowing waters while the sun was the everlasting symbol of life. It was his hope that the “sun continue to shine on the province and the people of Saskatchewan, and may this land of swift-flowing waters be a land for all.”

The Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Wall, spoke next. He summarized some of the themes of the first Throne Speech – praise for the 26 million bushels of wheat threshed the previous fall, grants of railway charters, the starting of public libraries and other issues of the day. He then lamented the absence of any mention of the First Nations, or the treaties that forged the ties between the crown, settlers and the original inhabitants of the land. Mr. Wall drew upon a statement by Bono that claimed that every age has its moral blind spots when he described the treatment afforded the First Nations over the province's first century. The acceptance of the runner and cushion, in his view, would serve as a reminder of the need to respect those who have too often been overlooked and to formally address the moral blind spot in the province's history.

Speaker Kowalsky concluded the ceremony by thanking those able to attend. He drew special attention to the representatives from the Manitoba, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut Assemblies, areas that with Alberta were at one time part of the Northwest Territories.⁴

Notes

1. Quote taken from the verbatim transcript of the ceremony prepared by the Hansard Branch of the Legislative Assembly.
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3. The mace runner and cushion were designed and created by Florence Highway of Pelican Narrows. Ms. Highway is a member of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation of Northern Saskatchewan and was immersed in her aboriginal heritage through her mother, Maggie. Ms. Highway learned the Cree language and the arts of beading and birch bark biting as a child and has returned to re-explore these crafts as an adult.
4. This historic event was broadcast live on the Saskatchewan Legislative Network. The proceedings will be used in educational material by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner. Further information may be viewed on the website of the Legislative Assembly, at: www.legassembly.sk.ca/news/default.htm