

Sam Johnston, First First Nations Speaker in Canada

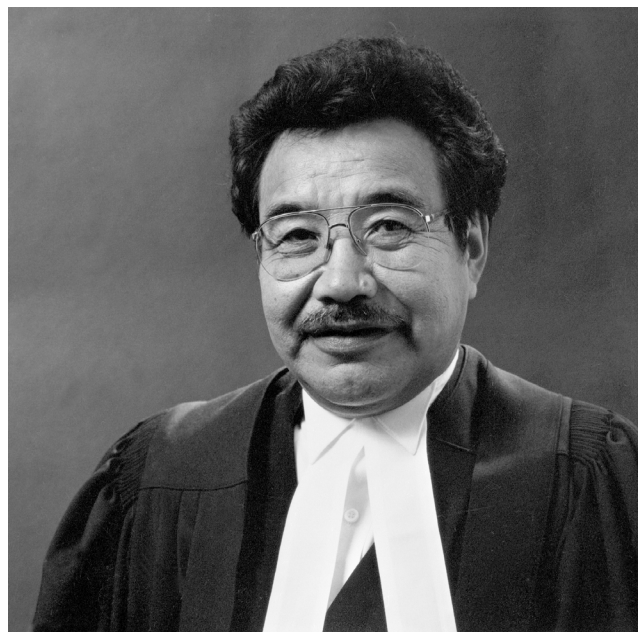
Samuel (Sam) Johnston, of the Teslin Tlingit, holds a unique place in Canadian history as the first First Nations person to be elected Speaker in Yukon and in Canada. He was also instrumental in the development of land claims and First Nation self-government agreements between First Nations, and the governments of Yukon and Canada.

Caitilín O'Hare

Born in 1935 in Teslin, a small village in Yukon that is part of the Teslin Tlingit Traditional Territory and was historically the summer meeting place for Inland Tlingit people, Samuel (Sam) Johnston's journey into politics began when he was elected Chief of the Teslin Tlingit Council in 1970, a position he held until 1984. In February 1973 he travelled to Ottawa as part of a delegation of Yukon First Nations Chiefs to present then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau with a document titled *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow - A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to Settlement by the Yukon Indian People*. This document, to which Johnston was a signatory, outlined the history and needs of Yukon First Nations peoples, and became the foundation for the Umbrella Final Agreement. Though not reached until 1988 and finalized in 1990, the Umbrella Final Agreement serves as the template for final (land claims) and self-government agreements between individual Yukon First Nations, the Government of Canada, and the Government of Yukon.

Johnston's involvement with the Yukon Legislative Assembly began in 1985 when he was elected as the New Democratic Party Member for Campbell, a seat he retained in 1989. He was first elected Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Yukon on July 15, 1985, at the outset of the First Session of the 26th Legislature. This not only made Johnston the first First Nations person to serve as Speaker in Yukon, but the first in Canada. He was elected Speaker for a second time on March 8, 1989, the first sitting day of the 27th Legislature, and he held the position for its duration. During this period, he continued his efforts to support the First Nation population of Yukon, and

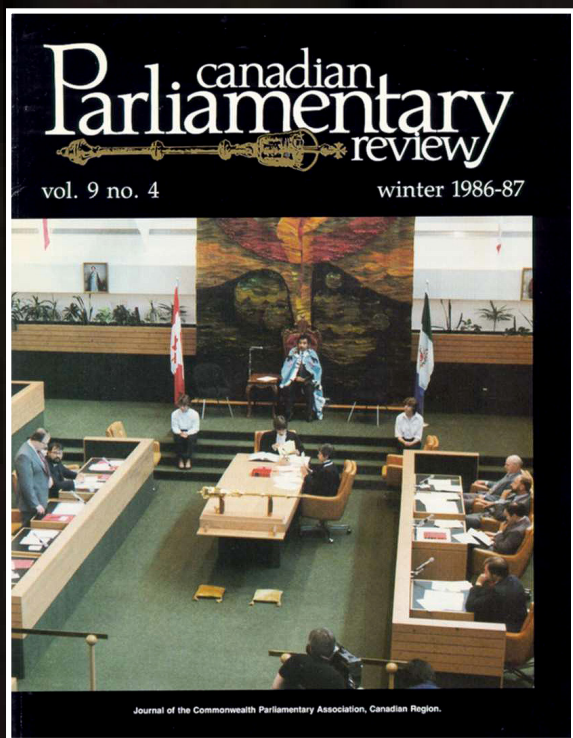
Caitilín O'Hare worked as a Research Librarian at the Ontario Legislative Assembly. She is currently working with CANADEM as an election observer in Ukraine.



Government of Yukon

Hon. Sam Johnston

further the work that he had accomplished as Chief of the Teslin Tlingit Council. On June 3, 1992, on the final sitting day of his tenure as Speaker, during the second reading debate on the bill, the Government House Leader's request that the Speaker be allowed to address the House regarding Bill No. 73, *An Act Approving Yukon Land Claim Final Agreements* received unanimous consent. Johnston said: "...I hope that the legislation set out today will be the tool for our children to make a better life for themselves. Our young people are our future leaders. This will be their opportunity to provide for their children. Therefore, we as leaders today, must encourage our young people to continue with this process, with these same principles, on into the future that awaits them..."¹



On May 29, 1993, both the Teslin Tlingit Council Final Agreement and the Teslin Tlingit Council Self-Government Agreement (each agreement was between the Teslin Tlingit Council, the Government of Canada, and the Government of Yukon) were signed. According to Johnston, they were key to preserving cultural traditions as well as supporting better health care and education for the Tlingit community.

In addition to his political career, Johnston is also an accomplished athlete and coach. In the 1960's he was involved in competitive dog mushing and taught the sport to youth. He is also skilled in archery, having both coached and competed in the North American Indigenous Games. He is viewed by many as the father of Yukon archery, though he credits his skills to his grandfather: "It's in your blood. My grandfather on my mother's side was the archer."² He also coached during the Dene Games at the Arctic Winter Games. In 2003 Johnston was inducted into the Yukon Sports Hall of Fame for his athletic and coaching achievements.

As a community figure, Johnston has actively supported youth, education, and the Tlingit language and culture. He has taught Tlingit at the Yukon Native Language Center in Whitehorse and performed Tlingit dance for a variety of audiences. Johnston has

also served as Chancellor of Yukon College, and Leader of the Ishkitàn (Frog) Clan of the Teslin Tlingit Council. In 2003 Johnston received the Yukon Commissioner's Award for Public Service, "for his role as a community leader and his many contributions to his community's quality of life."³

Johnston met his wife Kelly in 1982 at the Yukon Sourdough Rendezvous, an annual winter festival in Whitehorse, attendance at which was a tradition in Johnston's family. The couple were named Mr. and Mrs. Yukon at the 2016 Rendezvous, a title that Johnston's parents held in 1974. Johnston is now a well-respected member of the Teslin Tlingit Elders Council. His son Peter Johnston followed in his footsteps and served as Chief of the Teslin Tlingit Council, and currently serves as Grand Chief of the Council of Yukon First Nations.

Notes

- 1 *Debates of the Yukon Legislative Assembly*, 27th Legislature, 3rd Session, June 3, 1992, http://www.hansard.gov.yk.ca/27-legislature/session3/025_Jun_3_1992.html.
- 2 Marcel Vander Wier. "Youth Interest in Archery Continues to Soar," *Whitehorse Daily Star* online, May 7, 2014, <http://www.whitehorsestar.com/Sports/youth-interest-in-archery-continues-to-soar>.
- 3 Commissioner of Yukon. "Commissioner's Awards - Past Recipients," <http://www.commissioner.gov.yk.ca/awards/recipients.html>

