The Memorial to Sir Wilfrid Laurier

Chief John Tetlenitsa (Nlaka'pamux)

Chief Petit Louis (Secwépemc)

Chief John Chilahitsa (Syilx)

Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier (Canada)

Commemorating the 100th Anniversary, 1910-2010
Our laws and customs, what we call yiri7 re Stsq‘ey’s-kucw, were given to us by Sk’elép (Coyote) as laid out in our ancient oral histories, the Stspetékwle:

A long time ago, maybe 5,000 years ago, the Wutémtkemc, a group of Coast Salish people sometimes called “transformers” ventured up the Fraser River. They met Sk’elép, who was sitting on a rock watching them as they approached. They tried to t’ult (transform) him with their powers, but were able only to change his tracks into stone. Therefore, the marks of Sk’elép’s feet may be seen on this rock at the present day.

Sk’elép sat with his chin resting on his hand and stared at them while they were trying to transform him. When they failed, he cried out to them, “You are making the world right — so am I. Why try to punish me when I have done you no harm? This is my country. Why do you come here and interfere with my work? If I wished, I could turn you into stone, but as you have likely been sent into the world, like myself, to do good, I will allow you to pass, but you must leave this country as quickly as you can. We should be friends, but must not interfere with each others’ work.”

At a later date and at a different location, Sk’elép again met the Wutémktémc. He was not so diplomatic and threatened to cause them serious harm if they did not leave his country.

Also at this time it is said that Old Sk’elép was the ancestor of all Indians. He had many wives. From some descended the Nlaka’pamux (Thompson), from others the Syilx (Okanagan), from still others the Secwépemc (Shuswap)… It is said that at one time they spoke the same language.

After Sk’elép finished his work, it is said that the Old One — the Creator or Chief of the Ancient World who had sent Coyote — then came back to finish off some of his work. He led the different tribes into their homelands and gave them the languages they now speak.

(From a stspetikwle as recorded by ethnologist James A Teit, 1895 and 1915.)

One fundamental principle of our traditional law thus laid out by Sk’elép thousands of years ago is that each nation collectively holds its respective homeland and its resources at the exclusion of outsiders. Outsiders ought not trespass our lands without our express permission. However, when Sk’elép invited the foreign Wutémktémc into our home as guests, noting “we should be friends but we should not interfere with each others’ work” he was the first to establish a relationship between us as the owners and hosts of this land, and the outsiders as guests who were invited and should be treated with kindness but were expected to show respect and reciprocity.

As settlers came into our home in the past two hundred years, they were again reminded that we were the ones who owned the collective “ranches” or homelands of our nations, and that they were guests in our land. In the 1910 Memorial to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, our Chiefs reiterated their memories of the first seme7 (guests) who respected our lands and boundaries; however, as settlers took over our land and established laws aimed at keeping us off our “ranches,” they denied not only our ownership of lands and resources, but also our ancient laws of trespass and jurisdiction. They thus defied the honour of being guests that we had bestowed upon them.

Yiri7 re Stsq‘ey’s-kucw
Our Laws & Customs
In the summer of 1910, Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier set out across the country on a “non-political” pre-election campaign tour. On August 25th he stopped in Kamloops where he was met by a delegation of Chiefs from the Secwépemc, Nlaka’pamux, and Syilx Nations, who greeted their guest with an unequivocal message. They enlisted the help of their “secretary,” a Scottish-born ethnologist and long-time ally, James Teit, who had put their words onto paper, and French priest Father LeJeune, who translated the verbal presentation and presented the written English document (“the Memorial”). The Interior Chiefs asserted the persistence of their Aboriginal Nations’ title and sovereignty over their respective territories, vowing that they would continue to struggle for a just and reciprocal relationship with the government until it was achieved.

Laurier’s brief visit came on the heels of Interior Peoples’ escalating dispossession at the hands of settlers and the provincial and federal policies that sanctioned them. Laurier was braced by a report on Indian Title he had previously commissioned from lawyer Tom McGinness, which — produced without input from Aboriginal Peoples — acknowledged that B.C.’s Aboriginal Peoples had been unfairly and illegally dispossessed from the homelands they had occupied since time immemorial. Laurier’s government and subsequent governments did not release the report, nor would they accept its conclusions.

Yiri7 re stsq’ey’s ne Memorial ~ Historical and Political Context

The Memorial must have resonated with Laurier, who departed with it in hand, intending to follow up on a legal and political resolution of the land title and rights question. However, he lost the election to Conservative opponent Robert Borden the following year, before it could move forward. Now, exactly one hundred years since the presentation of the Memorial to Laurier, the vision those Chiefs put forward continues to reverberate in the ongoing struggles for Aboriginal title, rights, and jurisdiction.

It is often assumed that First Nations of British Columbia quietly accepted the allotment of reserves during the 1870s and 1880s. This is not true. The 1910 Memorial emerged alongside a series of legal and political actions at this time, including joint petitions to government, delegations to Ottawa and London, England; and the organization of the Allied Tribes. In response to these actions, the Canadian government enacted Section 141 of the Indian Act in 1927, which prohibited Indians from raising money and/or retaining lawyers in pursuit of title and rights.

The Memorial is a historical document that demonstrates the involvement of the Interior Nations in pressing for title, rights, and sovereignty in the early twentieth century. It is also a historical narrative in itself, which tells the story of the previous hundred years of relations with European newcomers from the Aboriginal point of view. The Memorial charts the first contact with fur traders (xemc7úw’i or “real whites”) and the ensuing fur trade period, throughout which Aboriginal people maintained control of their land and resources. It then documents the arrival of miners, the laying out of large reserves, and the continual curtailment of Aboriginal rights as more and more settlers poured into the land.
It also reflects Interior Aboriginal Peoples’ continued and consistent traditional concepts around being the hosts in their lands, and the reciprocity that the host-guest relationship entails. It underscores the Aboriginal concepts of land ownership and tenure, Aboriginal political authority, and sovereign relations with the Crown and government.

Even despite such oppressive measures as Section 141 of the Indian Act and the implementation of the residential schools system, the Secwépemc and neighbouring First Nations — indeed Aboriginal Nations throughout British Columbia and Canada — did not forget the concepts and issues as outlined in the Memorial. Many of the Chiefs whose experiences and voices are reflected in the Memorial provide a link between the fur trade era and 1910. Thus, Chief Louis of Kamloops and several other Chiefs present at the 1910 Memorial reading were born in the 1830s or 1840s and had witnessed the time of the seme7úw’i and the arrival of the post-1850s newcomers through the colonial period. The political principles and values learned from the Chiefs long ago remain alive through their descendents and persist in the foundation of the present struggle.

We, the Secwépemc and our neighbouring Aboriginal Nations continue to organize and pursue the recognition of title and rights from both a political and legal standpoint, creating new opportunities to put the vision stated by Chiefs in the Laurier Memorial into practice: “For the accomplishment of this end we and other Indian tribes of this country are now uniting... in this fight for our rights.”
Dear Sir and Father,

We take this opportunity of your visiting Kamloops to speak a few words to you. We welcome you here, and we are glad we have met you in our country. We want you to be interested in us, and to understand more fully the conditions under which we live. We expect much of you as the head of this great Canadian Nation, and feel confident that you will see that we receive fair and honorable treatment. Our confidence in you has increased since we have noted of late the attitude of your government towards the Indian rights movement of this country and we hope that with your help our wrongs may at last be righted. We speak to you the more freely because you are a member of the white race with whom we first became acquainted, and which we call in our tongue "real whites."

One hundred years next year they came amongst us here at Kamloops and erected a trading post. After the other whites came to this country in 1858 we differentiated them from the first whites as their manners were so much different, and we applied the term "real whites" to the latter (viz., the fur-traders of the Northwest and Hudson Bay companies. As the great majority of the companies employees were French speaking, the term latterly became applied by us as a designation for the whole French race.) The "real whites" we found were good people. We could depend on their word, and we trusted and respected them. They did not interfere with us nor attempt to break up our tribal organizations, laws, customs. They did not try to force their conceptions of things on us to our harm. Nor did they stop us from catching fish, hunting, etc. They never tried to steal or appropriate our country, nor take our food and life from us. They acknowledged our ownership of the country, and treated our chiefs as men. They were the first to find us in this country. We never asked them to come here, but nevertheless we treated them kindly and hospitably and helped them all we could. They had made themselves (as it were) our guests.

We treated them as such, and then waited to see what they would do. As we found they did us no harm our friendship with them became lasting. Because of this we have a warm heart to the French at the present day. We expect good from Canada.

When they first came among us there were only Indians here. They found the people of each tribe in their own territory, and having tribal boundaries known and recognized by all. The country of each tribe was just the same as a very large farm or ranch (belonging to all the people of the tribe) from which they gathered their food and clothing, etc., for food, grass and vegetation on which their horses grazed and the game lived, and much of which furnished materials for manufactures, etc., stone which furnished pipes, utensils, and tools, etc., trees which furnished firewood, materials for houses and utensils, plants, roots, seeds, nuts and berries which grew abundantly and were gathered in season just the same as the crops on a ranch, and used for food; minerals, shells, etc., which were used for ornament and for plants, etc., water which was free to all. Thus, fire, water, food, clothing and all the necessities of life were obtained in abundance from the lands of each tribe, and all the people had equal rights of access to everything they required. You will see the ranch of each tribe was the same as its life, and without it the people could not have lived.

Just 52 years ago the other whites came to this country. They found us just the same as the first or "real whites" had found us, only we had larger bands of horses, had some cattle, and in many places we cultivated the land. They found us happy, healthy, strong and numerous. Each tribe was still living in its own "house" or in other words on its own "ranch." No one interfered with our rights or disputed our possession of our "houses" and "ranches," viz., our homes and lives. We were friendly and helped these whites also, for had we not learned the first whites had done us no harm? Only when some of them killed us we there are some had ones among them, but surely on the whole they must be good. Besides they are the queens people. And we had already heard great things about the queen from the "real whites." We expected her subjects would do us no harm, but rather improve us by giving us knowledge and making us do some of the things they could do. At first we thought the gold was looked only for gold. We know the latter was our property, but as we did not use it much nor need it to live by we did not object to their searching for it. They told us, "Your country is rich and you will be made wealthy by our coming. We wish just to pass over your lands in quest of gold." Soon they saw the country was good, and some of them made up their minds, to settle it. They commenced to take up pieces of land here and there. They told us they wanted only the use of these pieces of land for a few years, and then would hand them back to us in an improved condition; meanwhile they would give us some of the products they raised for the loan of our land. Thus they commenced to enter our "houses," or live on our "ranches." With us a person enters our house he becomes our guest, and we must treat him hospitably as long as he shows no hostile intentions. At the same time we expect him to return to us equal treatment for what he receives. Some of our Chiefs said, "These people wish to be partners with us in our country. We must, therefore, be the same as brothers to them, and live as one family. We will share equally in everything half and half in land, water and timber, etc. What is ours will be theirs, and what is theirs will be ours. We will help each other to be great and good."

The whites made a government in Victoria perhaps the queen made it. We have heard it stated both ways. Their chiefs dwell there. At this time they did not deny the Indian tribes owned the whole country and everything in it. They told us we did. We Indians were hopeful. We trusted the whites and waited patiently for their intentions toward us and our lands. We knew that Indians had been driven out of the neighboring states, and we remembered what we had heard about the queen being so good to the Indians and that her laws carried out by her chiefs were always just and better than the American laws. Presently chiefs (government officials, etc.) commenced to visit us, and had talks with some of our chiefs. They told us to have no fear, the queen was kind to us, and would treat us as good partners, only when some of them killed us we must not object to their searching for gold. They assured us we would have perfect freedom of traveling and camping and the same liberties as from time immemorial to hunt, fish, graze and gather our food supplies where we desired; also that all trails, land, water, timber, etc., would be as free of access to us as formerly. Our chiefs were agreeable to these terms. They told us to take up the land and live as our people have done for centuries. We were within our rights, and pursued nothing that should be called stealing; for assuredly we would have perfect freedom of traveling and camping and the same liberties as from time immemorial to hunt, fish, graze and gather our food supplies where we desired; also that all trails, land, water, timber, etc., would be as free of access to us as formerly. Our chiefs were agreeable to these terms. They told us to take up the land and live as our people have done for centuries.
in check. They said, "Do nothing against the whites. Something we did not understand retards them from
keeping their promise. They will do the square thing by us in the end."

What have we received for our good faith, friendliness and patience? Gradually as the whites of this
country became more and more powerful, and we less and less powerful, they little by little changed
their policy towards us. The only reason for their policy was to put restrictions on us. They forced us to
knock down (the same as) the posts of all the indian tribes. They say there are no lines, except what
they make. They have taken possession of all the Indian country and claim it as their own. Just the same
as taking the "house" or "ranch" and, therefore, the life of every indian tribe into their possession. They
have never consulted us in any of these matters, nor made any agreement, "nor" signed "any" papers with
us. They have stolen our lands and everything on them and continue to use same for their own purposes.
We treat us as less than children and allow us no say in anything. They say the Indians know nothing, and
own nothing, yet their power and wealth has come from our belongings. The queens law which we believe
guaranteed us our rights, the B.C. government has trampled underfoot. This is how our guests have treated us
- the brothers we received hospitably in our house.

After a time when they saw that our patience might get exhausted and that we might cause trouble if
we thought all the land was to be occupied by whites they set aside small modern reservations for us here
and there over the country. This was their proposal not ours, and we never accepted these reservations
as settlement for anything, nor did we sign any papers or make any treaties about same. They thought
we would be satisfied with this, but we never have been satisfied and never will be until we get our rights.
We thought the setting apart of these reservations was the commencement of some scheme they had evolved
before all this. They said, "Of course we will give you a reservation," they made it. They knocked down
quality Yes sincerely,

Yours very sincerely,
The Chiefs of the Shuswap, Okanagan and Couteau or Thompson tribes
Per their secretary, J.A. Teit
and gives the Superintendent General administrative powers over Indian affairs.

1876 The first federal Indian Act is passed. It consolidates all previous Indian legislation, defines Indian status and reserves, hitherto

states that the Federal Government will continue to be responsible for Indians and will enact a policy "as liberal as

1871 B.C. enters Confederation. The Terms of Union are drawn up and mention of Indians is limited to Clause 13 which

reserves for Indians.

1867 The B.N.A. Act creates Dominion of Canada Section 91(24), giving the Federal Government responsibility for

under the Hudson's Bay Company spans 1821–1858.

1865 Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works, Joseph Trutch, reduces the previously allotted or proposed reserves under

pointed out by the Indians themselves. "

1861 Governor Douglas, who had risen from the ranks of the Hudson's Bay Company, instructs the Chief Commissioner of

Lands, Colonel R.C. Moody to establish Reserves throughout the colony, "… to be defined as they may be severally

1858 The colony of B.C. is formed on November 19th.

1857 Gold is discovered at Nicomen on the Thompson River by Native people, touching off the Fraser River Gold Rush. Gold prospectors compete for food resources, access to water and gold, and encroach on Aboriginal lands.

1858 The Nlaka’pamux (Thompson), St’at’imc (Lillooet), Syilx (Okanagan) and Secwépemc (Shuswap) engage in a war in the Fraser Canyon with American gold miners’ militias — elected leaders and established militias experienced in Indian wars in the U.S.A — to a standstill, compelling the Americans to sign a peace treaty with the Aboriginal Nations. B.C. Governor James Douglas abdicates responsibility, leaving it up to the Aboriginal warriors to defend the mainland from American invasion.

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1877 The Joint Reserve Commission visits Interior Nations who are seriously considering uniting forces with Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce to go to war over the land issue.

1878 The Joint Reserve Commission is dissolved because B.C. no longer wishes to participate. A federal commissioner carries on alone, subject to the approval of the B.C. Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works and B.C. Supreme Court to adjudicate disputes.

1885 The Potlatch is made illegal by an amendment to the Indian Act; subsequently expanded to include all Indian ceremonies.

1906 After a gathering in Kamloops, Chiefs leave for Ottawa and England to meet with King Edward regarding land claims. Chiefs include Joe Capilano (Squamish), Basil David/Dick (Secwépemc) and Charley Isipaymit (Cowichan).

1909 Interior Tribes of B.C. is formed.

1909-11 Numerous Nations put forth petitions and declarations, including the Cowichan, Nisga’a, Tahltan, and Lillooet.

1910 Interior Chiefs sign a declaration on July 16th at Spencer’s Bridge setting out their position on Aboriginal title and rights. On August 25th, a Memorial is presented to Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier by the Interior Chiefs at the I.O.O.F. (Oddfellows) Hall in Kamloops.

1911 Laurier loses the Federal election; Conservative opponent Robert Borden wins and the Memorial is shelved.

1911 The Memorial to Frank Oliver, Minister of the Interior, is presented. An expanded group of Interior Chiefs implore the Minister, then in charge of Indian Affairs, in powerful words to address the question of title, rights, and jurisdiction, which they view as fundamental to improving the living conditions of Aboriginal Peoples.

1913-1916 Partly in response to the Indian lobbying efforts, the McKenna-McBride Commission is established. However, instead of dealing with the fundamental issue of Indian title and rights, it only deals with adjusting the size of the reserves. Their report, completed in 1916, results in 47,000 acres of good, arable reserve land to be taken away and replaced with 80,000 acres of inferior land.

1916 The Allied Tribes of B.C. is founded. In 1919, they file a petition to the federal and provincial governments with a

comprehensive presentation of all Indian land claims in the province.

1920-1926 The Allied Tribes oppose the McKenna-McBride report. The Province refuses to participate in any discussions.

1926 The Allied Tribes dissolve in 1926.

1927 An amendment to the Indian Act (s.141) is passed, prohibiting Indians from raising money for advancing land claims, filing court cases on land claims or retaining a lawyer.

1949 B.C. Indians are granted the right to vote in provincial elections. Frank Calder is elected to the provincial legislature.
1960 Indians get the federal vote under Diefenbaker (Conservative).

1966-67 The Hawthorn Report, the first comprehensive study on Indian socio-economic conditions, identifies Indians as "citizens plus," thus forcing the federal government to act.

1968 The National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) is formed in response to federal government efforts to formulate and implement a comprehensive Indian policy aimed at assimilation and extinguishment of title and rights.

1969 The Trudeau administration makes the White Paper public. The policy aims at assimilating Indians into mainstream society by eliminating "special status" and transferring responsibility to the provinces. Indians across Canada vehemently reject it, issuing a Red Paper.

1969 The Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) is founded in Kamloops, with a mandate to advance Aboriginal title and rights.

1973 The Calder case (Nisga'a), in a split decision, affirms the existence of Aboriginal title and forces the federal government to reconsider its position, leading to the creation of a Comprehensive Claims process.

1974 Office of Native Claims is established at the Department of Indian Affairs to settle outstanding land claims.

1980 In UBCIC’s Constitution Express Aboriginal Peoples unite and travel to Ottawa to call for Constitutional recognition.

1981 The NIB is restructured to form the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and every band in Canada is given a vote within its forum.

1982 The Canadian Constitution is patriated without Aboriginal Peoples' input. Section 35 of the Constitution affirms the "existing rights" of Aboriginal Peoples (Indians, Inuit, and Metis). Three subsequent First Ministers’ Conferences to further define Aboriginal rights fail.

1984 The Guerin case (Musqueam) establishes that the federal government does have a "fiduciary responsibility" towards Aboriginal Peoples.

1987-92 The federal government and provinces draft the Meech Lake Accord to bring Quebec into the Constitution. It fails when Manitoba First Nation MLA Elijah Harper opposes the Accord in the Manitoba legislature, based on a complete lack of consultation with Aboriginal Peoples. The subsequently drafted Charlottetown Accord proposed a "third order of government" by Aboriginal Peoples but was defeated in a public referendum.

1987-89 Shuswap Chiefs reaffirm the Laurier Memorial in various resolutions, declarations, and publications.

1990 R. vs. Sparrow clarifies constitutionally protected Aboriginal fishing rights.

1991 Report of the B.C. Claims Task Force recommends a new treaty process for B.C. By 1995 they develop the B.C. Treaty Commission Act. Subsequently, the Northern Secwépemc communities represented by the Northern Shuswap Tribal Council, as well as the Alkali Lake Band (Esketemc) join the B.C. Treaty process; however the bands represented by SNTC do not join the B.C. Treaty process because the bands feel the process is fundamentally flawed.

1997 Delgamuuk’w vs. British Columbia upholds Aboriginal title, asserting that Aboriginal people must be consulted and compensated for any infringement or extinguishment of title.

2000 The Nisga’a Final Agreement Act becomes Canadian law. The Nisga’a surrender 92% of their territory and become subject to provincial and federal laws in exchange for expanded reserved lands over which they hold common title, and $190 million cash.


2007 The U.N. adopts the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Canada is one of four nations to vote against its adoption and remains one of the only countries which refuses to ratify.

2008 Prime Minister Harper apologizes to former students of residential schools, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is formally established.

2009 The B.C. government and the First Nations Leadership Council propose the Aboriginal Title Recognition and Reconciliation Act, contingent on recognition of B.C. Crown title. However, recognized as fundamentally flawed, it is subsequently formally rejected by the B.C. All Chiefs Assembly.
Tribal Chairman Message

One hundred years ago today, our ancestors delivered a clear message to the government. That message outlined our struggles and also made recommendations to government as to how to close this matter with a sense of justice and fairness to all.

The words of our ancestors were wise and have served to create a foundation of principles for the generations that have followed.

For the last 100 years, First Nations people in British Columbia have continued to struggle and fight for our rights and title. We have never ceded, surrendered or sold our lands. We have remained steadfast in our beliefs and knowledge that one day we will “Stand each other up to be great and good” and justice will be served.

We call upon the people of British Columbia and Canada and the governments that represent you, to do the right thing, to work with us to conclude this long struggle in our history by taking action that will bring the words in the Memorial to life.

Chief Wayne Christian, Splats’in First Nation

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The Shuswap Nation Tribal Council wishes to acknowledge the ancestral leadership for their determination and vision that created the Memorial document and the current leadership of all First Nations within British Columbia for continued efforts to bring the vision of the ancestors to life.

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“We wish it be known that there will always be soreness in our hearts until we get our rights” (Memorial to Frank Oliver, 1911).