

Land Question: 1915 Meeting

The Reserve Commission established by the McKenna-McBride agreement visited the Haida as it did almost all bands in BC. It met with the Skidegate Band on September 13, 1915. This was the second (and to date, the last) time that a formal representative of government had come to discuss the question of land, and this time both Dominion and Provincial representatives were involved. As such, to the Haida, it was a very important occasion, and they wanted to use it to discuss the entire matter, not just details of the little reserves which had been laid out for them in 1882. They received the Commission graciously, with musical entertainment, and Henry Green their interpreter opened with a formal written address (which unfortunately has not been preserved in the evidence available).

The Chairman responded to the address, congratulating the people on the appearance of their village and on the advancements they had made in Christianity and civilization. "Perhaps the very best means of bringing about true civilization has been the Christian religion. Christianity and Western Civilization have always gone hand in hand" He counselled them to advance further by means of individual effort and commercial enterprise, "each man working for himself and his own ends". He expressed a hope that the just claims of the Haida would be met, but added this:

"I am only going to mention one thing contained in that address, and that is with respect to the question of what is called 'Indian Title'. All we can say with respect to that is that it is not within our powers to deal with and we have therefore nothing whatever to do with it."

On being told that the Commission did not have the power to deal with the *most crucial aspect of the land* question, the Haida spokesmen were unwilling to proceed with the discussion.

James Sterling

We are somewhat nervous. We feel as though we cannot say what we want to say, because we do not know who is to represent the Indians, of the

five who are present at the meeting. And we have this idea that the two government
Provincial and Dominion, are fighting over our lands, and therefore we are
afraid to put the question before these gentlemen....

Councillor Amos Russ said, "We are glad that you people from Ottawa are here, and we are here to put before you our troubles". He went on:

...As far back as ever we can remember, without any doubt at all, the Queen Charlotte Islands belong to the Indians. It came about after a little while that the islands were called the Queen Charlotte Islands, but we don't know who gave them that name. As far as we can remember we can claim that the islands fairly belong to us. As far back as we can remember there was never any treaty with respect to this land, between the Government and the Indians. We have never had a fight for the Islands. No nation ever came and fought us for them and won them from us. We don't know why the Government took them from us., If we had a treaty with the Government we would not claim the Islands.

When the missionaries arrived here, the three principal points they taught us were these: don't take things that belong to others; love one another; and don't kill anybody. These were the three points they taught us. These things they taught us out of the Bible. We are glad that we have kept the teachings of the missionaries who taught us these things.

As the years have passed on and on we have seen, and know, that the Government has come in and sold our lands. What can we do? ...We have kept to the teachings of the missionaries. ...We have laid our case in the hands of the lawyers and the Privy Council of England is taking up the case, which I don't doubt that you people know....

Up at the north end of the Islands there used to be villages and villages, right from North Island to the present village of Masset. These villages stood side by side, but at present there is only one village there, namely Masset. North Island was so named by the Indians, and now the Government have called it Langara. I can say that, myself, if I took a piece of land and claimed it without any title to it, I would naturally call it another name; and that is the case with North Island. At this end of the Islands as far down as they extend, there were villages and villages side by side right to the furthest point; and at the present time there is only one village and that is Skidegate.

We see day by day that the Government is selling land far down this coast and also down the west coast of the Islands. We know for a fact that the Government is selling this land, and yet we can say that the Queen Charlotte Islands are ours. You can see right around the Islands there are villages and villages, and you can see our totem poles, which are the same to us as the whitemans' preemption stakes are to them.

We cannot take a step further on the question until we hear what our lawyer Clark has to say to us....

After further discussion Councillor James Sterling asked bluntly who do the reserves and the Queen Charlotte Islands belong to. The Chairman explained that the Provincial Government claims all of the lands outside the reserves, which are owned by one or both of the governments. Mr Sterling

I would like to ask one more question. The Dominion Government and the B.C. Government between them, they own these islands? I would like to ask this question: when and in which way did they both get the Islands? If you can give us evidence of how they got the Islands, before all these people, we would be contented.

The Chairman replied that that was the question for the Privy Council to decide. Solomon Wilson asked if the matter which they were there to discuss might interfere with any of the larger questions. The Chairman replied that he was not prepared to say, but that it might prejudice their case with regard to Indian Title. None of the Haida spokesmen were prepared to carry the discussion of reserves any further, and the meeting ended.

The needs of the Skidegate Band therefore did not get an adequate hearing although Mr. Agent Deasy later made minor claims on their behalf.

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