

Presentation by Grand Chief Matthew Mukash  
at the 2009 Cree Justice Symposium, Mistissini  
January 27, 2009

Wachiya/Hello friends, honoured delegates and those that are listening to us now by radio throughout the Cree Nation, it is with great pride and pleasure that I welcome you today to the Cree Justice Symposium, an event I believe with your leadership, will help shape the health and safety of our great Nation for decades to come.

Issues of justice are fundamental for our growing communities. To succeed, prosper as a people, and ensure future generations of Cree children the society they deserve *tomorrow*, we must always be mindful of ensuring an intelligent and balanced approach to equity, fairness, law, ethics and morality – all aspects of justice – *today*.

Martin Luther King Jr., perhaps one of the world's leading minds on issues of justice, wrote over 40 years ago that "*True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice*". He also wrote that "*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly*". Mr. King's

ideas are universal, and apply to us today in the Cree Nation as they did in the United States in the tumultuous 1960s. Justice is not something we invoke, something we cause to be done to another as if we are somehow not party to its effects. Rather, justice defines us as a people; justice is something that is embedded in the very fabric of our society, and therefore affects *us all* even when we may not perceive that it affects us *at all*. So, we all have a stake in this discussion and therefore must all be engaged which, indeed, is a defining characteristic of those democratic societies that have assured their people the greatest justice outcomes. Properly harnessed, justice will ensure our peace; will ensure that all Cree people are treated with respect and consideration, irrespective of the things they have done; and will produce for our children the greatest public “goods” that they can bestow, too, on their children.

As Cree people, we have much to be thankful for and have many assets at our disposal to achieve a framework of justice that can stand as a model for other First Nations communities from coast to coast to coast. We have incredible natural resources, a rich Cree cultural heritage, wonderfully skilled and engaging people, a young and vibrant population, passionate leadership, wise Elders, vibrant political will, federal and provincial agreements in place that will begin to help us make good on our destiny, and many more. Notwithstanding our many

gifts, we are also presented daily with the challenges that face any growing society. Crime and victimization are unacceptably high; drug and alcohol abuse continue to take its toll on our people; gangs and predatory organized crime syndicates increasingly influence our young people; and, families and the family structures are under attack because of media influences, the pressures of modern society and the haunting legacy of residential schools.

These challenges are real and they are ever present, but they are decidedly not insurmountable. One of our greatest traits as Cree people is our resilience, our ability to confront challenges, take stock, plan our approach and prevail. Addressing the justice issues that affect all of us will be no different, and will require our very best thinking and commitment. That's why we are here together at this symposium, a most important opportunity for us to set upon a productive course of justice reform. As I noted earlier, the communities that have assured their people the most advantageous justice outcomes are those that are engaged and inclusive; those where all sectors of society own the justice process and contribute to its constant shaping. Communities that have also produced the best justice outcomes are those that have employed a balanced approach, recognizing that justice problems will often fail when an "arrest our way out of the problem" mentality is adopted and where ever-increasing police departments are asked to

take the lead and deal with societal ills. Justice - criminal, social or otherwise - cannot be crafted in a vacuum only within our formal institutions. Justice, by its very nature as a product of human interaction, must spring from our people, for our people. It is therefore your responsibility, our responsibility, to carefully guide it. Justice begins with you.

This is perhaps the guiding principle for this Symposium: to bring our communities together to discuss challenges and debate solutions. Over the next three days, we want to hear your views about key justice system issues. Among other things this includes issues related to primary prevention, youth intervention and diversion, domestic violence, policing and the courts, restorative justice approaches, how we address the scourge of drugs, alcohol and gangs, and how we engage our youth with prosocial sports, recreation and other activities. We are hopeful that the tenor of this symposium is positive; dwelling too long on problems will not move us forward and will only stall us from making the justice changes we need to make for our people. Rather, we seek solutions, backed by your energy, vision and commitment, so that we can make things right for all of our people and for future generations to come.

Meegwetch/thank you for your time and contributions, and I look forward to continuing on the path of justice with every one of you.