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Open letter to the Gitksan People

Re: *Alternative Gitksan Governance*

The officials in the Gitksan Treaty Office believe that '*band councils have never protected the rights and title of the Gitksan*' (see Sebastian, Percival and Derrick letter dated September 23, 2008).

If this is the policy of the GTO board, they should reconsider it.

For many years, from the time that band councils were established in Gitksan territory, Gitksan persons have either been appointed or elected to the positions of chief and council. Many of those individuals – *Chris Harris, Stephen Morrison, Jonathan Johnson, John Smith, Charlie Clifford, William Wale, Moses Jones, Sam Wesley, Stephen Morgan, Wallace Morgan* and many others -- were highly regarded hereditary chiefs and had no difficulty in their role as village leaders. Despite the efforts of the BC and federal governments to ignore them, these men fought tirelessly for resolution of the "Land Question".

And they passed the torch to another generation. Beginning in 1968, for example, the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en refocused their struggle when young leaders like Ray Jones, Victor Jim and others responded to Prime Minister Trudeau's White Paper. The Gitksan Carrier Tribal Council (GCTC), led by President Ray Jones, was governed by a board of directors made up of chief councilors from the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en villages, including *Bill Blackwater Sr., Perry Sampson, Howard Wale, Magnus Turner, Richard Morgan, Vernon Smith, Walter Joseph and Dan Mitchell*.

From 1973, after the *Calder* decision, Ray Jones along with his executive and board, at the specific request of all the hereditary chiefs, led the fight to ensure that Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en territories would be protected. The GCTC played a major role by meaningfully involving all hereditary chiefs in the "land claims" struggle and facilitated an important series of meetings in the villages. The tribal council continued to hold such meetings with the hereditary chiefs for the next 15 years.

Recognizing the need to formalize the work and role of the hereditary chiefs, in June 1977 Chief Bill Blackwater Sr. and his council established the Land Claims

office in Kispiox. And the GCTC, at the request of the hereditary chiefs, organized the historic November 7, 1977 meeting in Kispiox.

At the same time, the Land Claims office established a Land Claims Advisory Committee. The committee included *Alvin Weget, Albert Tait, Richard Benson, James Morrison, Eli Turner, Walter Wilson, Steve Robinson, David Milton, Stanley Williams, Peter Williams, Roy Morris and Charles Austen*. These men guided our land claims efforts for many years, and advised on the organization of *Delgamuukw*.

The plaintiffs in the *Calder* case included Frank Calder and Nisga'a band council members. In *Delgamuukw*, the GWTC (formerly GCTC) executive and board were instrumental in ensuring that the plaintiffs would be the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs. The GWTC executive and board continued to organize and coordinate the *Delgamuukw* case until late 1987.

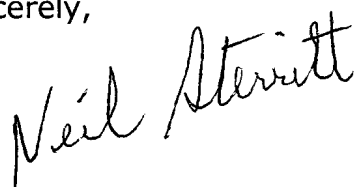
It is impossible to separate Gitxsan hereditary chiefs and house members from their leadership positions on band councils. Thus, when GTO officials unnecessarily criticize band councils and the tribal council, they are criticizing the work of highly respected hereditary chiefs. Moreover, GTO funding (for treaty negotiation purposes and the STFA) is based on the registered band membership list. The question is: *Why are the GTO officials so disrespectful of these organizations, given that they have benefited greatly with steady employment and exceptional pay for about 15 years now because of band members and the significant accomplishments of the hereditary chiefs working with the band councils and the tribal council?*

As a Gitxsan person and former leader, my personal vision is of an umbrella Gitxsan organization that is a positive, respectful, uniting force for all Gitxsan people, rather than one that arbitrarily polarizes and divides the people.

Many Gitxsan people have been born into this world since the 1970's who may not know recent Gitxsan history. It is our obligation as current and former leaders to ensure that future Gitxsan leaders know their history. For their sake, we need to demonstrate by our words and deeds the importance and relevance of an open, respectful, inclusive Gitxsan nation.

In closing, the accomplishment of those who serve, and have served, on our band councils is clear. These people should be honored, not belittled, for they are part of the Gitxsan legacy. The legacy of our hereditary chiefs and house members as community leaders is an important part of our *adaawk* and someday their achievements will be recognized as *gwalx ye'ensxw*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Neil Atteritt". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".