

George Cleary & The Sahtu Dene and Métis Land Claim Agreement

By Dakota Erutse

As the Sahtu Dene reflect on 100 years of Treaty 11, it is with recognition of its younger and modern 'sister' treaty, the Sahtu Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement. In reflecting on the who and the what, George Cleary has stood out as a prominent fixture in the history of treaty-making in the Sahtu region. He led the regional tribal council that negotiated and signed the Agreement. Dakota Erutse is leading the development of an anniversary publication for The Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated, which implements the Agreement. In this brief, which is adapted from the publication, Erutse reflects on the influence of George Cleary today.

WHEN GEORGE CLEARY died in Yellowknife last fall, at 65, fewer of his qualities were clearer to me than the following: his reputation was unquestionable, his voice was not timid but was, rather, of the solemn and quiet kind—quiet not in comparison to the loud, Shark Tank-esque posture which many today might expect from a management executive, but quiet in the sense that, in keeping his mouth shut, Cleary was a leader who made room for others to speak. As a person, he was calm.

I had not met Cleary. I first learned of him at the 2017 annual general meeting of The Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated, in Colville Lake. Ethel Blondin-Andrew, the chairperson at the time, bestowed on Cleary recognition for his years of service, and a plaque. Cleary responded with remarks of gratitude. Then the entire assembly offered him a standing ovation.

I would come to inherit, three years later and before his death, letters and memos from his time worked as the President of the Sahtu Tribal Council, the parent organization to The Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated. As a board member myself, the best practical advice I had ever received for overseeing an organization was to treat my own organization and staff as a post office: in being accountable, we all ought to know the papers that come in and go out, respect the paper trail and respect every page and e-mail. As a writer, I know enough about letters that, in business and in life, they nearly always convey the personality of their maker. I received Cleary's papers with great personal and professional interest.

I was most struck by his manner of calm.

Today many managers in private and public sectors, many politicians, take to Twitter and other social media to break the veil of Strunk-and-White formality and conciseness. Having done the good deed of business writing, they sometimes need to let out a little steam, address their own personal audience. They tend to plaster, without having cc'd the general Internet-accessing public, presumably private letters alongside those moral sentiments worthy of a Facebook rant or a rage Tweet. I was born in the '90s, but what a breath of fresh air to read Cleary's papers from the '90s.

When Dene and Métis of the Northwest Territories had gone from unity as one geopolitical force in 1990 to several disparate regional pursuits, in the attempt to secure a land claim agreement, George Cleary took the helm for the Sahtu region. The Sahtu Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement was signed in 1993. It is beyond me to suggest the negotiations and the overall effort had been hasty, but I do understand the need for quality control and for effective management of a truly complex affair.

When people in Colville Lake had concerns about the agreement, Cleary "made a trip" there and encountered "a few hard liners." He would later report to his board: "I think we have to understand their position and be patient with them and help them along to understand what is going on."

When "Treaty Dene of Fort Norman" (of Tulita) submitted a petition to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, protesting the agreement, it was in opposition to the "Métis personnel" who had been involved in negotiations. They believed at the time that "non-status and metis people" were making changes to Treaty 11. "As you can see the petition is a pile of garbage," Cleary later wrote to the region's political leaders.

When in 1993 the federal government had gone from positioning itself as an enthusiastic treaty signatory to a showy, treaty-endorsing legislator in 1994, to a dull and lifeless bureaucratic engine immediately after, it seemed that the land claim agreement had lacked a true mutual spirit after all that effort. Things began to appear slack, relationship wise: the covenant of a constitutionally-protected land claim agreement, the thread that binds any true legal relationship, seemingly reduced to mere paperwork in a cubicle. "It's unfortunate that our strongest ally is a Quebec M.P. but I guess that's politics," Cleary wrote again to his superiors.

And so on.

There are in these papers administrative efficiency and enough sorry details to put one to sleep, but there is ever more leadership value.

Cleary coordinated negotiators, Chiefs and Métis leaders, and staff, with the sense that every person was involved not in a project but in a process: through a land claim agreement, putting in place a stream of resources and possibilities.

There are no moral sentiments to be found, just plain old good will and hard work, coupled with a knack for dealing with people as they come. Flustered negotiators can be given a meal to ease their burdens and frustrations, their positions and arguments and analysis can be communicated more effectively, but with true managers, their disciplined spirit comes from within. In quoting Cleary, I hope you see as I do his empathy, his straight-edge approach, his insistence and his firmness.

All I can say now is that I wish I had worked for him. I, myself, have benefitted from mentors of his generation, but today the management and corporate culture in the Northwest Territories is replete with consultants, who own much of the workflow at the community and regional levels. And irrespective of the management track, retaining younger Indigenous talent in the first place, in their home communities where they belong, is even greater a problem.

There are fresh university graduates who, after studying the effects of colonialism, lose heart about working for band councils and for other versions of state enterprise masquerading as Indigenous institutions. There are others who see the generous salary and benefits in working for the likes of the Government of the Northwest Territories.

I am glad, however, to have had this opportunity to better understand the work of Cleary and his team. Without the land claim agreement, there would not exist any of the regional co-management boards that perform certain functions of public government: land use planning, permitting and licensing, environmental assessment, etc. These boards owe their existence to a people who decided to negotiate a modern treaty and to a team that included the likes of Cleary. As a member of the Sahtu Land Use Planning Board, I see now that they set us on a strong foundation, bringing the work closer to home and away from the paternalistic tendencies of the federal government.

CITATION: Erutse, Dakota. “George Cleary & The Sahtu Dene and Métis Land Claim Agreement” *Yellowhead Institute*. 23 March 2021. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2021/03/23/george-cleary-th...-claim-agreement/>