BRITISH COLUMBIA
ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS

PUGLAAS (JODY WILSON-RAYBOULD)
REGIONAL CHIEF

ON THE OCCASION OF THE SIGNING OF THE
K’ÓMOKS AGREEMENT-IN-PRINCIPLE
MARCH 24, 2012

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY
Gilakas’la – Greetings, Respected Elders, Matriarchs, Chief Hardy and Council, Ministers Duncan and Polak, Commissioner Lampert, Visiting Chiefs and dignitaries, Members of the K’ómoks First Nation, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great privilege to be here today to witness the work you are doing and to share in this important moment – to be with so many family and friends. My traditional name is ‘Puglaas’ and I come from the Musgamagw-Tsawateineuk/Laich-Kwil-Tach people. I live just north of here with my husband Tim, who is here with me today, in my home community of Cape Mudge where I serve as a member of Council. On behalf of my Chief, Ralph Dick, who is also here today, and the We Wai Kai Nation, we send our greetings.

I also bring greetings from our National Chief Shawn ‘A-in-chut’ Altleo and as BC Regional Chief of the Assembly of First Nations I extend greetings and congratulations on behalf of the 203 First Nations of British Columbia.

The signing of this Agreement-in-principle is a milestone in the history of the K’ómoks peoples and truly the beginning of a new future – one that will not be without its challenges but one that offers great opportunity and great hope. The opportunity to both preserve what it means to be a close knit native community in Canada today – and why those of us that can, have chosen to live where we do – that is at home in our territories – but also it is an opportunity to ensure your long-term survival as a peoples and to provide you with the ability to create
a strong and sustainable economy, thereby securing a healthy and prosperous future that supports practicing and thriving culture.

In making my comments here today, I want to speak primarily to you the members of the K’ómoks First Nation. Of course we express our thanks to the all the negotiators, to Mark Stevenson, and the Federal and Provincial Chiefs Negotiators and their respective teams for all their hard work in bringing you to this place and to the federal and provincial governments for making K’ómoks a priority. But moving forward the real work begins in your community as you move to Final Agreement, resolve outstanding issues with the Crown and most importantly start to re-build and implement your post Indian Act governing structures. You will, of course, eventually be voting on a Final Agreement package and there will be, as there has been in every other First Nation in your position, vigorous debate. The debate is important and necessary.

Our Nations are in an incredible period of transformation – of Nation building or re-building. Decolonization is not easy and while our peoples on Vancouver Island may have weathered the colonial storm better than many of our peoples across Canada, there is, nevertheless, a lot of work to undertake to get back to the place we all want to be. But we will. And you, along with other Nations are showing the way.

Negotiating and ratifying a modern treaty is perhaps the strongest expression of the transition that is taking place at this time. A treaty represents a fundamental shift in the relationship between a First Nation and the Crown – where, with constitutional protection, the Nation’s right to govern itself is recognized – free from the interference and dysfunction of the Indian Act system that still plagues the vast majority of our Nations.
All across this country – and I see this in my national role as the AFN portfolio holder for governance – our Nations are asking the same and very fundamental questions that you have asked and are now finding the answers to – while the Indian Act needs to go – what replaces it? How should we govern ourselves? Where are the resources going to come from to support our economies and to run our government? And – perhaps most challenging – how are we going to accomplish all this when still too many of our people suffer with personal issues related to the colonial legacy – the need for healing.

The Final Agreement you are working towards will provide you with tools to help answer these questions and is, in itself, a part of the healing process. The process is as important as the outcome. For without it the outcome is uncertain.

The process of translating agreements into practice – to be sure, the real work – has for you really just begun. While certainly not downplaying the importance of the work to date – it is quite one thing for the lawyers, politicians and working groups to come up with the legal language and proposed terms of settlements in agreements – like the one just signed here today – as you know through your community work thus far – it is quite another thing to translate legal rights and responsibilities into strong and effective governance and economic growth. Yes, you will have the tools – and the work begins in earnest as you use those tools to develop the laws that will govern your Nation beyond the Indian Act, and to make decisions with respect to your use of land – both your former reserve lands and those lands that are added to your land base.
While hard work this is the most rewarding part of decolonization – because it is only when you taste the power of freedom that comes from being released from the tyranny of colonialism that you only then truly realize that the decisions you make will determine the course of your own future – and that your destiny lies in your own hands and nobody else’s. For those Nations that have successfully gone through this process this is what is so liberating.

As you know, one of the most fundamental pieces of work you are undertaking is developing your Nation’s constitution – a constitution of the people that sets out how your governing body will make decisions, how laws will be enacted, the rights and responsibilities of your members – basically setting out the core institutions of your government. This work will inevitably tie your community together even more, and this is so empowering. While I am sure there will be much discussion on the relative merits of the Final Agreement and associated agreements – and they are complicated documents like this AIP – the most important document to your community at the end of the day, I expect, will not be the Treaty itself, but rather your constitution and your core laws - how you govern your lands.

And let me tell you this...You will not be alone in your journey of rediscovery! Those Nations that have already negotiated a Treaty or are self-governing, I know, will be more than happy to share their experiences as we all, collectively, work together to support one another – to build on our success. Through the support and participation of our First Nations we have, in fact, at the BC Assembly of First Nations, collected the experiences of our Nations’ governance reform and published a comprehensive Governance Report. The Report looks at governance along a continuum of reform – where at
one end of the continuum we have the *Indian Act*, sectoral governance initiatives in-between, and at the other end – and furthest from the *Indian Act* – self-governing Nations – as you are aspiring to, and will soon become. At the BCAFN we are committed to support your efforts and those of all our Nations – no matter where they are on the continuum. We also need to continue to work together where our Nations have shared territory.

In moving forward with your treaty there will inevitably be questions asked as to how the K’ómoks First Nation will relate with neighbouring Nations. As you will be the only Nation in the territory that has a treaty, this will put you in a position of increased responsibility among our family as your powers of government will be greater than your neighbours – however your neighbours – including my own community of We Wai Kai – are also moving along the continuum of governance reform – which may or may not lead to an eventual treaty – but will certainly move us away from governance under the *Indian Act* towards strong and appropriate governance.

As we all move forward – it will be important that our communities continue to work together on issues of mutual concern and benefit. This will be particularly so within our traditional territories where we share resources and have common interests with respect to the use of our territories, by not only our respective citizens but by third parties. We will need to continue to work together as your AIP moves to Final Agreement to ensure that any issues of shared territories are addressed in a meaningful and constructive way – respecting the interconnectedness of our families, our peoples, our lands and our Nations.
So in closing, I am sure you will never forget this day – the emotions of hope and the promise for a better future – and it is important to not lose the momentum moving toward Final Agreement. Recognizing it can be harder to ratify a Final Agreement than an AIP – there are still a lot of issues to resolve in the Final Agreement – I strongly encourage the Crown to proceed quickly and diligently to ensure the necessary mandates are in place to complete the Final Agreement. While the K’ómoks people have the biggest job in developing their core institutions of government before Final Agreement and getting ready to transition from the *Indian Act*, it is important that Canada’s negotiators can deal comprehensively with outstanding issues, and in particular fish and fisheries.

Once again, I want to congratulate the K’ómoks people on taking this critical step in realizing your vision of self-determination. We will be with you as you move forward and we will be there to support you.

This is a moment to celebrate – to recognize the work and to say thank you to those that have brought us to this point – it is also a time for reflection – to think about those who have passed and could not be here with us today but those that are here in spirit to support a vision they so dearly held for our peoples.

Control is finally once again within your grasp. Within a short while there will be a generation of your people that have never known the *Indian Act*, people who will continue as they always have done living in this place, off this land and continuing to practice their traditions and their culture.

*Gilakas’la.*