

**SPEAKING NOTES
FOR GRAND CHIEF
DR. MATTHEW COON COME
AT THE
AANISCHAAUKAMIKW GRAND OPENING AND CELEBRATION
(Oujé-Bougoumou, June 7 2012)**

Very distinguished guests, Elders of the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee, ladies and gentlemen:

Wachiya and Welcome! [Introductory remarks in Cree]

I feel very honoured and proud to have been involved with the Aanischaaukamikw Cultural Institute for many years. When I was Chief of the Cree Nation of Mistissini, and during my earlier tenure as Grand Chief, Aanischaaukamikw was just a dream.

After many years of hard work on the part of many people finally that long-held dream of the Cree people has become a reality. The vision of having a place to preserve our own material culture, on our own territory, in one of our own communities has been realized. No longer should any Cree person have to leave Eeyou Istchee in order to see the historical records and artefacts of our own culture. No longer should we have to travel to the large cities of North America and Europe to see the tools, the clothing and the art of our own ancestors. No longer should the work of our ancestors be stored in the dusty drawers and vaults of far away museums. We have brought our historical records back

home to be admired and to be appreciated, first and foremost, by our own people.

With this repatriation of our own material culture we are bringing back the items produced by our ancestors so that they will remain where they belong and from where they should never have been removed.

With the opening of Aanischaaukamikw, we are in a sense, taking another step away from colonialism. We are taking another symbolic step away from the belief that the traditional lands, the culture and the products of indigenous peoples are simply there for the taking by a dominant society. With the opening of Aanischaaukamikw we are reclaiming our culture, reclaiming our way of life and reclaiming our integrity as Indigenous People. We are also making a statement with this wonderful and beautiful building, and with the exhibits which are on display that we are here to stay and that we are not going anywhere.

The opening of Aanischaaukamikw is symbolic of other things as well. We Cree people have always been proud of our cultural heritage and we have always been confident about its future. Our culture, which is based on our connection with the land and on our connection with the Creator has been a source of sustenance to us and it always will be. With that confidence also comes an openness and a willingness to share our culture with the world outside Eeyou Istchee.

As we become more involved with the world beyond Eeyou Istchee, it has become increasingly important that people know who we are, know where we come from, understand our values and beliefs, and appreciate our history. Aanischaaukamikw will be one of the important sources for that information and that understanding.

The establishment of the Aanischaaukamikw Cultural Institute comes at a very important and pivotal moment in the history of the Cree Nation. Since the signing of the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement* in 1975, the successive leadership of the Cree Nation has been committed to moving our people and our institutions progressively towards a greater expression of nationhood. Our recent history over the past nearly 40 years has been about nation-building. We have been incrementally and progressively putting into place all the necessary tools for our nation, our communities and our people to thrive in health and security. We have been laying the foundations for our long-term sustainability.

Part of this effort has required that we find a way to translate our historical reliance on the land into a contemporary context. The land, which has been the source of our sustenance for thousands of years, must, and will, continue to sustain us.

Our connection to our land has gone through different adaptations throughout our history. That connection has carried us through our first contact with Europeans, it has carried us through the era of the fur trade, and it has carried us through the post-fur trade era. Our current challenge is to ensure that our sacred connection to the land will now carry us through the next phase of our history.

As we all know, there has developed in recent years an increasing interest in the development of the natural resources within Eeyou Istchee. Many countries in the world have a growing need for the kinds of resources which are present within our traditional territory. The Government of Quebec has developed an ambitious approach toward the development of these resources, and they have extended their hand to us asking that these resources be developed in partnership and in friendship.

We have replied by saying that we are prepared to enter into such a partnership so long as our Cree communities and our Cree Nation benefit substantially from the development of the resources on our territory, and that projects to develop the resources must meet our standards of social acceptability. We replied also by saying that we need to establish new and innovative governance structures for the Territory to ensure that this happens. These new governance structures are coming, and I am confident that we will be able to ensure that our connection

with the land will continue to be the source of our sustenance and our way of life, and our connection to the land will continue to be the source of our thriving culture.

The next phase of our history will no doubt bring a greater degree of interaction with people, with companies, with countries and with cultures that we are not familiar with, and that are not familiar with us. There will be a need for yet a greater degree of mutual understanding and mutual appreciation among us for the future to unfold positively and harmoniously.

The Aanischaaukamikw Cultural Institute is fundamentally about that—it is about understanding. It is about breaking down the walls which divide us. It is, in the end, about connecting with one another.

The Aanischaaukamikw Cultural Institute will therefore be much more than a museum. It will be much more than static displays and exhibits. It will be an institution which will play a vital role in facilitating the mutual understanding which will be required as we become more open to the world beyond our borders.

Promoting greater understanding of our Cree heritage adds to the already enormous importance of our relationships and our cultural exchanges with Québec and the rest of the world.

Aanischaaukamikw not only enables us to preserve our artefacts, our customs and our arts, but it will also project the best of

ourselves to the world. It will enable the positive connections which will be vital for our future.

On behalf of the Grand Council of the Crees, and on behalf of the people of Eeyou Istchee I would like to acknowledge and express gratitude to all the people who worked so diligently over such a long time to help us arrive at this day. I would like to acknowledge the work of Abel Bosum in steering the Aanischaaukamikw Foundation in a way that made the resources available to construct this building and to ensure its future operations. And I would once again like to congratulate Diane Ried, President of the Board of Directors, on her being recipient of a special Queen's Jubilee Award in recognition of her work in establishing Aanischaaukamikw.

I would also like to acknowledge and express our gratitude to Mr. Stephen Inglis, our Executive Director, who agreed to bring such a high level of professional expertise to assist us in developing this vital new Cree entity.

I would like to express our deepest thanks to those individuals, foundations, institutions, companies and governments who understood the importance of this new Cree institution and found ways to translate that understanding into substantial financial contributions.

And finally, I would like to thank the Elders of the Cree Nation and the Cultural Coordinators of each community all of whom provided important guidance to the work that went into the establishment of this remarkable institution.

Thank you to all those who traveled from afar to be with us today and who understand the importance of this day and the importance of Aanischaaukamikw.

Meegwetch, merci, thank you.