

Basil Ambers

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Above: Screenshot from the 1990s video "Severing the Web on Vancouver Island"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWUyGBNN0_M

"We haven't won anything yet. We've just finished fighting for an island in front of our village that was a graveyard. You talk about the treaty of Fort Rupert. That treaty was signed in good faith by the people of long ago. It should have meaning. We had to fight for that island, a graveyard island with visible graves on it" Basil Ambers, 1997

Select Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs 1997/03/03

<http://www.leg.bc.ca/CMT/36thParl/CMT01/1997/hansard/ab0303.htm>

**1996 Legislative Session:
1st Session, 36th Parliament**

**SELECT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
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Michael de Jong (Matsqui -- L)
Jack Weisgerber (Peace River South -- Reform)
Clerk of Committees: Craig James

**TRANSCRIPTS OF PROCEEDINGS
(Hansard)**

PORT HARDY

MONDAY, MARCH 3, 1997

Issue No. 34

Also Present: Gilbert Popovich (Mayor, Alert Bay)
Mark McIntyre
Chief David Hunt (Kwakiutl District Council)
Chief Saul Terry (Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs)
Rick McRae (IWA-Canada Local 171)
Carmen Burrows (representing Bruce Burrows, United Fishermen
Allied Workers Union Local 26)
Teresa Ransome
Basil Ambers
Chief William Cranmer
Chief John Henderson
Yvon Gesinghaus
Rod Naknakim

B. Ambers: My name is Basil Ambers. I'm an elder from the Fort Rupert band, Kwakiutl. I'm also the spokesperson for the elders. It's very interesting to sit and listen to the things that have been said, knowing that there is nothing happening, really, on the treaty front. I'm also the treaty worker for my band. We're having a heck of a time. Like, you asked those two young ladies if there was any dialogue between us and the people from the communities. It's really hard to have a dialogue when you don't have any money to fight for anything. I don't know whether you people realize the hoops we have to go through in order to qualify for a loan from the two levels of government in order to pursue the land claims issue.

We belonged to a treaty society at one point. It didn't work, so we pulled out. Then we were informed by the commissioners that we would not be funded, because we were "dropouts" -- that's their term for us. We tried to talk to them about our institutions and our government and our style of working things out amongst ourselves. We invited them to come and witness some of the things that were happening on our cultural front, which was an indication of our style of government. Finally, they did come, and they were amazed.

One of the things I would like to level at you people is that you don't know anything about us. You have no knowledge whatsoever of our culture and how our institutions work. You have no knowledge of our potlatch system and how that system works within us and how it works as our government. Everything we ever do in this world comes out of that potlatch system.

Even though we are the most studied people in Canada, you people don't know a thing about us, absolutely nothing. You've had anthropologists by the dozens come to our country. The Kwakiutl have been studied and studied. There are reams and reams of books on the potlatch system and on our type of government, and I bet there isn't one of you sitting up there that can tell me anything about it. I bet you are all ignorant of what it's all about. That's why I sit here and I sort of seethe. I know the actual ridiculousness of us trying to get a treaty with you people, because of things like that.

Interim measures. Oh, we all felt: "Wow, they're starting now to come out with things that mean something. They're now saying that we're going to have interim measures." The interim measures only worked on the government side; it never worked on the Indian side. I have never heard of anything that has been halted just so that you could have a look at it and say: "Okay, how much should we give the Indians out of this?" Rather, everything has gone ahead full bore.

There's going to be nothing left. We are the top people of the Kwakwaka'wakw people; we were the number one tribe in the potlatch system. And we're going to be the poorest amongst our tribes. We have a highway right behind our village; there's hardly nothing left in the North Island.

I listen to all the half-truths that have been said about us. We're loggers. I was a logger. I donated the end of my thumb to the logging industry. I logged from the forties right to the sixties. I understand what mechanization is about; I watched it happening. The young gentleman there who was talking about the number of people that are working in the logging industry. . . . I bet you that if you went from tribe to tribe in the Kwakiutl world, you wouldn't get 100 working in the logging industry. That's the truth. If you went from tribe to tribe, you would find that the unemployment rate is around 40 to 60 percent in every tribe. We understand that, as leaders trying to work within the system. And we're finding it really tough to do that.

I didn't even hear about this parliamentary group here until yesterday. Otherwise, I would have asked for a time and made a proper submission. I just came back from Vancouver. I sit on the Pacific Salmon Commission because of the things I believe. I'm no longer a fisherman. I had to sell my licence last year. I'm one of the ones who are what you might call victims of the Mifflin plan. I've got a boat still sitting down at the dock here in Port Hardy.

One of the things that happens to you. . . . Like, I'm jumping around here all over the place, simply because of the fact that I came here totally unprepared to make a formal statement. But I feel funny listening to all the things that have been said and the things that have been asked of people who we are supposedly trying to get a treaty with. It really bothers me that the common ground isn't there.

I had to sell my licence. One of the things that people don't understand about the Mifflin plan is that. . . . Like, I was a fairly successful fisherman. I'm 66 years old. I put in my licence up north in the Prince Rupert area. I could not afford to buy another licence to come and fish down here. That's the reason I had to get rid of my licence. I had a straight A licence on my boat. For the size of my boat, it was another \$100,000 to. . . . Now, who's going to fund a 66-year-old man to get another licence on something as dubious as making a living at fishing? I made a fairly good living at it. Everything I own, I own myself. I don't owe anything on my boat or on my house or on the things that I have. But I'm

still a victim of the Mifflin plan.

Those are the things that are never really discussed when you talk about how the Mifflin plan worked against us as Indian people. A lot of us have lost our licences. A lot of us are out of it now. We're on a beach now, looking outwards. We have a lot of people standing on a beach now. Those people are still going to stand on a beach -- and their children and their children's children are going to stand on a beach -- unless we have a meaningful treaty.

Interim measures has to mean something. It has got to have meaning; it has got to have teeth. Otherwise, you might as well forget about it. We can't deal with the resources going as fast as they are. They're just simply going out the window. And we're sitting there watching them, with no real ability to step in there and stop it.

That's one of the reasons why Chief Saul Terry made that comment that there is a lot of unrest amongst the bands. I hear it all the time. One of the things I do is go all over the province, because I'm interested in our world. I hear a lot of people talking about civil disobedience again, saying the only time that we ever get anything of any meaning is when that happens, when there is civil disobedience.

It's a sad commentary on you people, who have within you the power to change things, when you don't change anything at all. I feel really badly when I look at people that are supposed to be in that position, people with so-called brains.

We sat here. We fought with the people trying to bring more sea farms into our area. We fought -- what's his name? -- when he tried to bring in the ferrochromium thing here. We haven't won anything yet. We've just finished fighting for an island in front of our village that was a graveyard. You talk about the treaty of Fort Rupert. That treaty was signed in good faith by the people of long ago. It should have meaning. We had to fight for that island, a graveyard island with visible graves on it.

It's costing us a heck of a lot of time and a lot of money to put out those types of brush fires. We should not have to fight for a graveyard. That should be totally acknowledged right away -- and yet that was part of the treaty. That island was part of the treaty that was granted by the Hudson's Bay Co. Somehow or other, somebody got hold of it and then threatened to log it and started falling trees over the graves. We had to go out there in force to stop it.

We've got to get some honesty somewhere, and we've got to get some things with meaning. I am absolutely sick and tired of listening to some of the garbage that I keep hearing. I don't want to die knowing that I didn't leave nothing behind for my children. You probably don't, either. Thank you, that's all I've got to say.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambers. Are there any questions?

J. Weisgerber: Just to follow up again on this Mifflin thing. I don't want to overemphasize it, but while we won't deal with that issue directly, certainly the issues around salmon and fisheries coming out of Nisga'a are going to oblige us to make some comments on it.

I was told this afternoon by an aboriginal fisher in Alert Bay that he believed the Mifflin plan to be racist insofar as aboriginal people seemed to be the ones obliged most often to sell their licences. Do you think it's harder for aboriginal fishers to raise money for additional licences? Is that one of the reasons, aside from your age, that you decided to sell?

B. Ambers: Of course it is. I have very good credit, but there was no way that a bank would have loaned me \$100,000. Absolutely no way.

J. Weisgerber: Because of the limitations on your house as collateral, etc.?

B. Ambers: That's right.

End of Transcript of Basil Ambers