



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., welcomes Canada Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal People during fact-finding mission

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., welcomed the Canada Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples as family and relatives on Wednesday.

The committee was in the Navajo capital Wednesday and Thursday as part of its tour of Southwestern tribes to learn more about successful Native governments.

The President presented an overview of Navajo history and government to the seven Senators and their staff, explaining that the Navajo people never relinquished their sovereignty although the U.S. government replaced their independence with dependence.

“Now we’re regaining that sovereignty,” the President said. “One of the biggest things that I’m pushing is to get back on our own as a nation, like we once were. I don’t like being dependent. It starts with the individual person. I don’t like to see one of my children, siblings, family members, my people being dependent on anybody. That’s not the way it should be. Right now the Navajo Nation is dependent big time on the U.S. government.”

He said the Navajo Nation receives about \$350 million per year through grants, contracts and entitlements from the federal government, and earns approximately \$170 million through its own resources, taxes and fees.

However, he added that within 20-to-30 years, the Nation will have restored its independent status and should no longer be dependent on other governments to meet its own needs, except for promises contained in its Treaty of 1868.

Among the projects he says will help re-establish its financial independence is the Desert Rock Energy Project, which he hopes will break ground this year, casinos, with the first of six

opening this summer, and a dozen other economic development projects.

In total, he projects an additional \$270 million in new tribal revenue.

Today, however, the Navajo Nation has a 50 percent unemployment rate that leaves it extremely difficult to find good jobs on Navajoland.

As a result, many Navajos are forced to leave home to live and find employment.

But many hundreds succeed as jewelry makers, weavers and artists, he said.

The President explained that the first Navajo tribal government was established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs 84 years ago.

“It was put in place for us by the U.S. government,” he said. “We’re really yet to come up with our own form of government, what they took away from us, the foreigners when they came across the big water. Before the foreigners tread these lands, we were very independent, very fierce, and very proud.”

Several years ago, he said the Navajo Nation enacted the Fundamental Law of the *Diné*.

“It predates the U.S. government,” he said. “It’s laws that we believe have been shared with us by the deities, laws related to the earth, sky, water, the wind, who we are, how we came to be, the laws that governs all of that, and this predates the U.S.”



Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., greets the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples Chairman, Gerry St. Germain of British Columbia.

government. The Navajo Nation identified parts of it and embodied it into code of law.”

To date, he added, the Nation hasn't begun to fully incorporate it but is working toward that goal.

The Navajo Nation is the largest tribe of 310,000 citizens, with about 100,000 residing on Navajoland,” he said. Many more would return home except for the lack of employment. Nevertheless, the Nation's population is growing at a rate of about five percent per year.

Because of the size of the Navajo government, he said, it is hard to see growth and progress every day. But he said

the Nation is developing continuously. He used the analogy of a giant oak tree that one cannot see growing overnight, within six months, or even in a year, but it is known to be growing.

President Shirley told the Senators he does not like nor use the term “Indian,” which he said is a misnomer. Among the Navajo people, he is a member of the five-fingered, intelligent earth-dwellers called *Diné*.

“I never refer to myself as Indian, even in my writings.” he said. “Officially, I suppose we carry the term Indian. I don't like it. We should try to get back and the truth, and try to change that. I hope my other presidents and children and grandchildren will change it. We're members of the five-fingered, intelligent earth-dwellers called *Diné*. That's who we are.”

Likewise, he said he does not use the term “reservation” which denotes a wildlife reserve. To Navajos, he said, this has always been their homeland known in the foreigners' language as Navajoland, not a preserve or reservation.

“When you refer to your land as a reservation, you're in a way referring to yourself as wildlife,” he said. “No, we were never wildlife. We're *Diné*. We've always been that. The Creator created us such.”

The President said how one refers to oneself is how a people applies their way of life, and gets to the truth of who they are.



President Shirley addresses the Canada Senate's Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples in Window Rock on Wednesday. The committee is visiting tribes in the Southwest.

“You're Canadians, First Nations, and we're the Navajo people,” he said. “You're family based on what I told you. We're all on the same side.”

He said the real culprits working against people are hunger, thirst, jealousy, greed, famine, and all manner of diseases. The committee also heard presentations by Acting Education Superintendent Eddie Biakeddy, Navajo Nation Chief of Police Jim Benally, Leila Help-Tulley of the Navajo Nation Council's Speaker's office, and Ed Martin, administrator of the Navajo Judicial Branch.

Among the Canada Senate members visiting the Navajo Nation were Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples Chairman, Gerry St. Germain of British Columbia, Senator Nick Sibbeston of the North West Territories, Senator Larry Campbell of the Province of Ontario, Senator Elizabeth Hubley of Prince Edward Island, Senator Robert Peterson and Senator Lillian Dyck of Saskatchewan, and Senator Sanda Lovelace-Nicholas of New Brunswick. Joining them was Ms. Marcy Zlotnick, Committee Clerk, Stephen Stewart, executive assistant to Senator St. Gerry Germain, and Ms. Tonina Simsone, analyst.

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