

James Bourque PC. (1935-1996)

The Honourable James Bourque P.C. was the director of policy for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People. Jim's commitment to public service started early when he was elected president of the hunter and trapper association in Fort Chipewyan when he was eighteen. Following a term as the park warden in Wood Buffalo National Park, Jim served as chairman of the Metis Association of the Northwest Territories, founded, and served as chair of, the Fur Institute of Canada, chaired the Northwest Territories Constitutional Committee, and held the position of Deputy Minister Renewable Resources for the NWT government. On July 1, 1992, Jim was sworn into the Queen's Privy Council for Canada.

Jim Bourque was born at Wandering River, Alberta. Trapping, hunting and fishing were important parts of his early life. He committed himself to promoting and supporting traditional ways of Metis life in the Northwest Territories. Bourque played many important political roles during his lifetime. He was actively involved in Northwest Territories political organizations. From 1980 to 1982 he was the President of the Metis Nation of the Northwest Territories. He was also Deputy Minister of Renewable Resources in the government of the Northwest Territories, and the chair of the Commission on Constitutional Development in the Western Arctic. In 1992, he was appointed to the Privy Council and served as Co-director of Policy for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

Bourque was also the founder of the Centre for Traditional Knowledge, housed at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. He also served as Chairman of the Fur Institute of Canada from 1986 to 1989 and was a Lifetime Member.

The Metis people of the Northwest Territories recognized Jim Bourque as an Elder. He will be long remembered for his contributions to Metis society in Canada. He was quoted as saying, "The geese migrate because they have responsibilities to fulfill at different times and at different places. Before they fly, they gather together and store up energy. I believe strongly that our people are gathering together now, just like the geese getting ready to fly. I am tremendously optimistic that we will soon take on the responsibilities that we were meant to carry in the world at large." (With contributions by the Gabriel Dumont Institute.)

NNSL (OCT 23/96) -It will be a long time before history can fully measure the impact Jim Bourque has had on the Northwest Territories.

Bourque passed away in Ottawa Saturday at the age of 60, the victim of a heart attack. His influence, which has as much to do with the way he conducted his life as his accomplishments, shapes the north today as much as it ever did. The words and the tone of those whose lives Bourque touched resonate with respect.

"If young people ever needed a role model to look up to, he was the one," said Premier Don Morin. "He always treated people with respect, and got it back in turn. He was an honest man."

"There's a lot of people crying across the territories," said Susan Fleck, a long time friend of Bourque's, who worked as his executive assistant during his final years with the territorial government.

"He couldn't walk into a community in the North without being stopped on the street by people who knew him. He was an incredibly humble man, for all his accomplishments."

The list of those accomplishments is a weighty one.

From 1991-92 he chaired the Commission for Constitutional Development, better known as the Bourque Commission. The duty took him to communities across the north for a series of public meetings. That dialogue began the daunting task of forging a new constitution, a project now nearing fruition.

In the mid and late 80s, a time when the fur industry was almost wiped out by European, American and Canadian anti-fur lobbyists, Bourque was northern trappers' most powerful advocate. He founded the Northwest Territories Fur Institute and served as its chairman for five years. He was the driving force behind the establishment of aboriginal fishing and hunting rights. Bourque waged these battles as deputy minister for the department of renewable resources, a post he held from 1982 until retiring in 1991. A year later he was appointed to the Privy Council.

"It was a real challenge to follow him," said Joe Handley, a brother Metis who knew Bourque for 11 years and was his successor at renewable resources.

"He was very well liked by his staff. He had a simple and clear way of expressing himself that earned him respect in the communities, out on the land and among the most senior politicians."

Before being appointed a deputy minister Bourque served a term as president of the Northwest Territories Metis Nation. Frank Laviolette of Fort Smith was one of his keenest supporters in the Metis leadership.

"There was a lot of disagreement among the Metis leaders then, especially in the west," recalled Laviolette. "But he brought them together."

Metis Nation president Gary Bohnet noted, "Jim had a gift for bringing together people who had opposite points of view...He is lost to us at a time when we most needed his guidance, especially now with his constitutional work becoming a reality."

Though he shaped history in the boardrooms of Yellowknife and Ottawa, Bourque was always a man of the land. He embraced the teachings of his Cree grandparents. Through his life he spoke of the importance of aboriginal traditions, and the lessons the land holds for all.

"He was happy on the land, he liked the land, and he was also good in the office," said Laviolette, who helped Bourque relocate two herds of bison from Wood Buffalo National Park after an anthrax scare in the early 60s.

"He always did the best he could, not only for the Metis, not only for aboriginals, but for everyone," said Laviolette.

Flags in Ottawa and the NWT are at half mast this week in honor of Jim Bourque, and hearts are hanging across the North.



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