

WITH CHIEF JOHN MISWAGON, CROSS LAKE FIRST NATION



*John Miswagon is Aski Okimaw, or traditional leader of the Pimicikamak, an indigenous nation of 6,000 Cree whose homeland surrounds Sipiwesk Lake, north of Lake Winnipeg. Under Pimicikamak law he is also, ex officio, the Chief of the Cross Lake Band. His traditional upbringing taught him a holistic respect for the environment and its ecosystems as the basis for human survival. He has worked as a Conservation Officer for the government of Manitoba and also as a manager for the Royal Bank. He was interviewed after his speech to the Frontier Centre on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005.*

**Frontier Centre:** When you describe Cross Lake First Nation as embracing traditional cultural norms with respect to its governance, what do you mean?

**Chief John Miswagon:** The first correction is that it's not Cross Lake First Nation, it's Pimicikamak. It all depends on what you know about culture. It's a whole new arena. Cultural norms are a set of principles. The cultural aspect of indigenous peoples is based on truthfulness, honesty and having respect for what you do as a leader.

**FC:** What was the process that led your Band to the conclusion that you ought to head in that direction?

**JM:** Why we went that way was 123 years of failure in following another process.

**FC:** You've said that you started remaking your Nation about 15 years ago?

**JM:** More or less. Putting it down on paper was what took the longest. The discussions have been going on for about 100 years.

**FC:** Is there harmony on your reservation now, or prosperity? Are you faring better or worse than other First Nations?

**JM:** You're going to have to ask them. Of course I'm going to say we're brilliant. I don't know what other conditions really are, so I can't honestly answer that. I think we have to learn first how to trust our citizens. Without that trust, there's nowhere to go. There's not much trust in other communities, in other tribes. They're in the same boat we were in fifteen years ago.

**FC:** How often do you have elections? Are they genuinely competitive? Do you have to worry about losing your job in the next round?

**JM:** A leader does not worry about winning elections. We have an election process that we put together from the grassroots, and it means more to them because of that. The first election we held under Pimicikamak election law was in 1999, and there was 84% voter turnout because the election process meant something to us. And sure enough it works.

**FC:** Has there been any notice from the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs about the difference in your way from so many others? Is the devolution of powers happening in a way that's satisfactory?

**JM:** I represent Pimicikamak citizens. I do not represent Canada, and probably never will. I can't know what Canada feels about it, but I know they're starting to see more of it. In the recent talks and in government media releases that we get, they're looking for a different way. They're always talking about a different way. We're leading that way.

**FC:** Did you support former Indian Affairs Minister Robert Nault's proposed First Nations Governance Act? What did you like or dislike about his ideas?

**JM:** Personally, I never read it because it's federal legislation and it's none of my business. If what Indian Affairs was after at the time was accountability and transparency, that's what we're all about.

**FC:** The new Minister, Andy Scott, has announced that they're moving towards a new policy on housing that includes down payments and monthly payments, an individual stake. What do you think about that?

**JM:** You're asking a former bank manager. It already exists at home. There are people who are paying for their homes right now. We've been doing that at Pimicikamak for quite a while.

**FC:** Do you think that works better than the old model based on a social welfare assignment system?

**JM:** I believe that people who pay for their own houses tend to be a little more careful with maintenance and upkeep. As far as the other formula goes, I really don't understand it, but I know it's inadequate.

**FC:** Pimicikamak's the last holdout in signing the Northern Flood Agreement. Why? What is the sticking point?

**JM:** The Northern Flood Agreement is a settlement in itself. The timeline on that agreement is for the lifetime of the project. As long as a turbine turns anywhere in the Churchill-Lake Winnipeg system, the treaty stands.

**FC:** How badly did the Jenpeg dam affect your people and is there any way to make up for the losses?

**JM:** The biggest thing we have right now that we would like to see better progress on is removing the debris from the lake that accumulates every year and to stabilize shorelines to save what is there, and to try and rehabilitate the shoreline as well. Those are all part of the treaty. They're all promises already in there, it's just a matter of getting them done. As far as how it's affected us, I'll be 41 years old tomorrow. I've seen it change from a beautiful place where we didn't worry about money. We had it all, we had medicine, we had food, the river was our highway. We didn't worry about gasoline, we had dog teams, we paddled, we sailed. It literally turned our river and our lakes into environmental slums. It turned me away from a water that gave us life when I was a kid to a process where it takes lives, with boating accidents, for example. That's the dilemma and the added stress that's on our people.

**FC:** As far as your future is concerned, does it make sense to count on that water as a sustainable resource any more? Is

**there a good side to it, in the sense of future production of electricity and your share in those revenues?**

**JM:** We often make people aware that we are users of electricity as well. The dams are there and they'll be there for the long time. We're not against dams, we're against damage. Something needs to be done to address the damage I've talked about, and somehow make it a little safer for our people. From a treaty perspective, there lies another challenge. We are told, "You are part of the solution or you are part of the problem," when it comes to the legal aspect of treaty rights. If you are part of a people that destroys the land that you walk on, and the land that you walk on holds the rights that you hold, you are in conflict. If my right to hunt moose is there but there are no moose to hunt, then what is the point of that right?

**FC: Do you want more freedom to exploit resources?**

**JM:** Generally speaking, all over Turtle Island—what people call North America—I think the priority should be to estimate what is left, instead of take, take, take. I think we need to do an inventory, because nobody seems to really want to tell the truth about what is left. One example I share: I've heard many times that there is 50 years worth left of natural gas and oil in North America. What are you planning on doing after 50 years? Could we say that the governments that have assumed jurisdiction over us have done a good job? Probably not.

**FC: Despite a 3,000 percent increase in government spending on aboriginals over the last generation, poverty levels in First Nations remain high. Should we look at spending more of that money directly to individuals or families instead of government agencies?**

**JM:** I can only speak about where I come from. Probably 90 percent of the money reaches the people at Pimicikamak, with ten percent being administration, the people who administer the money. I don't administer it myself, we have people that do it.

**FC: That's a pretty high figure compared to some other bands.**

**JM:** Like I said, we're very respectful of what the people's needs are. When I became Chief in 1999, I used to get ten complaints a day. Today, I get one complaint a month. Are the people being served? Do these kinds of funds reach them? They are reaching them.

**FC: Is there anything that can be done in terms of the *Indian Act* to make that kind of responsible governance possible for other bands?**

**JM:** Starting with these funds that you're talking about coming from Canada, it would greatly benefit the people if they came directly from Ottawa right to the Nation. I've met some Indian Affairs officials who are retired now, and they say ten percent gets chopped off before it leaves the room for their purposes, for overheads; they funnel it back. But I haven't seen the point of charging ten percent for printing a cheque. It stops in Winnipeg and gets chopped off another ten percent. Some of it gets funneled through AMC [the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and others], and when it actually gets to the people, you're lucky if you see sixty percent of it. But in order for Canada to realize that, you have to have what we have started, a financial management system, an accountable system that's accountable to the people, to us and to everybody else.

**FC: So your books are open, and anybody that wants to can come in and have a look at how you're using the resources. Is that a common occurrence, or do you think you're a rarity?**

**JM:** The way we do things at home is the way my mother taught me. To be honest, to be fair and, if there are times where you can't help people, you tell them you cannot help them at this time. That's all I do. Whether that is rare, maybe it is and maybe it isn't. I can only speak for our experience. What happens in other communities, I cannot say if we're any better. I know that we're more open, we're more accountable. We've always been open about how we do things at home.

**FC: What do you think of the idea in use in some bands of the concept of Chief by hereditary custom? Is that sort of practice widespread and what's your opinion of it?**

**JM:** In the old days, that's how it was done.

**FC: Did that refer to administrative power or to national power? Wasn't hereditary custom used in relation to war Chiefs, not the chore of looking after the day-to-day affairs of the tribe? Wasn't that typically looked after mostly by women?**

**JM:** In the clan system, the rulers and the head people have always been women. If the people that are under that system still follow the principles of respect, of caring for the people and loving the people, if they're there because they've earned it, then that's the way it used to be.

**FC: Do Canada's Indian Chiefs have too much power?**

**JM:** I don't know if they have any power at all. All they really have power to do is to sign letters and to sign funding agreements, and band council resolutions that are not legally recognized in any court. I don't know what you mean by too much power. They have no power at all. They are accountable to the Minister, they are accountable to Indian Affairs, but they are not accountable to me.

**FC: How widely is your message of empowerment, of bottom-up power, spreading throughout other First Nations in Canada? Is there much changing in that respect?**

**JM:** Everywhere I go, the will of the people is always talked about. I've been to the United States, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, it's talked about everywhere. Sometimes when people do see big dollar figures at the end, they run, they're not gung-ho about going there. But in the end what it boils down to is, "Do we love each other?" It's not about money. If you're going to blindfold yourself with money, you're going to get lost.

**FC: A Chief from Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, who runs one of the most successful economic reserves in Canada, said that he made prosperity happen under impossible conditions by breaking all the rules. Are your people rule-bound? Do they need to have fewer rules, and perhaps break some of the ones they have?**

**JM:** We govern by principles and laws, rather than rules. The laws and principles about how you exist and how you do things supersede anything. The laws have to be based on truth, honesty and respect for the people. What he's accomplished over there is the easy part. They get financial power, that's the easy part. The hard part is to get our people to realize the power they do have, without breaking all the rules the federal government has set for the bands. If everybody keeps following the Canadian rules under the arrangements we have, we'll never get anywhere.

**FC: The role of women in your band is important. They form one of your Four Councils, and they have veto power over everything. What difference does that make in the lives of your people?**

**JM:** When I was asked to run for Chief, I talked to 13 people out of 7,000 on the list. Those 13 people I talked to were grandmothers. I told them I had been asked to run, and I asked them if they wanted me to run. They told me, "You're the one."

**FC:** **What about schooling? Even though some aboriginals who attended Residential Schools were abused, aren't they ones who did go the ones who are now prospering? What are you doing at Pimicikamak to equip your children for the future?**

**JM:** We do the best we can, but are they prospering? No. Part of it is the cultural shock they experience when they come out. There are other factors at play. It's not just, "Can you make it in the classroom or outside the classroom?" That's the challenge.

**FC:** **So it's not just whether they're educated, but whether they're happy?**

**JM:** The people in the community who went through the education system were not all abused. That's one thing that has to be cleared up. But very few went through without any abuse. The abuse that we talk about is intergenerational. It doesn't end with that person. I know a family that was dealing with three generations of sexual abuse. That is rampant in aboriginal communities. It's a huge problem. If you ask a young lady 25 or 30 years old what bothers her the most, it's the sexual abuse, not getting a job. In order for that person to move forward, she's got to heal herself. That's the greater thing and in the process of healing herself, you go through the healing processes and you go through respecting people. The second-last step in the healing process is forgiveness. If you go to a person right now and say, "I sexually abused you. Forgive me," they don't even know where to start. They have to know what they're feeling. They have to get it out.

They have to deal with it. They have to talk about it with somebody they can trust. Out of a 13-step process, the 12<sup>th</sup> step is forgiveness, and I think sometimes that is the hardest thing our people are trying to deal with. It's not just one issue, it's a whole bunch of issues.

**FC:** **One of the things that the Harvard Project talks about is a capably trained bureaucracy. Is the University of the North helping you get there with the next generation?**

**JM:** That process is far too new to see whether it's going to work or not. We have to have a process that's culturally sensitive to the young people. There's a teaching process that goes on outside the classrooms that's missing right now in our system. We have gone to see other aboriginal schools in Minnesota and Québec, so we're still looking. That tells you that we're not happy with what we have.

**FC:** **What do you feel about the way things traditionally used to be, where children were taken out of school and spent two or three weeks on a trap-line or out fishing? Do you think they would gain more respect for the people and the land, if that were included?**

**JM:** When I was talking about visiting a school in Québec, that's exactly the purpose of that. To give them a two-week break at the right times for hunting, so that kids can spend time with their families and their fathers and brothers and go out and experience that. There's a feeling out there that that's needed.

**FC:** **If you had the power for one day to change one thing in the *Indian Act*, what would that be?**

**JM:** The *Indian Act* is not mine. Why would I change it?

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