

# MI'KMAQ APPLAUD APOLOGY

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**Monday, March 22, 1999 (Membertou)** - Cape Breton Regional Mayor David Muise apologized to Membertou First Nations community Sunday for sins committed by the former City of Sydney 84 years ago.

He told about 40 direct descendants of Membertou's founders that Sydney's successful fight to force out Mi'kmaq living on Kings Road was wrong.

"There were some racist remarks made at the time," he said at a dinner in Membertou.

The fledgling community of Mi'kmaq was called "unsightly" and "immoral" in some of historic court documents.

"There's nothing we can do to undo the move...what I'm here to do is start the healing process for wrongs of the past," Mr. Muise told the group after a sweet grass ceremony and songs by tribal drummers.

The founding Membertou community lived on the banks of Sydney Harbor along Kings Road, about three kilometres away from the band's present-day location. About 20 homes, a church and school were in the community at the time of the move.

Former band councillor Roy Gould said one racist

aldermen managed to convince everyone, including the courts, that the move was valid, arguing the Mi'kmaq were hampering the city's development. Kings Road is a main route to downtown Sydney.

"The move actually started in 1915 when they wanted us off Kings Road, and it was completed in 1925 to 1927," he said. "The biggest argument in the courts at the time was that we were hindering the progress of Sydney Steel."

The wrongs committed against the band were brought to the municipality's attention after one off-reserve Mi'kmaq refused to pay his taxes.

"I was not that pleased for many, many years concerning what happened to my people on the Kings road reserve, and I decided maybe something should be done," linguist Bernie Francis said.

"I decided after I received my last (tax) bill, to write a letter to seek and apology for Membertou."

Mr. Francis said Mr. Muise is noble for not hesitating to apologize.

"Even though other people in the council discouraged him from coming here because they thought his apology would have legal implications, the mayor waved them off with his hand and said 'What needs to be done, needs to be done, and

what's right is what's right," Mr. Francis said. "So I give all points to the mayor."

He said he hopes the relationship between the band and regional municipality will now improve.

"We want to be able to be part of Sydney. We don't want to follow the Sydney fathers. We want to walk side by side," he said.

Band Chief Terry Paul asked the mayor to go a step further by helping Mi'kmaq enter the very white business community surrounding Membertou. Not one of 700 municipal workers is Mi'kmaq.

"I'm asking for us to work diligently to improve the situation that our people are in. There's 80 per cent unemployment. Help us get into the business community ... and the municipality itself," he said. "Just give us the chance."

Mr. Paul agreed Mr. Muise is a man of honor.

"I'm wouldn't be able to tell you how great I feel for the mayor coming here. I have a lot of respect for him ... and I think it's going to help build bridges for our community here.

"It will finally give us a chance have people understand who we are, ... which will help to remove the ugly head of racism," he said.

The apology came on the day the United Nations has declared International Day for Elimination of Racism.