

Tribute to Mr. Robert Kanatewat

It is with great pride that the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue recognizes the remarkable contribution of Mr. Robert Kanatewat, former Chief of the Cree community of Chisasibi, by awarding him an honorary doctorate for the promotion and advocacy of Indigenous rights and for his exceptional community involvement and political record.

A politician and entrepreneur with a strong commitment to his community, Mr. Kanatewat was actively involved in the political debates regarding Indigenous issues in the past decades, particularly as one of the Eeyouch signatories of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. At that time, he was Chief of the community of Chisasibi, a position he held from 1968 to 1977. Fighting for the Cree Nation's land claims was certainly one of the greatest challenges of his political career. In 1972, he was named lead plaintiff in the case against the James Bay Development Corporation. It was therefore Mr. Kanatewat's name that appeared in the lawsuit as the Cree and Inuit initiated proceedings before the Superior Court of Quebec, which lasted more than a year and a half. In 1973, Justice Albert Malouf made a landmark decision recognizing the rights of the Cree and Inuit by granting an interlocutory injunction to stop work on the James Bay hydroelectric project. The first explicit judicial recognition of Aboriginal rights in Canadian history, this decision made history by paving the way for the negotiations that led to the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, the first modern treaty in Canada. This document, which addresses, among other things, Indigenous rights, community development, education, justice, health and social services, environmental protection, autonomy and preservation of the traditional way of life, has had a significant impact on the development of the Cree Nation.

When he was first elected Chief of his community in 1968, Mr. Kanatewat had already been a member of the Band Council for several years, at a time when First Nations Band Councils were not officially recognized in Canada. It was early in his political career that he developed his relationship with the federal government, where he was instrumental in raising awareness about Cree rights. One of his first accomplishments as Chief was to use his negotiating skills and leadership to secure government funding to train Chisasibi people in the construction trades to provide his community with 150 new homes. This collective project was a success, as all Cree communities were then able to benefit from the expertise acquired and have new housing units, which were badly needed by the Nation's members. While serving as Chief, Mr. Kanatewat became an executive member of the Indians of Quebec Association, the first organization to bring together all Indigenous communities in Quebec. Committed to improving conditions in the communities, during his time in office he was able to convince the government of the need to make housing more accessible for all member Nations. Mr. Kanatewat is known as a man of great commitment, availability and concern for the welfare of his community and nation.

In a spirit of self-determination and self-management, he has strongly promoted the economic development of his community by encouraging Indigenous people to take over local businesses previously run by non-Indigenous people. As a result of his influence and determination to strengthen governance by the members of his Nation, the Cree were given responsibility for running the only gas station and restaurant in their community. Mr. Kanatewat has always encouraged projects that would promote the independence and economic growth of his Nation. Following his successful political career, he co-founded Kepa Transport, a flagship Cree company that continues to play an important role in the Quebec economy. His entrepreneurial success and vision have contributed greatly to his Nation's economic development and empowerment.

For over 45 years, Robert Kanatewat has contributed to the advancement of various social causes as a Cree leader and has received several awards and honours in recognition for his involvement. Among others, the Chisasibi airport was named after him and in December 2021 he was awarded the First Peoples Medal by the Lieutenant Governor of Quebec, which recognizes remarkable individuals who, through their dedication, commitment and achievements, contribute to the influence of their community, of their Nation or of First Peoples. The members of his community wished to honour his important contribution to the Cree Nation by symbolically offering him a house in Chisasibi.

To this very day, he continues to be involved in various committees and to encourage the younger generations to pursue their education and to take part in the development of their communities. Mr. Kanatewat is currently Commissioner of the *Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act*, served as a member of the Niskamoon Society Referendum Committee for the *Eeyou Marine Region Lands Claims Agreement* and sits on the Board of Directors of the *Cree Nation Trust*.

In recognition of his political commitment and dedication to his community, as well as his significant contribution as an ambassador for the respect and recognition of Indigenous rights, the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue wishes to honour Mr. Robert Kanatewat for his exceptional career by awarding him UQAT's highest academic distinction. As an Institution committed to actively participate in the reconciliation between all peoples, it is a great pleasure to award an honorary doctorate to an inspiring man who has served for the advancement of Indigenous peoples' rights and the well-being of his Nation. On behalf of the entire academic community, please accept, Mr. Kanatewat, our warmest congratulations.

Vincent Rousson
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