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**IN MEMORIAM**

**Chief Joseph (Joe) William Mathias**  
**November 12, 1943 — March 10, 2000**

**NATIONAL POST | March 11, 2000**

**BC Chief was 'greatest visionary'**  
**Mark Hume |**

VANCOUVER - When word of the sudden death of Joe Mathias, chief negotiator of the Squamish Nation, spread through British Columbia yesterday it stopped the native community cold.

The First Nations Summit, which was engaged in a crucial conference about treaty negotiations, and which was scheduled to meet with Ujjal Dosanjh, the Premier, in the afternoon, cancelled its business on the spot.

Stunned native leaders knew that at some point they would have to figure out how to get the Summit back on track - but yesterday they needed time to let the news sink in.

Chief Mathias, a towering presence in B.C.'s native rights movement, would no longer be at the table.

An undisclosed illness sent the 57-year-old to St. Paul's Hospital, late Thursday, complaining of stomach pains. By morning, he was dead.

"It's just a shock," Chief Bill Williams, of the Squamish Nation said yesterday. "Everybody in the Nation is in mourning."

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**HE WAS AN  
INTELLECTUAL,  
A DEEP THINKER, A  
POWERFUL SPEAKER**

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Chief Williams described Chief Mathias as "a great leader and a visionary" who played a role of immense importance in forging the First Nations Summit and helping to launch B.C. on the path to treaty settlement after 130 years of government resistance.

Chief Mathias dedicated the past 35 years of his life to pursuing treaty settlement for B.C.'s aboriginal communities, while at the same time negotiating a specific treaty settlement for the Squamish Nation, which claims some of the most valuable real estate in Canada, in and around Greater Vancouver.

"He worked all his life on it - until the day he died," said Chief Williams. "Chief Joe Mathias is and was the greatest visionary there was in trying to settle the land claims process right across Canada."

A quiet, modest man who was raised to be a leader, Chief Mathias has been a dominant figure on the native political scene for decades. He was of such stature that successive Prime Ministers and Premiers sought him out - and when they appeared on the public stage with him he never appeared lost in their shadow.

He was an intellectual, a deep thinker, a powerful speaker, a tough negotiator and a man who had a remarkable concept of time and of the Squamish Nation's place in the world. In conversation he could make a smooth transition from talking about how his great, great grandfather met Captain George Vancouver, in 1792, to his own childhood, when he sat around the kitchen table absorbing native politics. In the next breath he would be looking into the future, foreseeing a time when native people felt they were equal partners in Canada.

Chief Mathias led a movement to unite native groups, to pursue treaty settlement under the banner of the First Nations Summit. It was not an easy task given the historical, inter-tribal rivalries that existed. But he succeeded. In 1992, Brian Mulroney, who was then Prime Minister, and Mike Harcourt, who was B.C. Premier, came to the Squamish Nation to sign an agreement that launched the treaty process in the province.

For Chief Mathias, it was a huge step towards achieving a childhood dream of seeing native people reach treaty settlement.

He said that as a boy he used to listen to native leaders discuss around the kitchen table their frustrations in trying to deal with a government that denied the existence of native rights.

"I was there," he once recalled. "Those things were sinking in, about our water rights, our land rights, our treaties, Indian agents, this whole thing they were trying to grapple with and understand with no educational backgrounds.

"As time went on, it became clearer to me and clearer to my family that this is the role I would be undertaking as soon as I was old enough, as soon as my grandfather moved on," he said.

Chief Mathias expressed frustration, just last week, with the slowness of negotiations. But he was a moderate among native leaders, arguing for patience when others sought confrontation.

"To reach agreement is to make concessions. That's the only way you can reach agreement," he liked to say.

But Chief Mathias was also bluntly critical at times. Recently he attacked Garde Gardom, the Lieutenant Governor of B.C., for quoting Capt. Vancouver at a ceremony to swear in the new provincial cabinet.

Chief Mathias thought the quote, which referred to the emptiness of the land, was a slap in the face to his people, whose presence on the coast has been traced back nearly 10,000 years.

Chief Mathias prided himself on being a tough "horse trader" at the treaty table. But he had a gentle heart. Sometimes he'd close meetings with these words: ``May you go home safely. May your children be waiting with open arms and love."



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