**The Numbered Treaties Background**

One of the most misunderstood developments in the long colonial relationships

between First Nations and Canada is the numbered treaties, which were entered into between 1871 and 1921. First Nations and government viewpoints concerning the treaties are at odds in many significant ways. These differences arise from a number of factors. Indigenous cultures are based on oral traditions, while European cultures are based on the written word. First Nations draw their understandings of the treaties from oral accounts that were preserved and transmitted through the generations. From a First Nations viewpoint, what was said was more important than what was written in the Treaty documents. From a Canadian point of view, it is the written text of the treaties that is paramount. Based on “outside promises” (agreements made orally but never written into the treaties), First Nations believe that Canada has failed to live up to or to acknowledge the terms of agreement. A second major obstacle to a mutually satisfactory understanding of the treaties is the issue of language and interpretation. Most of the First Nations treaty negotiators spoke no English. However, negotiations

were carried on in English and translation was at times inadequate, especially considering the complicated legalese in which the treaties were written. First Nations and the Canadian treaty commissioners had a fundamentally differing conception of the nature of a treaty. In the European tradition, treaties were contracts, often short-term and often broken. First Nations signified their conception of the treaties as sacred covenants by the inclusion of the pipe ceremony upon

agreement. At the time of the numbered treaties, First Nations recognized that their old way of

life was no longer viable. The appearance of steamships threatened the role of First Nations who worked freighting goods in the fur trade. With the disappearance of the bison, First Nations of the western prairie region needed a new means of survival for their cultures. Although there were many doubts about the wisdom of entering into treaties, ultimately the peoples recognized that there were few alternatives that would ensure the future for the next generations. They negotiated

for the best deal that they could get, asking for such provisions as a school on the reserve, implements and training in order to practise agriculture, a guarantee of assistance in hard times, and provisions for medical care. The treaties were presented to First Nations as a bounty above and beyond the way of life they had always practiced, including their right to hunt and fish within their traditional Territories. From a Canadian point of view, the treaties were seen as a necessary step in extinguishing title to land desired for settlement. One of the key features of the Treaties was the creation of reserves, which were relatively small areas of land on which First Nations would settle and assimilate the values and customs of the European colonists. Through negotiation, Canada avoided the conflict that characterized western expansion in the United States and that proved so costly in money and bloodshed.

The treaties were never honored by Canada. Even as the numbered treaties were being negotiated, the Canadian government enacted the *Indian Act* in 1876, a piece of legislation that was intended to assimilate First Nations while controlling every aspect of their lives. The act was written and passed without First Nations’ input or agreement. The recognition of treaty rights in the *Constitution Act* of 1982, in addition to several other political and social developments, has led to a re-examination and reinterpretation of the importance and relevance of treaties today. Increasingly, it is recognized that treaties are living documents that have benefited all Canadians and that, if honored in the spirit presented to First Nations by government negotiators and understood by First Nations’ signatories, the treaties can be a viable basis for a sustainable relationship between First Nations and Canada.

**The Numbered Treaties**

1. During the signing of the numbered Treaties what could have been problematic during this process?
2. Why did the First Nations agree to sign Treaties?
3. Why do you think the goals of First Nations were when signing Treaty?
4. What did the Canadian government see the Treaties important for?
5. What ironically did the Canadian government legislate during the Treaty signing negotiations? What was the goal of this legislation?
6. Which event was most influential to the signing of Treaties? Explain your pick.