



It's Our Time: a vision for the future

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AFN Annual General Assembly 2010

INTRODUCTION

As all First Nation governments gather together at Winnipeg "**Where our Nations Meet**", we have three days together to focus on our rights and chart our path forward.

You will have all received my report sent to all First Nations leaders at the beginning of the month and posted to our website. I did this in advance of our meeting because I believe strongly in accountability to each and every one of you – detailing what has been accomplished throughout 2009 and 2010 since I took office last July. I wanted to set out the honour and privilege it has been to meet with you, to listen and to advocate our rights and interests as directed by you before Parliament, with corporate Canada, with the media and with the international community.

I believe we have set the groundwork through our work together to achieve important change. This year we set a strategic plan and committed to clear priorities. We stabilized and strengthened our organization, finding new and better ways to communicate and to build consensus. We successfully advocated for Canada to reverse its opposition to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and we have heard positive commitments on education and other priorities.

Now, we must turn words into action and ideas into clear results for our people.

Through listening and visiting with you – my role and AFN's is very clear. This gathering here today is incredibly significant – we gather as Nations and decision-makers. I will bring before you a vision, based on our past efforts, our mandates and my work with the National Executive. I feel it is essential that I set out this vision as the second part of my accountability to you. Accountability is not only about what I have

done – it is also about being clear about what I see and what I will work on, on your behalf, in the future.

Our Reality: inequity, exclusion and limitation

I do not need to explain our reality to you. We live these statistics every day.

Again and again we are reminded that our children face far greater challenges and are far less likely to achieve optimal outcomes in health and education. In 2007, a Standing Committee of Parliament concluded that our children make up the most vulnerable and marginalized categories of children in Canada and cited specific concerns such as higher rates of malnutrition, diabetes, drug and alcohol abuse and suicide.¹

A recently released study by the Canada Council for Youth and Child Advocates confirms again that our children are disproportionately living in poverty, involved in child protection and youth criminal justice system, face significant health problems, lag seriously behind in education achievement, and are at higher risk for sexual exploitation, violence, injury and death.² Our basic services, in particular, in education and child welfare continue to be underfunded and subject to arbitrary limitation and reallocation by bureaucrats completely removed from our community and with no accountability to First Nation governments or peoples. We are the only jurisdictions that do not receive fiscal transfers based on a stable allocation reflecting demographics, need and inflation. We know this. Canada knows this.

¹ Canada, Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, "Children: The Silenced Citizens: effective Implementation of Canada's International Obligations with Respect to the Rights of Children" (2007).

² Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates; Aboriginal Children and Youth in Canada: Canada Must Do Better; June 23, 2010.

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This reality is further encumbered by the fact of our relationship with the Government of Canada. The *Indian Act*, so clearly designed as an instrument of oppression, control, paternalism and assimilation, continues to permeate and constrain daily First Nation government operation and function. Through the many historical overviews done by academics and our own scholars, we can see this terrible legacy and by witnessing the ongoing impact of a colonial regime that denies our governments the tools to effectively plan for and manage and govern our lands, waters and our peoples. RCAP summarized the current state by saying "First Nation traditional ways have been subverted and have in some cases disappeared. This has left many First Nation communities trapped between what remains of traditional ways of doing things and the fear of importing too much of mainstream Canadian cultural values".³

Beyond the *Indian Act*, we face additional challenges. We all know there have been important victories in the courts. Victories that have affirmed our Treaties, rights to territories and resources, interpretation and oral histories relating to our Treaties and our underlying Indigenous title and rights to territories never ceded. But as was once said by one of our own legal scholars, Sakej Henderson "we win in the courts only to lose at the negotiation table". Canada's laws and policies have not been reconciled with the *Constitution Act* section 35, nor have they been reconciled with our legal victories. The Crown continues to subscribe to the notion that section 35 is "an empty box". Victories that have been hard fought and won by the dedication and scarce resources of our peoples but then never fully realized or implemented. Canada's policies regarding claims and self-government begin by forcing us to prove our rights, to prove our existence.

³ RCAP, Vol. 1, p. 293.

With regard to Treaty matters, Canada does not have a comprehensive approach to implementing the spirit and intent of Treaties. Through this past year, I have had many opportunities to meet with representatives of the Crown. In particular, I attended functions with the Prince of Wales last winter and also more recently with Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II. On both of these occasions a statement was delivered on behalf of First Nations. We affirmed our enduring relationship with the Crown and we also clearly stated that the promise of Treaty and our solemn commitments to one another remain unfulfilled. This is our reality.

In 1993, National Chief Mercredi told the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples "the approach we prefer is to proceed on the basis of the treaty relationship ... we need a bi-lateral process to look at how we are going to implement not only the treaties but the inherent right to self-government as well."⁴ The Commission concluded in 1996 that through submissions from First Nations peoples and non-First Nations peoples alike: "The time has come... to put the relationship ... on a more secure foundation of mutual recognition and respect and to plan together a better future for our children and our children's children"⁵.

Now over 14 years later, the Governor General of Canada echoed these same words:

Through powerful words of reconciliation, we invite all Canadians—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—to work together to chart a new course for our country. A course that gives full recognition to the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples. A course that protects the rich languages, traditions and customs that have enriched our land since the dawn of

⁴ As quoted in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Restructuring the Relationship*; Volume 2, Part One, chapter 2; p. 50.

⁵ RCAP, 1996, Vol 2 pt 1; p. 2.

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time. This is about opening our hearts, our minds, and our eyes, to new possibilities, to new ways of living together. This is about building a brighter future for our children. This is about humanizing humanity. By now, it should be clear: **the time has come for us to re-found our nation on more solid ground.** For Indigenous rights are human rights.⁶

These are important words and I have welcomed the support of the Governor General through our several meetings this past year. But our reality demands more than words, we must find the way forward together with a specific plan that will end the socio-economic gaps, will strengthen our governance, will protect our languages and cultures from further decline and will affirm our rights.

All we have to do is look around to see that the voice of Indigenous Peoples is critical not just here in Canada but around the world. Whether we look at climate change or the global economic crisis – Indigenous peoples are suffering deeply right across this planet.

I believe that the world needs us – that Mother Earth needs our voices, our energies and our knowledge and our governing systems that are founded on a fundamental belief of the interconnection of all things and the centrality of relationships between all beings. Our brothers and sisters of Indigenous nations to the south and to the east are looking to us right here. Yes we face challenges; but we also have access to the tools needed to advance the cause and support the Indigenous voice throughout the globe.

⁶ Her Excellency, The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean; **Dedication Ceremony at the Canadian Tribute to Human Rights Monument**, Ottawa, Monday June 21, 2010.

Our Resilience: standing firm on a strong foundation

Understanding our reality and understanding the importance of action, we begin our work together standing very firmly on a foundation set by our ancestors. Every generation of leadership that has gone before us has contributed to the strength of this foundation.

The early days of this and other organizations can be traced back in history through traditional alliances, through Treaty negotiations, through war time and then in the late 60s to reject the *White Paper* proposal of the Government of Canada. The Assembly of First Nations emerged as we began the work of Constitutional negotiation and securing the affirmation of existing Aboriginal and Treaty rights in the Constitution Act, in 1982. This was the result of solidarity, commitment and hard work by our leadership of the day: through an intensive legal and political campaign in London England, as well as efforts in Canada, including the Constitutional Express.

Subsequent leadership took us through Meech Lake and then of course to the monumental effort that culminated in the Charlottetown Accord in 1992 and advanced the notion of Canada, not of two founding peoples as so wrongly told in the colonial history, but of three orders of Government federal, provincial and First Nation and the affirmation of Treaty and Aboriginal rights and title.

On July 11, 1990, at Oka, the Mohawk nation stood firm for their land including a sacred grove and burial ground. The ensuing conflict between the Mohawk Nation and Canada awakened all to the heavy stakes and the reality of our rights.

In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) tabled its five volumes, over four hundred recommendations and a very clear twenty year action plan for Canada. RCAP canvassed the country very widely and our

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peoples - elders, young ones, women and men lined up to bring forward their views. The RCAP report remains a rich collection of our voices and serves to inform our dialogue today.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada continued attempts to amend the *Indian Act* culminating in the proposed *First Nations Governance Act* in 2002. Again, this effort failed to engage in solutions designed by and for our people and to affirm and enable our governments in accordance with our rights and responsibilities. In response, First Nation leadership, through the AFN, rejected this approach and set about to discuss and to determine the alternative path forward.

In 2005, the Joint Committee of Chiefs and Advisors on the *Recognition and Implementation of First Nation Governments (RIFNG)* tabled its report for dialogue of the Chiefs including a draft Accord and work plan. Following adoption, the work proceeded and we affirmed by consensus resolution, our collective direction again in 2007⁷ setting out the path forward of reconciliation, implementation of our governments, capacity building and structural change. I co-chaired the RIFNG Committee and remain committed to the RIFNG Report.

Also late in 2005, we achieved the Political Accord on the Recognition and Implementation of First Nation Governments and also agreement from all provinces/ territories and the federal government to move forward collectively on key socio-economic interests through the Kelowna Accord. While this progress was not realized due to a change in federal government, this does not alter our consensus or our path forward.

Most recently, we added the critical cornerstone to our foundation that was achieved in 2008 with the settlement agreement and apology to

⁷ Resolution 06-2007, Implementation of First Nation Governments: the path forward

survivors of Residential schools. The statement of Prime Minister Harper on June 11, 2008 when he said “the Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly”⁸ marked the first time that many of our people began the process of healing and looking to the future.

As National Chief Fontaine commented in 2008:

“We are, and always have been, an indispensable part of the Canadian identity. ... We must not falter in our duty now. Emboldened by this spectacle of history, it is possible to end our racial nightmare together. The memories of residential schools sometimes cut like merciless knives at our souls. This day will help to put that pain behind us. But it signifies something even more important - a respectful and therefore, liberating relationship between us and the rest of Canada. ... We must capture a new spirit and vision to meet the challenges of the future.”⁹

Moreover, we have also now begun the work together as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I was honoured to bear witness and to fully participate in the first national event on June 16, 2010 and am confident that this process will continue to make a strong contribution to our collective national healing journey.

With this foundation in place, I believe that we can and must look confidently to the future and seize the opportunity for this renewed spirit and vision.

⁸ Government of Canada. Statement of Apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools, June 11, 2008

⁹ Assembly of First Nations: National Chief Fontaine, **Apology response**, June 11, 2008.

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Solidifying and Strengthening – 2009-2010

Through our efforts, many of which I set out in my report sent to you late last month, steps have been taken at the national level to enhance our communication, our opportunity for dialogue and to confirm our work together. The first step was working with the National Executive in building a strategic plan, from the ground-up. A strategic plan that directly responds to your mandate, clearly reflects our role and effectively enables us to organize and target our work.

The National Executive has framed themes – we've called pillars – to organize our efforts:

- **Exercising and Implementing Rights** (Co-Chairs: Regional Chief Lonechild (SK) and Regional Chief Picard (PQ))
- **Strengthening Families and Communities** (Co-Chairs: Regional Chief Toulouse (ON) and Regional Chief Erasmus (NWT))
- **Supporting First Nation Governments and Nation building** (Co-chairs: Regional Chief Wilson-Raybould (BC) and Regional Chief Stanley (AB))
- **Advancing Economic and Environmental interests** (Co-Chairs: Regional Chief Morris (YT) and Regional Chief Augustine (NB/PEI))
- **Strengthening and stabilizing our organizations and communities** (Co-Chairs: Regional Chief Simon (NS/NFLD) and Regional Chief Traverse (MB))

I wish to acknowledge and express my sincere thanks for the dedication of my colleagues on the National Executive and their willingness to engage fully in the development of this plan. Throughout the Fall and again this past Spring, the National Executive has taken the time to carefully review and reflect on planning and on the way forward.

Each theme area is co-chaired by two members of the National Executive who have agreed to oversee and spear-head activity relating to these thematic areas. This approach enables us to have a very organized and multi-pronged approach to our many complex issues.

NOW WE MUST LOOK FORWARD TOGETHER

My own traditional teachings, formal education and experience have shaped the approach that I take.

I recognize that the role of National Chief means that I have no power or authority, except that which is specifically delegated by you. However, as National Chief, I have responsibility to bring ideas and peoples together, to facilitate dialogue and discussion and to carefully but deliberately set about moving forward by supporting and working very closely with the Regional Chiefs and with every Chief of every First Nation.

Through the work of the last year and with the full support of my colleagues, I believe that our path is clear. We have clear choices. We must confirm these choices and then together, we must act. We must remember that the "Assembly of First Nations" is just that: it is an "assembly"; it is not the National Chief, it is all of us.

Here at Winnipeg, '**Where our nations meet**' I want to set before you the path that I see. While, we will need to continue to discuss, to consider and to work together, I want to be fully accountable for what I see and what I stand for.

Now is the time that we have to challenge ourselves, challenge our assumptions, challenge some of our old patterns and ways of doing things in the past that have not worked.

Now is the time, to look forward with confidence and clarity and to take action.

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A First Nation House

Building on our strong foundation – and the pillars we have set – we must gather the energy to build our own houses.

Our houses will not all look alike but it is clear that we must create processes and a path forward.

I have seen clearly this past year, our many strengths and clarified our respective roles. I have summarized what I see as a way forward for AFN: an organization that is **nationally facilitated, regionally driven and First Nation mandated and approved.**

We all have a role to play.

We must respect our differences but we also need a national framework in order to successfully clear the paths and achieve the success our peoples deserve. We must drive the solutions through regional and Treaty processes that reflect the underlying imperative of Nation building and Treaty implementation.

And fundamentally, all of this must be approved and must be mandated directly by First Nations. Our peoples retain the authority and are the holders of the rights – not the organizations.

We all have responsibility to the tasks and to each other.

And I have great confidence that as we each take up the challenge and organize our efforts, our message will be strong. Our message will be clear. No longer will divide and conquer tactics succeed in taking us off stride. By building our house based on approaches that respect and include one another, we will succeed.

Let me now be clear about what I envision and how we will achieve the change we need. As set out in our strategic plan – there are five pillars.

Right now, I will suggest we push further and we sharpen our focus on these themes and identify very specifically what is needed to advance our rights; to support our families; to advance our economies; to build our governments and to transform our organizations.

Through these actions, we will achieve our collective vision. A vision of our future wherein we exercise our inherent authorities; we uphold our cultural traditions; and focus directly on fulfilling, with great confidence, our responsibilities to our families, our Nations and to our lands, territories and waters.

RIGHTS

Our work begins with affirming our RIGHTS. We must pursue:

- 1. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.**

We have advocated very strongly on this at every level and with every audience. We succeeded in Canada reversing its opposition but we are not there yet.

We now must insist that Canada endorse without delay and work with us on a plan forward based on the standards set out in the Declaration.

This action is the fundamental first step in re-setting the relationship between Canada and First Nations in accordance with the Royal Proclamation, Treaties and the constitutional recognition of our rights and title.

- 2. National Treaty strategy.**

Throughout this past year, we have held several meetings with Treaty Nations to design and advance a national strategy that brings support to Treaty nations to implement the spirit and intent of

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Treaties in relation to all matters including health and education and the issues related to the Natural Resources Transfer Act.

3. Aboriginal title and Claims policies.

Advancing and implementing new Treaties and agreements will require **reformed Comprehensive Claims policy**, based on Recognition and Implementation of Aboriginal Title rather than denial and extinguishment. We also must address deficiencies in the policy and process regarding specific claims, in particular relating to claims over the \$150 Million. Delivering on a new approach to additions to reserve policy is needed - one that eliminates the current completely unacceptable inefficiencies.

FAMILIES and CHILDREN

As critical requirements to move forward in healing, our children must have hope and opportunity.

1. Education

I have dedicated a great deal of time and focus to the priority of education. I believe absolutely in the power and the importance of education as a key part of our path forward. Equipping our peoples for the future means ensuring that everyone of our children has the full support and opportunity to succeed. We must lead the way forward within every one of our communities to tell our children that we care and that we will work for the future.

I issued a Call to Action on education that requires 5 clear steps:

1. reconciliation of our RIGHTS across all jurisdictions;
2. legislated funding guarantee for our schools and for the education of every one of our students;

3. building First Nation education systems including ensuring access and full support for First Nation language immersion;
4. supporting the re-emergence of a learning culture in our communities ;
5. compelling all to support and invest.

Through the Call to Action, specific strategies, driven at local, regional and national levels are emerging and we must vigorously support these efforts.

At the national level, we will:

- press the **Council of the Federation** to continue their work with us on education and to ensure solid and clear support for investment, setting clear targets and compelling the Government of Canada to hold a **First Ministers Meeting** focussed on education.
- Advance the imperative of **funding guarantee** for education through legislated protection in a manner consistent with policy statement advanced and confirmed by Chiefs in Assembly 2010 - **First Nation control of First Nation education**
- Based on dialogue and direction at AGA 2010, advance a new approach to post secondary education as released by AFN on June 21 – **Maximizing post secondary education**
- Advance clear direction through key Parliamentary processes including the current **Senate Committee** process to ensure First Nation directed solutions are achieved in First Nation education
- Support **Treaty and human rights challenges** on education parity

2. Health and child protection

Supporting our families also means advancing our interests in health and child welfare. Our Nations are moving forward with health governance regimes which reflect our traditions and cultures and respond to our needs. We must

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work to support the emergence of regional and local models for enhanced First Nation jurisdiction over health.

AFN has continued close collaboration with the First Nation Family and Child Caring Society throughout this past year in challenging federal child welfare funding levels as discriminatory at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal; and we will continue advancing challenges and solutions that protect children by demanding equal funding and family and community support.

3. Indigenous cultural, linguistic and spiritual rights

Finally, I believe that it is essential to set out a clear and decisive statement on the protection of languages and cultures. For decades, the *Indian Act* specifically targeted and made illegal our ways and our customs. Even after the most offensive sections of the Act were changed, our languages and our traditions have suffered and been oppressed by policies and by mainstream education. Moreover, the history of Canada continues to overlook and even deliberately minimize and push aside our reality, our contribution and our rights.

Linked with the apology and the work of Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I believe we must also work with Parliament to advance and confirm a very specific **Action Plan and Declaration on the protection and promotion of our cultural, linguistic and spiritual rights and freedoms as Indigenous Peoples in Canada.**

GOVERNMENTS

We must change the nature of our relationship with the Crown to one which is truly nation-to-nation. We have clear responsibility to carefully re-build our nations, our governments, our systems; and we must ensure full accountability and transparency in the process. I know many of you are well on the way and I want us all to have

the same opportunity, as others begin the process to push aside the *Indian Act* on their terms and based on the will, direction and support of their peoples.

Building our governments can only mean one thing. We must together commit to a concrete plan to end the *Indian Act* and its impact in the daily lives of our communities. I suggest we commit to a path that implements and affirms our governments and ends the *Indian Act* and the over-bearing control that the Department of Indian Affairs has over our daily lives as First Nations peoples. This is something that has been called for by the Penner Report and RCAP, and if we can commit to this together, I have no doubt that we will accomplish this goal.

Of course, we have to be careful to not let Canada escape its financial and fiduciary obligations to our peoples. So, we need to proceed with caution, in the manner recommended by Penner and RCAP, and consistent with the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

First Nations can overcome any fear of change. The Department of Indian Affairs makes the changes unilaterally without First Nation consultation. I believe the time has come for First Nations to drive the change; not for a patch work of arrangements but a methodical and clear plan to replace the *Indian Act*. Indian and Northern Affairs continues down the wrong path – a path of piecemeal and reactionary measures that only serve to prop up the *Indian Act* and continue to fail to deliver the governance that our peoples want and need.

The current legislative agenda of Parliament could consume us in reacting and fighting the battles. But we already know that these battles even when won only restore the status quo – a status quo that we reject. So rather than constantly reacting, let us spend our time together wisely - building our future and affirming our governments.

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Specific steps that I see as a way forward include:

1. **National First Nation - Crown Relationship gathering** to deliberate on a comprehensive plan for joint implementation of First Nation governments, in a manner consistent with the UNDRIP.
2. One of the outcomes would be a **First Nation - Crown Agreement** setting out obligations to work collaboratively on a comprehensive plan for change. To give the agreement political and legal force, it should be confirmed by a **Parliamentary Proclamation** and an **Order-in-Council**.
 - the Agreement, would include a process, mutually and previously agreed upon by First Nations (including full community-based engagement and decision-making) for transition away from *Indian Act* and confirming First Nation governments
 - the Proclamation and Order-in-Council would not just affirm the agreement but also affirm our Treaties and Aboriginal title and rights.
3. Clear analysis and legal confirmation that **First Nations funding will not be compromised** but rather funding arrangements transformed based on recognition of First Nation governing entities
4. Through intergovernmental dialogue started at the Council of the Federation and culminating in a First Ministers meeting, confirm a process to create fundamentally **new fiscal transfer arrangements** based on demographics, inflation and factors of need and **new**

tools to address growing issues related to capital funding and infrastructure.

5. Affirming First Nation governments as leaders in **accountable, successful administration** and continuing to build capacity through specific work shops and direct support.
6. Advocating through Parliament and all senior Public Administration and Policy fora to advance new structures and machinery of the Federal Government, as recommended by Penner and RCAP, to replace INAC. These would include a new **Ministry of First Nation-Crown relations; a Section 35 Attorney General** to ensure that our constitutional rights are safeguarded within government; the establishment of **Aboriginal and Treaty rights Tribunal**; and a secondary Ministry or agency to fulfill fiduciary and program obligations of the Government of Canada. .

ECONOMICS and ENVIRONMENT

Moving away from poverty to sustainable prosperity, the success of our governments will also depend on our ability to capitalize and to strengthen our economic presence and advantage. I believe that we must re-position our Nations as leaders in environmental protection and key economic actors for the future. We can achieve this through:

1. **Affirming our role in environmental protection and recognition of our traditional knowledge**
We must uphold and expand our responsibilities to Mother Earth and all living things. Moving forward from grassroots movements expressing support and care for our waters and our lands, I believe we should advance a **national statement of Indigenous relationship to our lands, waters, air and all things** and that we

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should confirm this through our spiritual ceremonies.

A critical link to Indigenous movements globally must also be made in connecting with the efforts of the Indigenous peoples of North and South America and beyond. Through the *World Peoples Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth* held this past March in Bolivia, our voices are coming together. As Indigenous leaders we must push this message forward strongly for the world to hear.

2. Trade Alliances

Re-affirming trade among one another and internationally as we have begun through meetings with key Ambassadors in Ottawa and with the US Tribes.

At the national level, we also have a role to play to facilitate business and economic partnerships for the benefit of First Nation businesses. We have started this work through active participation with the key Boards of Trade and we will advance a clear understanding to shape outcomes in the future.

We must intervene nationally and internationally with trade bodies and bonding agencies to ensure that our rights and interests are recognized within the balance sheets of federal and provincial governments in Canada.

3. Green Energy and New Technology

We must affirm our economic place through green energy and new technology. We can do this through supporting First Nations energy leaders and pulling together all of the key players through a major energy summit in the spring of 2011. The work leading to and emerging from the Summit will generate partnerships for green solutions and support for housing, infrastructure and community development needs.

4. National strategy to address impacts of poverty

Ultimately, the principal means through which we will address First Nation poverty is through the recognition and implementation of our Treaties and Aboriginal Title and Rights. However, there are also other means at our disposal. In order to tackle the welfare dependency cycle, we will have to work collaboratively with governments, corporations and the philanthropic foundations of this country on a strategy to counter the crippling effects of poverty that is consistent with and linked to our Rights agenda and building of our governments.

Elements would include:

- Supporting and enabling First Nations directed programming and policies in social assistance to create incentives for building skills and employability
- Supporting special programming in education emphasizing language and cultural supports
- Special assistance for repairs, renovation and maintenance of key community, recreation and learning infrastructure
- Linkages and partnerships with public and private sector to support and nurture parenting skills and a renewed culture of learning

ORGANIZATION

This past year, I have taken every opportunity to clarify the role and place of the Assembly of First Nations. As I have said, I believe that AFN is an advocacy organization and that we are not and should not be seen as the national government of First Nations. Our role is as an Assembly of the leadership of the Nations taking forward direction and advocacy based on our consensus deliberations and mandated actions.

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On this, I need to hear from you directly.

Confirming a clear understanding of the role and purpose of AFN is the first step to achieving other changes that are essential for AFN to deliver its mandate successfully.

Over the past year, we have made solid progress in stabilizing the organization and as is apparent in the audit presentation, we have undertaken significant restraint and created improved efficiencies in order to get the AFN on track and to deal with the deficit. But this does not mean that AFN is assured to be viable in the future.

AFN operates with almost exclusively Federal Government funding. There is a fundamental conflict of interest in the current model. And the situation is made more acute as Government adds restriction to all funding and requires more and more reporting.

I have full confidence in our current administration and in the many incredibly hard working staff who have dedicated their careers to work at AFN. Yet, the current model of AFN being completely dependent on the federal government for funding, places AFN under controls by government and government officials. I find this troubling and am concerned that if we do not act and we do not deal with the fundamentals, AFN's ability to support First Nations will be negatively affected.

There have been dozens of resolutions and a clear recommendation of the AFN Renewal Commission process regarding AFN funding. Essentially the recommendations are twofold:

1. That AFN develop a new fiscal relationship with Canada that is based on a stable multi-year financial transfer that is consistent with AFN's mandate to support First Nations as they strive to re-gain self-determination; and

2. That AFN investigate, consider and develop revenue sources other than government funding.¹⁰

I suggest to you that the time is now that we commit to fully implementing this direction. We must find the mechanism to ensure that AFN funding sources do not compromise the ability of the organization to fulfill the mandates that you provide. At the same time, we must be clear that as a national advocacy organization that is intended to facilitate policy dialogue and discussion, that program funding is directed to other organizations mandated and better suited to program delivery at regional or community levels.

Having attended the last two meetings of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), I believe that our protocol and strong relationship with American Tribes may be helpful in this regard as well. In the NCAI model, there is minimal government funding as it is a member-based organization that relies on corporate and other sponsorship for major events. I think this model is worthy of consideration and I welcome your views.

I also believe that we need to better utilize mechanisms such as the creation of new trust funds and strategies to facilitate ways in which we can support important initiatives especially in relation to the socio-economic mandates of the organization and ensuring full transparency of all decision-making. There are also resolutions relating to the development of a **First Nations Rights Fund** or 'war chest' which we are moving on as this will be essential in supporting key Treaty and aboriginal right and other legal actions that we resolve to take together.

¹⁰ Assembly of First Nations Renewal Commission, A Treaty Among Ourselves; May 2005, p. 63.

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Overcoming division and Supporting our Youth to Succeed

Another interest throughout this year has been bridging division and encouraging dialogue. We have done this through recognizing and supporting the role of women, youth, elders and veterans through our meetings, Assemblies and gatherings. These efforts must continue to be strengthened and reinforced.

Looking forward, we will also advance an urban strategy that will implement previous mandates regarding First Nation governments as the representatives of all citizens regardless of residence and identify ways in which our organization can create more opportunities to engage our citizens no matter where they live. It is certainly clear that our citizens are now actively engaged in selecting leadership of their home communities from wherever they reside and many take an active interest and responsibility in our dialogue and in our future.

As I have said, our youth are not only the leaders of tomorrow but they are leaders right now. I am very pleased to have worked closely with the Youth Council on the launch of **IndigenACTION**. This is an initiative to bring together all of those involved in fitness, sport and activity for our young people and all members of our communities. Through a series of regional discussions, a national strategy will be built by and for our communities creating partnership and investment for our young athletes as well as supporting the overarching goal of community wellness, pride and confidence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to reflect back on these critical pieces as they all form an integral part of a singular vision. A vision of wholeness, respect and harmony.

Wholeness in terms of our individual and community lives achieved through healing and

recovery, through building confidence, seizing opportunity, overcoming poverty and growing prosperity in our economies as well as our spiritual and physical lives.

Respect through reconciliation of our rights and our governments affirmed as the original Nations with rights, responsibilities and a very clear role as governments with intergovernmental and fiscal relations within Confederation that affirm our rights and our Treaties and uphold the honour of the Crown.

Harmony through bridged divisions within our communities, among the Indigenous Nations globally and with other governments and corporations domestically and internationally established out of respect and sustained through our active participation and voice in environmental and economic affairs.

In short, this is a vision of our Nations which reflects on our proud heritage and resilience as Nations as the fuel and inspiration for the future. A future in which our Nations achieve wholeness, respect and harmony. **A future wherein we exercise our inherent authorities, we uphold our cultural traditions and focus directly on fulfilling, with great confidence, our responsibilities to our families, our Nations and to our lands, territories and waters.**

To achieve this vision, we not only need to clarify what we want to achieve but also how we are going to achieve this. There are two elements that I believe are key to answering this question.

I believe that first and foremost, it is absolutely essential that we confirm our **unity and trust in one another**. Unity in our resolve to support one another. We are not the same and solutions must fully respect our differences and the authority of our peoples at the community level to decide for themselves. But what we do share is this vision for the future. I have seen this in every corner of this country that I have visited. For too long, our progress has been inhibited by

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the obstacles thrown in our path when governments and others employ divide and conquer tactics. We must collectively work together to build trust among ourselves and find the path that we can firmly and resolutely support together.

Second, we must have the **confidence** and commitment to take action to advance our plan and our vision through all means needed. We have seen that the resolve of our people at the community level to stand firm on key issues has been a critical factor in success. We must have a multi-pronged approach that involves diplomacy, intergovernmental relations, corporate and civil society alliances, as well as direct action to support grassroots initiatives and interests.

I ask all of you across the First Nations of this land to reflect on the words and the ideas I have expressed here. I invite you to add all of your thoughts and comments and that we spend the time, as is our way, to deliberate, to discuss and find the way forward, together. Whether it takes hours, days, or longer; we must be committed to this work and remain around the council fire until we are confident in our action.

I invite you all to this work and in return, I pledge to you my ongoing dedication and full commitment to humbly fulfill the responsibilities you have given me.

Kleco, Kleco,

Shawn A-in-chut Atleo