



**Address to the Special Chiefs Assembly**  
~ National Chief Perry Bellegarde ~

**December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015**  
**Hilton Lac Leamy**  
**Gatineau Québec**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



Tawaw kahkiyaw,

okimâwak, nâpewak, iskwewak, kêhtêak, oskâyak. Okimaw  
piyisiw awasis nitisihkason. Miyo kisikaw anoch.

Good morning.

Chiefs, friends and relatives, Elders' Council, Women's Council,  
Youth Council and fellow leaders, Ministers ... Mr. Prime Minister  
...

We meet today at a time of great challenge in the world, and in  
our territories across this land. And yet, there is hope and  
optimism for better days ahead.

I know that is how I feel.

And much of it comes from our work together.



Think of the accomplishments we have had in the past year alone in building awareness for First Nations issues.

We have secured Canada's full commitment to respect the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to work with us to ensure its full implementation. We continue to press for and seek support from the Pope for the renouncement of the Doctrine of Discovery – that racist illegal doctrine used to rationalize colonialism and dispossession.

Our lands and waters.



This February in Vancouver the AFN will host **The First Nations Forum on Energy**, to discuss our role in Canada's energy future, helping to shape a smarter, more responsive economy, And seeking ways that respect inherent rights, Treaties and jurisdiction,

and balance what is right for our economy with what is right for Mother Earth.



We brought a clear message to the Premiers at the Council of the Federation meeting that a "Canadian energy" strategy can only succeed with First Nations as full partners. That means being at all tables where decisions are being made and shaped about natural resources. That means establishing strategies to address climate change that are developed with First Nations as partners and co-decision-makers.

And our message was heard- loud and clear on many other fronts.



We've worked hard to keep the pressure on all governments to work with First Nations to bring an end to the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. And now the new federal government has stated its intention to establish a national inquiry that we and the families have called for, for so so long.

We will continue that important work to support the families and to protect all Indigenous Women and Girls through the development of a national action plan and other work with federal, provincial and territorial partners at the next Roundtable on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.



We have carried out work in many other important areas through, a Mental Wellness Forum in Winnipeg, and an expert panel on the state of specific claims.

Through our collective advocacy, we have cemented the principle of rights recognition as the foundation of our new relationship with this new federal government. Over the coming four years, we have much work to do to unravel and replace key policies and legislation that are more focused on rights termination than on rights recognition.



We have worked to support the Day scholars in their quest for justice. We have fought for the rights of our children and against the gross funding inequities in child welfare and education. We have elevated awareness of the need to revitalize Indigenous languages across Canada. And overall we have had great success in generating awareness and support for the rights and well being of First Nations.

We are being heard.

And I believe understood, like never before.

That's why I'm optimistic.





Little more than a month ago Canadians chose a new Government. It was an interesting election for First Nations in many ways.

For the first time ever, First Nations communities and electors were engaged like never before in a Canadian election.

In 51 ridings where First Nations people live and work, our people voted in large numbers.

In fact, in six ridings our communities ran out of ballots!

And you know what? We made a difference.



Today there are ten MP's of Indigenous descent sitting in  
Parliament ... and two are sitting in Cabinet!

(pause for applause)

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Canada's new Government is led by a Prime Minister who has  
promised a change, not only in tone, but in the practice of how it  
will govern.

As someone who travelled to Paris last week for the opening of  
talks on Climate Change, I can tell you ... that change has  
already begun.



When world leaders met last Monday, Canada's four seats were occupied by (count off)

The Prime Minister ... the Minister of Foreign Affairs ... the Minister of Environment and Climate Change ... and the Assembly of First Nations represented by your National Chief.

The message was simple ... Indigenous people are a vital part of the solution, even though we have not been part of the problem.



When it was Canada's turn to speak, Prime Minister Trudeau said "Indigenous peoples have known for thousands of years how to care for our planet. The rest of us have a lot to learn and no time to waste."

What a powerful statement from the Prime Minister.

He understands the important role of our people to protect our environment.

He is listening ...



In his mandate letter to each and every Cabinet Minister, Prime Minister Trudeau wrote, "it is time for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation and partnership."

(Pause. Repeat.)

"recognition of rights ... respect ... co-operation ... and partnership."

Why? Because as the Speech From The Throne stated:

"Because it is both the right thing to do and a certain path to economic growth".

Chiefs, it is indeed a new day on Turtle Island.

That's why I'm optimistic.

(Pause.)



But We also have much work to do.

Our 400-years of shared history has brought us a massive gap in the quality of life between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Canada.

So how do we close the gap? How do we get started?

How do we move beyond the Indian Act?

How to we occupy the field and exert jurisdiction?



Let me say now, I believe this Prime Minister has already taken some important first steps in the right direction – committing to work with First Nations so that every First Nation child receives a quality education.

And the new Government's plan is aligning with the AFN's vision.

Here at the AFN, we have a full-slate of Regional Chiefs working together and working with First Nations leadership in each region, in each Treaty and Traditional territory, to get things done.



We have established portfolios with a Regional Chief at the helm of each one to ensure our most pressing issues see action in accordance with the mandates provided by Chiefs-in-Assembly.

I thank all of them for the work they have done this past year and for their leadership and their commitment to hard work in the upcoming year.

Working together we can and **will** make progress on rights recognition and on health care, water, housing, education and infrastructure ...





In the year ahead we will tackle the issues that will set us on a sound path for the future.

We are opening doors in Ottawa to facilitate the work of all First Nations on:

Implementation of our Aboriginal Rights and Title,

Treaty enforcement and implementation, and realizing self-determination for our Indigenous Nations.



It includes the important work that must follow the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action.

And it includes assisting First Nations in advancing their visions of positive, respectful, nation-to-nation relationships with the Crown. We will work and support each other on our respective paths to ensure we are never again poor in our own homelands.

Yes my friends, there is much work to do.



This Prime Minister has charged his new Minister of Finance with establishing a new fiscal relationship with First Nations that lifts the 2% cap on annual funding increases and moves us towards sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for First Nations communities.

Nothing will have a more immediate impact in helping to Close the Gap than lifting that 2% cap and launching discussions on significant catch-up funding after decades of underfunding.



We need funding that comes from proper intergovernmental transfer mechanisms, rather than contribution agreements.

We can put in place a new fiscal arrangement between us that reflects the Constitutional status of First Nations.

One that finally embodies the spirit of sharing and caring that has guided our peoples and our ancestors in Treaty relationships for so long.

Mr. Prime Minister, my fellow Chiefs, the job ahead of us is substantial.



We did not get here overnight, but I say to you this morning, as we gather, there must be a sense of urgency.

The First Peoples of Canada have suffered too much, and for too long ...

Our people have waited in terrible conditions ... suffering indignity and going without many of the basic services other Canadians take for granted.

So I ask that we move quickly.

We CAN resolve issues by working well together.

From Land and Resource issues to .

Treaties and Aboriginal rights to.

Education and Employment to.

The Environment and the Economy.



Mr. Prime Minister, everyone

We look forward to working together in a true spirit of cooperation and reconciliation. You have made a great start in changing the narrative. You have reached out your hand as a Treaty partner in a respectful way. It is now up to the nations of each Treaty and Traditional territory to seize that opportunity and shape the future - Nation-to-nation.

(Pause.)

Mr. Prime Minister, we thank you for being with us today.

We are hopeful.

We are optimistic.

Let's get to work

Thank-you.

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