



## **ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS**

***UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF FIRST NATION ECONOMIES  
A PRESENTATION TO THE FIRST NATIONS CROWN GATHERING  
JOHN G. DIEFENBAKER BUILDING, OTTAWA, ONTARIO***

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BC REGIONAL CHIEF  
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*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*

*(Italicized text spoken in response to Prime Minister Harper's opening remarks, Jan.24/12)*

Elders, Your Excellency, National Chief, Mr. Prime Minister, Chiefs, Grand Chiefs, Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries, community members watching across the country. My name is Jody Wilson-Raybould. I am the Regional Chief for BC and hold the national portfolio on Supporting First Nation Governments. My traditional name is Puglaas and I come from the Musgamagw-Tsawataineuk/Laich Kwil Tach people of northern Vancouver Island. I live on my home reserve at Cape Mudge where I am elected to Council.

I would like to thank Elder Commanda for the prayer, and leaders of the Algonquin Nation for welcoming us to their territory for this historic gathering. We are here in a spirit of reconciliation and constructive dialogue - may it be the first of many such meetings!

I have been asked today to speak to unlocking the potential of First Nations' economies.

Our people are in a profound period of transition and of Nation-building or rebuilding. We are, in fact, making economic progress. It may not be widely known but a significant economic transformation has already begun. The economists at TD with the support of the Canadian Council of Aboriginal Business, estimates that the combined income of Aboriginal households, business and government sectors reached \$24 billion in 2011. Double the \$12 billion tally recorded in 2001. By 2016, they estimate this overall economic pie could eclipse \$32 billion - or roughly 50% above last year's estimate. If achieved, the total Aboriginal income would be greater than the GDP of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island combined. This is good news. We are trending in the right direction.

But truth be told, we can and must do much more. Any optimism and progress is overshadowed by the deplorable conditions faced in many of our Nations – particularly in the north – where such encouraging

growth numbers mean nothing in the face of crippling poverty and desperation. This is totally unacceptable. We need to collectively find ways to ensure no Nation is left out or behind and that all our peoples are supported.

Strengthening First Nation economies will certainly help. It will also strengthen the Canadian economy and provide opportunities for not only our people but also for other Canadians.

Canada is emerging out of one of the worst global economic crises in modern history... faring better than most industrialized economies. When the crisis began and governments implemented “economic stimulus” programs as you did Mr. Prime Minister, many of our Chiefs reflected that their Nation’s economies had been in a state of crisis for years and definitely in need of stimulus. One of the biggest stimuluses’ for us must be governance reform.

Societies that govern well simply do better economically, socially and politically than those that do not. Good governance increases societies’ chances of meeting the needs of its peoples and developing sustainable long-term economic development.

Within Canada the structure and institutions of non-Aboriginal government are well-established within a sound legal framework. Today most Canadians just take it for granted the way their economy works and the legal and political framework that supports it.

Contrast that to the governments of the people whom the Chiefs in this room represent.

While historically we were, of course, self-governing, more recently we have been under federal administrative authority and our peoples and our lands and consequently our economies governed separate and

apart from non-Aboriginal Canada in accordance with the *Indian Act*; neither an appropriate governance framework for First Nations' people - nor for any people for that matter.

During the colonial period, band government was based on models developed by the federal government to deliver federal programs and services. The powers of our governments were very limited. The effects on us were unfortunate. The *Indian Act* system promoted an impoverished concept of government. "Government" for us became little more than managing programs and distributing limited resources. The concept that government should be about making laws, resolving disputes and generating the means to pursue a collective vision was smothered under the need for federal programs and services and the fact that the local "band office" was the instrument to deliver them. This is not self-government. This is not a system that supports strong economies and can provide a sound investment climate.

Thankfully, this is changing. And why is this changing? Because there are First Nations leaders that have supported and led both sectoral and comprehensive self-government initiatives to replace governance under the *Indian Act*. To create the legal and administrative framework of self-government that other Canadians take for granted and to establish a sound investment climate. This includes the raising of local revenues and financial management, the building of public infrastructure and facilities and the raising of capital, and the management of land and resources and community planning.

Today there is now a general consensus that supporting First Nations' developing strong and appropriate governance – or self-government – is simply the right thing to do. And why is it the right thing to do? Because Canada's economy and First Nations, and our collective futures, are all intertwined. If we want to unlock our economic potential it is needed.

Ironically, while we all may now agree we need to move away from the *Indian Act* towards self-government, I do not need to tell anyone in this room what a challenge this has become.

The reality of our post-colonial transition is that short of a court saying we have rights over land and the right to govern ourselves, our people have to vote to remove Canada from its paternalistic role in our lives. This is because under the *Indian Act*, we are still wards of the state. Consequently Canada has a fiduciary responsibility to our people and cannot simply legislate the *Indian Act* away in favour of recognizing self-government until our people vote in favour that it is ok to do so; legally challenging, politically perverse – but nevertheless true.

No other segment of Canadian society has had to decolonize and then go through this process to establish basic structures of governance to create the tools for economic and social development.

However, today we have the tools – section 35 (full box) / United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (minimum standards for engagement with our People). The challenge now is to translate the promise of section 35 and the UNDRIP into practical benefits on the ground in our communities.

While our leaders have advocated and continue to advocate for change back home on-reserve many of our people are afraid and reluctant to vote “yes” to self-government. Given the colonial legacy and the impoverished concept of governance under the *Indian Act* they simply do not trust their existing “band” government; nor if we are being frank your government for that matter. This is now one of our biggest challenges.

For change to occur each of our communities must go through our own processes of empowerment and local transformation, though healing,

rebuilding, capacity development - call it what you may. Our colonial period must officially end.

As this process of decolonization continues to unfold we all have a responsibility to support what is essentially basic community development work. We must all not add fuel to the fire by trying to circumvent this process.

*(While we are making progress, and as you said today Mr. Prime Minister, your government is making a down payment on our long-term goal of self-government. We must be mindful that it is a down payment on the 'right house'...one where we make choices collectively where our Nations lead the change to uproot the 'Indian Act tree' and knock it over, leading to full self-government. Not a down payment where your government re-builds our governance for us through federally imposed initiatives.)*

So with all due respect, Mr. Prime Minister, on this point we must ask that you please rethink your government's approach set out in a number of recent Bills introduced or proposed affecting our peoples, which seek to tinker around the edges of the *Indian Act* in a piecemeal way with federally imposed solutions to our issues and in advance of our Nations having first had the opportunity to address core governance reform.

Unfortunately, this attempt to legislate aspects of self-governance for us is, to put it bluntly, and again I say this with all due respect, an exercise in neo-colonialism and as history has shown will not work however well intentioned. The approach is fraught with legal and political problems at many levels. This process of change has to be led by our people to be legitimate.

There is still a need, however, for federal legislation that is First Nation led. Legislation developed jointly with our Nations. Not least we need Governance Recognition legislation, so that when a Nation is ready,

willing and able and as directed by its people, there is an efficient mechanism so it can move away from the *Indian Act* and establish its core institutions of governance without the federal government acting as gatekeeper and without interminable negotiations that take years to conclude. This is the foundational work we need to undertake and re-confirm; determining citizenship in our Nations, how we select our governing bodies, how we make laws and how our governments are accountable to our people. This is really the starting point to all other governance reform, including creating the legal and administrative framework to support economic development.

Recognition legislation to achieve this goal is not a new idea but perhaps finally an idea whose time has come? It was recommended by the Penner Committee on Self-government, it was recommended by the Royal Commission. It has been supported by our Chiefs. Frankly it just makes good sense - *(This will get at the roots of the Indian Act tree – we need core governance reform. When we do the Indian Act tree will topple over. No gaping hole, Mr. Prime Minister, but strong and self-determining First Nations.*

However, to move our governance agenda forward it will take leadership...by you and by us. We cannot simply say it is too difficult or too big, if we are truly serious about economic and social development and the advancement of our peoples.

It will also take financial resources. Resources that can come from our Nations having fair access to our lands and resources and revenue sharing with the provinces. There will also need to be new investments made by your government. We know your government rejected the Kelowna Accord, but it is that level of investment that is needed; well-planned out and tied to a solid vision of a post *Indian Act* world. Investments that will ensure quality education and provide for improved individual health.

In fact, what we really need is a new fiscal relationship and a commitment to deal with issues such as own source revenue. We need to ensure our Nations have the resources to provide comparable level of services as other Canadians expect and receive.

In conclusion, our peoples are beginning to take back control of our lives. Where governance reform has been successful, whether through sectoral or comprehensive initiatives, economic opportunity has followed. I, for one, like many of my colleagues am excited about our opportunities. We have the solutions – and we need to build on our success.

But let us not forget, unlocking the economic potential is not the end in itself but is rather a means to an end. That end being healthier and more prosperous First Nations' communities with our people enjoying a better quality of life with practicing and thriving cultures. We must never lose sight of the objective.

And finally, Mr. Prime Minister, this Gathering provides you with an opportunity to demonstrate that you are a true Canadian and committed to undertaking the necessary steps to support OUR Nations along their journey. Our people are watching. Canadians are watching. After Attawapiskat the world is watching. Canada's reputation - our reputation as a country of caring and compassionate peoples and as a leader internationally is at stake.

*(We need direct leadership from you to smash the status quo and ensure that Aboriginal people in this country are truly engaged in, and benefitting from, the economy as much as anyone else.)*

Our people and all Canadians expect you and your government to do the right thing.

Gilakas'la.