

Statement by the Prime Minister of Canada at the Crown-First Nations Gathering

24 January 2012

Ottawa, Ontario

“Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is indeed a pleasure to welcome you on the traditional territory of the Algonquin, to this historic Crown-First Nations Gathering. And it is especially appropriate to do so in this building, a building whose name honours the memory of a prime minister who cared deeply about the things we are gathered here to talk about today: respect, rights and opportunity for First Nations Canadians.

“John George Diefenbaker was, in many ways, the initiator of the modern era of Crown – First Nations relations. It was he who named the first First Nations member to the Parliament of Canada, Senator James Gladstone in 1958. And, it was he who, two years later, extended to aboriginal Canadians living on reserves the right to vote in national elections.

“In addressing that long-standing and fundamental injustice, he was a man ahead of his time and in many ways, an apt inspiration for today’s proceedings.

“Greetings to all participating here in Ottawa and across the country: His Excellency, Governor General Johnston and Mrs. Johnston, Minister Duncan, Secretary Rickford, Senators and Members of Parliament from our Caucus. All distinguished guests, Elders, chiefs, including Chief Weasel Head, and Peter Standing Alone from my home nation, The Blood First Nation of Southern Alberta and, of course, National Chief Atleo.

“It is in no small part the vision and conception of the National Chief that has led to this gathering today, and I know we all congratulate him for that leadership.

“Ladies and gentlemen, friends, yesterday was the sixth anniversary of the general election in which Canadians first entrusted the stewardship of our country to our Government. These past six years have been a time of, putting it mildly, distractions of elections, of minority Parliaments, and, of course, world economic and financial crises.

“Nevertheless, our Government has worked hard to deal with matters of abiding concern to members of Canada’s First Nations. And I believe that, as a consequence of our work together thus far, we have exciting opportunities to strengthen our relationships.

“More than that, such will be the demand for labour in our future economy that we are positioned today to unlock the enormous economic potential of First Nations peoples, and to do so in a way that meets our mutual goals.

“Canada's growing and vibrant economy will require a skilled and growing labour force in every region: urban, rural and remote. Aboriginal peoples are Canada's youngest population. It is therefore in all of our interests to see aboriginal people educated, skilled and employed.

“And there will be no better point in history to ensure that happens. In a moment, I will come back to that. First however, I must say this: every relationship has its ups and downs, moments of consensus and of disagreement. I believe it is important to build a narrative of any relationship based on its highest points. In the relationship of First Nations with Canada, there are some very high points.

"We have the Royal Proclamation of 1763, of which we will mark the 250th anniversary next year, a foundation of the Crown-First Nation relationship. We have, of course, all the historic treaties, large and small. We have the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, this year, in which aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples joined under the Crown, ultimately laying the basis for a distinct country in the northern half of this continent. And, of course, all the wars since, in which aboriginal people have always fought alongside their fellow Canadians in the defence of freedom and democracy, here and around the world. There are great things on which to build.

“Nonetheless, we must acknowledge the not-so-uplifting moments, some very low points and the reality that, for generations, the relationship between our peoples was tainted, tainted in a manner that eroded trust and blocked ways forward as does a tree fallen across a road. Tainted in particular by the experience of the forced residential schools, the explicit attempt to destroy aboriginal culture and to dismantle the aboriginal family that wounded so many so deeply.

“That is why one of my most rewarding days in office was when I rose in the House to deliver an apology to those students. We acknowledged that sad chapter in our history. We repudiated the thinking that lay behind it. And, we went beyond symbolism; we took concrete action to settle the claims of those who had been injured.

“That ladies and gentlemen, concrete action, has been our election promise to First Nations people in 2004, in 2006, in 2008 and in 2011. And to those commitments, we have been

faithful. For example, Our Government has addressed historic grievances by accelerating the settlement of both comprehensive and specific claims. In concert with The Assembly of First Nations, our historic new process has allowed more than 65 specific claims, previously held up for decades, to be dealt with thus far.

“We have extended the full protection of the Canadian Human Rights Act to First Nations Canadians living on reserves. We seek to promote the full participation of First Nations in Canada’s political and economic life, with all its rights and responsibilities. And we are dealing with things that have been in the talk-shop for 20 years, in some cases longer than that.

“We are, for instance, about to ensure that the property of First Nations women and children are protected when relationships end. We have tabled bills to strengthen First Nations governance with 21st century rules on elections and transparency. Many First Nations people will say it’s about time. We routed more than a billion dollars of Economic Action Plan funding to investments for Aboriginal and northern communities, using one-time stimulus money to accelerate the building of new homes, and water and waste water systems to improve living conditions. And soon, we shall secure water-system accountability through legislated standards.

“In the name of self-government, we have devolved land and resources from Ottawa to Inuvialuit. To protect children, we have brokered six child and family services harm-prevention agreements between Ottawa, First Nations and provincial governments. And, of course, we endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. This reaffirms our aspiration and our determination to promote and protect the rights of indigenous people at home and abroad.

“These things we have done, Ladies and Gentlemen, as a down payment on what we wish to achieve. For our goal is self sufficient citizens and self-governing communities. Our goal is to promote improved governance. Our goal is much increased aboriginal participation in the economy and in the country’s prosperity. And we have no illusion about the enormous work that lies ahead of us.

“Our Government’s actions and accomplishments during the last six years speak to our sense of urgency. But, I can tell you this: we have only just begun. In terms of participation, standard of living and quality of life, the time has come for First Nations to fully share with other Canadians from all walks of life with equal opportunity to find the dignity of gainful employment and more than that, the ability to raise a family in the security that comes with it.

“This is our goal as the Government, for all Canadians. And where it is not working for First Nations, we must act, act aggressively and act together. That brings me to the “Canada-First Nation Joint Action Plan,” agreed last year between the Government of Canada, and the Assembly of First Nations. This is a timely understanding, based upon common goals and shared principles, principles such as respect and transparency. Goals like the empowerment of individuals, strong, sustainable communities and economic development.

“I call it timely, because there has never been a better moment to build on what we have achieved, to move forward, to reset the relationship, to learn from the past, but to focus on the future. The Joint Action Plan points the way ahead, through specific joint commitments, commitments that will effectively change the rules in education, accountability, economic development and treaty relationships.

“Why would we wish to change the rules? Because “from the rules you set, come the results you get.” And the incentives buried in the Indian Act self-evidently lead to outcomes that we all deplore.

“To be sure, our Government has no grand scheme to repeal or to unilaterally re-write the Indian Act: After 136 years, that tree has deep roots, blowing up the stump would just leave a big hole. However, there are ways, creative ways, collaborative ways, ways that involve consultation between our Government, the provinces, and First Nations leadership and communities, ways that provide options within the Act, or outside of it, for practical, incremental and real change.

“So that will be our approach, to replace elements of the Indian Act with more modern legislation and procedures, in partnership with provinces and First Nations. It is an approach that has already shown promise. With inspired leadership, energy and enterprise, some bands have already shown that First Nations people are as quick to prosper, as capable of excellence and as able to enjoy all that Canada’s vibrant economy has to offer them.

“I think if B.C.’s Haisla First Nation, partners in the massive Kitimat LNG project that will deliver training, employment and rich economic and social benefits to the community for decades to come. Or in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Miawpukek First Nation which has developed a unique job creation program for unemployed community members, operating in surplus despite having revenue sources of their own.

“Or in Quebec, the Essipit First Nation has developed its tourism and commercial fishery industries, thereby creating local jobs and partnerships with both the private sector and neighbouring municipalities.

“I do believe that so much more is possible than what we presently imagine or conceive. However, none of us, not governments, not First Nations communities, not aboriginal individuals, can accomplish these things alone or without the others.

“In past conversations, we have talked about symbolism and respect and trust. Certainly, in the past, lack of trust on both sides has held us back. But this is a new day. New generations are arising, generations that seek a common vision, that have common goals. And, the greatest respect that we can show to First Nations men and women is to provide them with the tools, to credit them with the capacity and then allow them to move forward. We all need to move forward.

“So let us be willing partners. Let us use this opportunity to renew the conversation. I look forward to your deliberations. Thank you, Friends.”