

Closing the Gap

“ Elections are really about the hopes and dreams of making lives better. For those seeking election, it is about listening, understanding and acting. Closing the gap in the quality of life between First Nations and Canada builds a stronger, healthier country for all of us. We need change now – we must close the gap. ” – National Chief Perry Bellegarde

The Gap is the vast difference in the quality of life experienced by First Nations people and non-Indigenous Canadians. *The Gap* is a fundamental human rights issue, inclusive of First Nations' collective rights to land and self-determination. *The Gap* should not exist in a country as rich as Canada. *The Gap* is holding all of us back from building healthy and thriving First Nations and a stronger Canada. Now is the time for reconciliation. We can only achieve reconciliation with *closing the gap*.

The gap between First Nations and Canada is well documented. In recent years, Canada has ranked between 6th and 8th on the UN Human Development Index while First Nations fall between 63rd and 78th. The federal government's Community Well-Being Index shows that the gap has not changed at all since 1981.

There is wide support for *Closing the Gap* among Canadians, civil society, business leaders, faith-based groups and international organizations, including: Amnesty International, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Canadian Labour Congress, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Council of Canadians, KAIROS, and Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers). This list continues to grow.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) is providing First Nations' priorities for the 2015 Federal Election. Our plan points the way to real change. Working with the next federal government, we can *Close the Gap* through dedicated, strategic investments and concrete actions in the following priorities:

- 1. Strengthening First Nations, Families and Communities**
- 2. Sharing and Equitable Funding**
- 3. Upholding Rights**
- 4. Respecting the Environment**
- 5. Revitalizing Indigenous Languages**
- 6. Truth and Reconciliation**



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Strengthening First Nations, Families and Communities

We must create a new environment which strengthens First Nation families and communities and ensures that First Nations children thrive. Together, by respecting First Nations' self-determination, we will close the gap by acting on and building equitable and fair systems and supports for education, child welfare, health and wellness, community safety and justice.

Within the first 100 days the newly elected federal government will:

- Launch an honourable joint process to close the education gap through First Nations Control of First Nations Education. This includes immediate and continued new investments in classroom funding to catch up from years of underfunding and neglect and a guaranteed annual escalator which ensures equitable funding. Additionally, new investments are required for regional education organizations, systems development, new school construction, operations and maintenance.
- Engage in a collaborative process to develop, with First Nations, a National Action Plan to address the root causes of violence experienced by First Nations women and girls.
- Establish an inclusive and comprehensive National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls with full involvement of Indigenous organizations, communities and families.

Within the first two years the newly elected federal government will:

- Commit to increased investments to ensure equality in child welfare services and programs for First Nations children and families, and develop with First Nations an equitable funding formula and escalator.
- Work with the AFN to develop and implement a First Nations Health Plan to close the gap in health outcomes. This requires long-term, sustainable and substantive investments in First Nations health services, prevention, promotion and Non-Insured Health Benefits.
- Work with the AFN to implement the *First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework* to support greater individual and community wellness.
- Implement and uphold *Jordan's Principle* to ensure that First Nations children will not face delays or disruptions in health services.
- Provide long-term and sustainable investments to support flexible First Nations skills and employment training responsive to First Nations and industry's needs in the economy. This will be delivered by First Nations-mandated organizations through a renewed relationship.
- Engage in a joint process with First Nations to develop and implement a statutory framework recognizing First Nations Police Services as essential services with equitable funding and capacity supports.
- Support the development and implementation of community safety and security action plans to ensure that all First Nations people – women, men, girls, boys, two-spirit and transgender people and others – are free from violence.
- Support the development and implementation of restorative First Nation justice systems and implement actions to end over-representation of First Nations people in the criminal justice and correctional systems.
- Repeal the *Safe Communities Act* and imposition of mandatory sentencing.





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Sharing and Equitable Funding

Canadian prosperity is built on First Nations' lands and resources. First Nations were never meant to be poor in our own homelands. Chronic under-funding of essential services for First Nations has meant that many lack services that Canadians enjoy, like clean drinking water. We must work to close this gap and uphold First Nations rights through equitable funding and new approaches that support First Nations as active partners in the economy.

Within the first 100 days the newly elected federal government will:

- Lift the 2% cap on federal funding to First Nations and immediately eliminate the funding gap it created.
- Immediately establish a new fiscal relationship, inclusive of new fiscal transfer arrangements with equitable escalators for ongoing funding.
- Commit to convening a multi-party process (First Nations, provinces, territories and Canada) to develop revenue sharing frameworks.
- Restore funding for First Nations representative organizations at all levels – national, provincial/territorial and tribal councils.

Within the first two years the newly elected federal government will:

- Commit, in Budget 2016, to long-term investments in First Nations water treatment and management systems to ensure universal access to clean water and sanitation.
- Invest in First Nations housing to address the current backlog and demand for new homes.
- Support First Nations housing management authorities.
- Implement, through a multi-party process, the full involvement of First Nations in emergency prevention, management and mitigation agreements and support First Nations' roles and capacities to provide these services directly.
- Work with First Nations on the development and implementation of sustainable strategies to facilitate and enhance capacity to engage actively in the economy.



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Upholding Rights

First Nations and Canada have a Nation-to-Nation relationship, enshrined in the Treaties, ceremony and protocol, and affirmed in Canada's Constitution and international law. Canada must re-commit to the Nation-to-Nation relationship. Canadians believe in respecting and upholding rights, including First Nations' rights. The Crown must work hand-in-hand with First Nations in the spirit of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect and sharing – the essence of Treaty Relationships. All current and future federal laws, policies and practices must reflect these principles. Our Elders and ancestors made a commitment to one another to work together based on partnership and mutual recognition of one another as Nations. We must honour that commitment.

Within the first 100 days the newly elected federal government will:

- Establish a joint AFN-Cabinet Committee to set direction and monitor the implementation of First Nation-Crown priorities.
- Engage in a collaborative process with First Nations to ensure the federal government is organized in a way that demonstrates accountability to First Nations and is consistent with s. 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
- Repeal *Bill C-51* and ensure that security and policing legislation and operations respect and uphold First Nations' rights to expression, assembly and association.

Within the first two years the newly elected federal government will:

- Review existing policy and legislation and create a framework for future policy and legislation to ensure consistency with s. 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
- Create tables, as defined by rights holders, on a Treaty-by-Treaty and Nation basis to ensure the meaningful recognition and implementation of Treaties, Aboriginal rights and title, with independent parliamentary oversight and enforcement mechanisms.
- Engage First Nations as full partners from the earliest stages in all decisions that have the potential to impact First Nations – law, policy, administration and procedure.
- Recognize the inherent rights of First Nations, and provide financial and capacity support for the development and implementation of First Nations laws as they exercise jurisdiction pertaining to their citizens, communities, and territories.
- Ensure meaningful inclusion of First Nations at Ministerial and inter-governmental decision-making tables which impact First Nations.
- Ensure Indigenous people are appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada as well as other decision-making bodies.
- Ensure that all joint processes are adequately supported and financed.



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Respecting the Environment

As stewards of the natural environment, First Nations have a deep connection that has sustained us from time immemorial. Increasingly, the environment that has sustained us is under threat. First Nations have relationships, protocols and clear responsibilities to the lands, waters and all of creation. Taking action to protect the environment is in everyone's collective interest and is imperative to the well-being of all children and the coming generations.

Within the first 100 days the newly elected federal government will:

- Establish a multi-party dialogue with First Nations on environmental protection, stewardship and sustainability.
- Repeal changes to environmental legislation and regulations enacted through Bill C-38 and Bill C-45 and work with First Nations to develop environmental and resource laws to protect the lands and waters and ensure First Nations' rights and responsibilities are respected.
- Apply the standard of free, prior and informed consent, consistent with First Nations' fundamental rights, in any decision-making that has the potential to impact First Nations' lands, territories or resources.

Within the first two years the newly elected federal government will:

- Recognize and support the inherent rights of First Nations to develop and implement their own environmental regulations to manage traditional territories and resources.
- Ensure First Nations governments are provided sufficient legal, technical and financial capacity to participate in environmental review and other regulatory processes.



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Revitalizing Indigenous Languages

There are more than 58 First Nations languages in Canada. These are treasured jewels unique to this land, and are not spoken anywhere else in the world. Critical and immediate action is needed as only two First Nations languages — Nēhiyawēwin (Cree) and Anishinabemowin (Ojibwa) — are predicted to survive. We must save our languages. Elsewhere in the world endangered languages have been revitalized. Recognition, action and investments today will ensure First Nations languages survive.

Within the first 100 days the newly elected federal government will:

- Increase investments in existing efforts and initiatives to revitalize Indigenous languages, including immersion programs.
- Work with the AFN on a National Action Plan to revitalize and promote Indigenous languages.
- Work with the AFN on an Indigenous Languages Act consistent with the principles in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) *Calls to Action*.

Within the first two years the newly elected federal government will:

- Establish a National Indigenous Languages Revitalization Fund to support First Nations languages revitalization initiatives.
- Establish a permanent National First Nations Languages Institute and commit to ongoing operating funds for revitalization efforts.



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Truth and Reconciliation

In June 2015, the TRC released its Principles for Reconciliation and 94 *Calls to Action*, providing a roadmap to reconciliation and *Closing the Gap*. Where do we go from here? The AFN holds up the TRC's *Calls to Action*. Together, we can implement them. This means jointly developing an implementation plan and acting on the plan together.

Within the first 100 days the newly elected federal government will:

- Fully adopt the Principles of Reconciliation provided by the TRC and work with the AFN on implementation of the *Calls to Action*.

Within the first two years the newly elected federal government will:

- Jointly develop a report card with the AFN and report annually to the Chiefs-in-Assembly and Parliament on the implementation of the *Calls to Action*.

Time to Act

We must close the gap in the quality of life between First Nations and Canada. It is imperative to move on this agenda and build a stronger, healthier country for all of us. First Nations' priorities are Canada's priorities. When First Nations succeed, we all succeed.

We are at a pivotal time in Canadian history. Canadians are poised to begin the era of reconciliation and we are issuing this plan to point the way forward to real change through concrete action. We are seeking responses and commitments to this plan from all federal parties. We are reaching out to all of those who will work with us on an agenda for positive change and reconciliation.

We are seeking partners who believe in a fair and just Canada. We are seeking partners to build a stronger Canada.

Now is the time to act. Now is the time to *Close the Gap*.



Closing the Gap



The Gap: Key Facts

- Half of First Nations children live in poverty.
- Life expectancy of First Nations citizens is 5-7 years less than other Canadians.
- 48% of children and youth in foster care are Aboriginal while Aboriginal people make up only 4.3% of the population.
- There are more than 40,000 Aboriginal children and youth in foster care — more than three times the number of children in residential schools at the height of the Indian residential schools system.
- Secondary school graduation rates are 35% for First Nation students on-reserve, compared to 85% graduation rates for other Canadians.
- There are more than 1,200 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.
- Tuberculosis rates are 31 times the national average.
- Aboriginal people account for 12.2% of new HIV infections and 8.9% of those living with HIV.
- Suicide rates are 5-7 times the national average.
- Aboriginal individuals account for almost one-quarter of all adults and youth incarcerated in Canada.
- 132 First Nations are currently under boil water advisories.
- 48% of First Nation water systems are in high or medium risk.
- 130,197 new homes needed on-reserve to account for population growth and condemned units, as well as the 1 in 4 adults living in overcrowded housing and deteriorated units.
- More than 4,300 First Nation citizens remain displaced from their homes due to flooding dating back to 2011.
- A 2% cap was put in place in 1996 as a “temporary” fiscal restraint measure. It has not been lifted. Since that time, the First Nations population has grown at a rate of more than 25%. Federal transfers to provinces over that period have had annual increases of 3% to 6%.

