

ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS



A Communiqué from National Chief Shawn Atleo

January 2012

The Assembly of First Nations issues regular updates on the National Chief's activities and work underway at the national office. More information can be found on the AFN's website at www.afn.ca.

Crown-First Nations Gathering, January 24, 2012

On January 24, 2012, over 800 First Nation Chiefs, youth and Elders assembled in Ottawa, Ontario for the Crown-First Nation Gathering. The Crown-First Nation Gathering was an important opportunity for First Nations to engage directly with our historic partner, the Crown, as represented by Governor General David Johnston, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, a number of key federal Cabinet ministers and senior officials. Hundreds more First Nation leaders participated in the Gathering through 10 videoconferencing sites, and many more watched the live webcast and live television coverage. It was a truly momentous occasion, a chance for all Canadians to see our people, hear our words and better understand our plans to move forward.

Background to the Gathering

The role of AFN and my role as National Chief is best summarized as facilitating and “opening doors” for First Nations to drive change. We first called for this meeting collectively at the Annual General Assembly in the summer of 2010. At the end of 2010, the Prime Minister indicated an openness to consider such a Gathering. In December of last year the date was confirmed. We held a strategy session at our December 2011 Special Chiefs Assembly in Ottawa.

In calling for the meeting, our key goal was to honour and reset – or renew – the historic relationship between First Nations and the Crown. From the earliest days of first contact with the newcomers and through the time of Treaty making, our relationship was founded on the principles of mutual respect, mutual recognition, partnership and sharing. This relationship is codified in the Treaties and our own wampum belts – that we would work together as partners and share in the benefits of this land. But the imposition of the Indian Act and many other federal laws and policies, such as the tragedy of the residential schools betrayed this relationship. Our people are living the results of failed federal policies and laws that have been imposed on us, resulting in poverty, despair, poor health and poor living conditions.

I do not need to tell you the facts and statistics that show how our people have been marginalized. I know that you see and live this reality every day.

It is clear that now is our time to take control of the decisions that affect our lives. We want to renew that original relationship, give life to our inherent rights, move forward based on the Treaties and unlock the full potential of our people. The Crown-First Nations Gathering was an opportunity to begin this process. Importantly, the Gathering directly built on important steps by the current government through the Apology and Canada's endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Preparing for the Meeting

The AFN and First Nations had a great deal of work to draw in preparing for the meeting. In addition to the many resolutions put forward over the years at AFN assemblies, we have position papers such as *First Nation Control of First Nation Education*. All of this work informed our preparations for the Gathering.

As well, I noted that a strategy session was held during the December 2011 Special Chiefs Assembly. This was an opportunity for First Nations to discuss the structure of the meeting as well as the key elements for discussions. First Nations instructed that the overall purpose of the Gathering must be to renew the relationship and create the opportunity for First Nations to drive their own solutions based on their rights and responsibilities.

As the meeting date drew closer, the National Executive had national teleconference meetings twice weekly. The full National Executive (Regional Chiefs and chairs of the Youth, Women's and Elder's Councils) also met on Sunday, January 22 at a session that was attended by a number of Chiefs, Grand Chiefs and Elders. The next day, over 800 First Nations representatives met in Ottawa for a pre-Gathering preparation session. This was an opportunity to confirm our plans for the Gathering. The day started with a sunrise ceremony and the lighting of a sacred fire at Victoria Island, a historic gathering place for the Algonquin Nation. I thank the Elders and helpers who organized this event, who prayed for us and reminded us of our sacred responsibilities to all creation.

Monday was an excellent day. The energy and wisdom of our people are truly inspiring.

Our core document for the meeting is called the **2012 First Nations Plan: Honouring Our Past, Affirming Our Rights, Seizing Our Future** and is publicly available on the AFN website. The focus is on the key themes of:

- The First Nation-Crown Relationship
- New Fiscal Relationships
- Implementation of First Nation Governments
- Structural Change

There was concern by some delegates over reports that the Prime Minister would only be at the Gathering for a brief part of the morning on Tuesday. We re-iterated throughout that the Crown must be fully committed and engaged in the work of the Gathering. In addition to the Gathering, the Prime Minister hosted a Regional First Nation roundtable dialogue on Monday from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. There was an open and honest exchange on First Nation priorities from designated representatives from every region of the country. This set the stage for Tuesday's historic gathering.

The Crown-First Nations Gathering

The Crown-First Nations Gathering was convened Tuesday morning. First Nations were represented by a delegation of 170 leaders, Elders and other representatives. The day began with appropriate ceremony and a gift exchange. A drum group from Treaty #3 was present and a smudge was performed by Algonquin Elder Bertha Commonda.

Opening speeches were delivered by the Governor General, the Prime Minister and myself. The Governor General stated: *"My hope is that this gathering will serve as the foundation for a renewed and strengthened relationship between the Crown and First Nations. By going back to first principles, we can work with greater confidence—together—to create a brighter future for our families, our communities and our country."*

Following the opening remarks, there were presentations from Crown and First Nations representatives on a number of key topics. Speakers included Ministers and former National Chiefs Ovide Mercredi and Matthew Coon Come as well as AFN Regional Chiefs. These presentations were forceful and moving. It was clear that First Nations are driving change and bringing forward innovative ideas for progress and prosperity.

The afternoon featured concurrent sessions with the Crown, represented by thirteen Ministers and others including Senators and Members of Parliament, and First Nations leaders focusing on:

- Strengthening the Relationship and Enabling Opportunities
- Unlocking the Potential of First Nation Economies
- Realizing the Promise of First Nations Peoples (education, health, safe and secure communities, etc.)

I am pleased to report that, contrary to media reports, the Prime Minister stayed for the full day and participated in a number of these sessions. The results of the concurrent sessions were reported back to all delegates and a Crown-First Nations Gathering Outcomes Statement was released.

Results and Outcomes

The Outcome Statement issued following the Crown-First Nations Gathering commits to key principles and sets out immediate steps for action. Importantly, the Statement recognizes the Royal Proclamation on 1763, the involvement of our Nations in the War of 1812 and the Treaties as the basis of our relationships. It acknowledges that “a series of misguided and harmful government policies...have shaken First Nation confidence in our relationship”. The Statement confirms that it is time to reinvigorate the Crown First Nation relationship on the original basis building on the Apology and the endorsement of the United Nations Declaration.

Specific work, building on and advancing the Joint Action Plan is also referenced. This includes work to strengthen First Nation governance and move beyond the control of the Indian Act; renewing the relationship and improving First Nations financial arrangements; implementing Treaties and Treaty rights; advancing resolution of First Nation land claims on the basis of recognition and affirmation of First Nation rights; implementing mutually agreed upon recommendations on First Nations education; and, a specific task force to advance recommendations to unlock First Nation economies.

The statement concludes with the Crown and First Nations committing to maintaining open dialogue, monitoring progress and working together to report on outcomes within one year.

In terms of specific, immediate next steps for the action:

1. **Financial Arrangements Working Group** to be established between First Nations and relevant departments to review the structure of financial arrangements between the federal government and First Nations. The task of this group will be to advance single, multi-year Government of Canada financial arrangements for First Nations; improve accountability for all parties; and ensuring financial self-sufficiency of First Nations as the end-goal.
2. Removing Barriers to First Nations Governance: The Government of Canada and First Nations will work to develop solutions to remove barriers that hinder First Nations governance. The Indian Act cannot be replaced overnight, but through the use of **existing tools and the development of new mechanisms, both parties can create the conditions to enable sustainable and successful First Nations.**

3. The Government of Canada and First Nations commit to respect and honour our treaty relationship and advance approaches **to find common ground on Treaty implementation**. With regard to comprehensive claims, the statement references a commitment **to ensuring federal negotiation policies reflect the principles of recognition and affirmation** in advancing certainty, expeditious resolution, and self-sufficiency.
4. **Education Reform:** A commitment to implement agreed upon recommendations as quickly as practicable and establish a process to work constructively through any areas of disagreement.
5. **Economic Task Force:** an economic task force to report back, in a timely fashion, with recommendations to further unlock the economic potential of First Nations. The Chiefs Committee on Economic Development has discussed this initiative already and welcomes nominations of potential candidates for this Joint Task Force. Please consider forwarding nominations by February 10, 2012.

Next Steps

Convening this Gathering was a tremendous challenge and we recognize and appreciate the efforts and willingness of the Crown to join us in this way. The logistical complexities did not ultimately detract from the event. First Nations stepped up and demonstrated that we have the ideas and plans to drive change and smash the status quo. We must act now on this renewed understanding, addressing the urgent needs and creating lasting change for our peoples and for all of Canada.

While clearly we have much work to do, some of the divergences of opinion are narrower than reported by the media. On the issue of the Indian Act, the Prime Minister referred to it as a “tree fallen across the road”. He went on to say that the Government “has no grand scheme to repeal or unilaterally re-write the Indian Act”. On this point, we agree. No one expects or wants the Act to be changed overnight, but we do agree it is an obstacle. I believe we also agree that it must be ultimately eliminated. How we get there must be determined by First Nations and this is what will continue to advocate for openness on the part of the Prime Minister to achieve.

The Crown-First Nations Gathering is an important first step in renewing the relationship between First Nations and our historic partner, the Crown, but it is only a first step. We emerged with a shared understanding that building stronger First Nations and a stronger Canada requires us to reinvigorate the original relationship that was based on partnership, sharing and trust. We have a commitment to act on key priorities guided by recognition and implementation of First Nations rights.

The key now is for the government to act on our shared commitments so that we move forward together. I look forward to an early demonstration of that commitment from the Government of Canada. The day after the Gathering, I was interested to hear the Minister refer to the ‘negotiation and implementation of agreements as the way forward in reconciliation’ in signing a self-government framework arrangement with Whitecap Dakota Nation in Saskatchewan. As well, in signing an agreement on January 27th with the First Nations Education Steering Committee in British Columbia, the Government committed to a relationship based on mutual respect, recognition and collaboration, announced a new funding model which would ensure compatibility with provincial funding regimes and invested an additional \$15 million annually to support First Nation schools in that region.

These are important signs and we will be vigilant in ensuring that the words spoken and reflected in action. Of course, we will be watching the next federal budget, expected in March, for a further demonstration of the Crown’s commitment to investing in our people to realize our potential. First Nations are ready for change and have the ideas and plans to move forward. We are already taking action. We fully expect our historic partner, the Crown, to move with us.

As we move forward, the involvement of everyone – from elders, to leaders, to women and youth will be essential to drive the change forward. We look to regions and to all of the leadership to shape the next steps on their own terms. Just as the Crown-First Nations Gathering came to being through the leadership and inspiration of our peoples, so too must we drive the next steps. We need the continued energy and commitment of every one of our leaders to move forward – ***recalling our ancestors and elders while focussed on the lives of our young ones to achieve change now.***

To view a selection of photos from the Crown - First Nations Gathering, please visit:
<http://s1053.photobucket.com/albums/s469/AssemblyofFirstNations/>

Kleco, Kleco!

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