I am honoured to be with you here again. I remember well being here last year speaking about the enduring relationship between First Nations and the rest of Canada.

I spoke of the proud heritage of indigenous nations and the Treaties made between our nations and the newcomers. The relationships set in Treaty are important to Canada and represent the way forward. As we discussed, the stark and tragic inequities First Nations face today reveal that this relationship has been denied too long. We shared views of the possibility of a new story – a story of hope and opportunity for First Nations.

Today, I want to continue this conversation but turn our focus sharply to the economic side of the story. Reconciliation is a complex concept but we can all agree it compels action – right now.

I will suggest that reconciliation can be best approached as the building of a re-newed foundation with four cornerstones: rights recognition, healing and education, capacity and a fourth which will be my principal focus today – seizing economic potential.

On January 24th of this year, First Nations leaders and representatives of the Government of Canada – including the Prime Minister and the Governor General – joined together at the Crown-First Nation Gathering. The purpose was clear: it was a first step to ‘re-new’ our relationship. In the words of Governor General David Johnston:

“We have deep roots together, of shared promise and partnership. This was reflected in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which sought to achieve balance by allowing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to co-exist and work together in the land we now call Canada. The Royal Proclamation pre-dated Confederation by more than 100 years and is the foundation of our modern relationship.”

Moving forward and building on this renewed foundation has and will continue to require our best efforts and genuine commitment. In plain language, it will be hard work.

My Elders have always counselled me that in reality we have only two choices: “we can do things the hard way. Or the harder way.” There is no easy path. But we can achieve our goals.

The first point of our struggle to renew and re-balance our relationship was achieved through political advocacy of many great First Nation leaders of the past. Thirty years ago this month, section 35 was enshrined in the Constitution of Canada. Section 35 recognizes and affirms Aboriginal rights and Treaty rights. It is a relatively brief and straightforward clause, but it changed Canada’s legal landscape forever.
While the Crown continues to attempt to limit and restrict this reference, the Courts have repeatedly supported First Nation views and confirmed section 35 as a solemn commitment that must be given meaningful content. This recognition of our jurisdiction forms a first cornerstone of the effort needed now.

The second point involves one of the most poignant aspects of the struggle and involves dealing with the deep wounds that perpetuate harm to this day. Seven generations of our peoples experienced residential schools and systematic denial of our basic rights and liberties through the so-called 'civilization acts' and decades upon decades of failed policies and legislative efforts aimed at marginalizing, displacing, de-stabilizing and isolating our peoples.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, in its final report issued more than 15 years ago stated these policies and this approach have miserably failed our peoples and all of Canada.

The apology offered by Prime Minister Harper in 2008 and now the Truth and Reconciliation Commission add another cornerstone to our foundation of renewal. We must re-call also that this period of reconciliation is about healing and recovery for all of us, not just First Nations. Throughout the period of residential schools, Canadian children also were only taught a negative view of our cultures and our ways. In other words, we were erased from the “official record” of this country’s history.

Education, as I have said many times, and echoed by First Nation leaders across the country, must be a first priority. We seek nothing less than a full guarantee of quality education for our children that equips them with the tools and skills they need for the 21st century while valuing and embracing their language, culture and identity.

Education as well, for all Canadians to know the true story – the reality of Treaty and that understanding and balance are key aspects of our shared future.

Building capacity through education links to a third element that is equipping First Nation governments to be fully effective and fully accountable to their peoples. First Nations governments must have the tools to build effective public services and public policy to effectively plan and serve their peoples. There is excellent work underway in many of our Nations – First Nations like Sagamok Anishinawbek here on the north shore of Lake Huron who achieved ISO 9001 certification is just one example. We need to grow out this success through partnerships and support that enable every First Nation to build their capacity.

Now, to complete the foundation and begin building anew – we must turn to our shared economic reality, which is both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity. This is the critical fourth corner stone – essential for reconciliation and for our mutual success.
First Nation leaders entered Treaty as economic arrangements to acquire specific tools including education to equip their Nations as needed to deal with evolving economic realities.

Today the achievement of reconciliation – underway through legal recognition, healing and growing capacity – can only be realized as First Nations are able to use our Treaties and rights to build our economic capacity. Our people and our lands hold tremendous potential. Today we must enable and unleash this economic potential. There are compelling reasons and clear strategies to make gains quickly.

Let me start with the reasons:

First, the most obvious reason to act now is the First Nation population growth rate of over 25% compared to only 6% for general population. When we combine this growth with the reality that our working age population experiences three times higher rates of unemployment – the math is painfully obvious not just for our communities but for all of Canada.

We can invest in our people to benefit all Canadians or continue paying the price to perpetuate poverty. Canada’s economic fundamentals require greater economic participation of our quickly growing population.

It is worth repeating the research showing that closing the skills and education gaps between First Nations and the rest of the population will generate $400 billion within a generation and save Canada $150 billion in social costs.

Earlier this year, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce identified skills shortages and specifically Aboriginal peoples as part of a top ten list of barriers to Canada’s overall competitiveness. Furthermore, as Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney points out this month, there are “tremendous opportunities for value added commodity production from energy to agriculture”, but that in order to maximize these opportunities, “the need to improve skills across the spectrum has never been greater”.

Second, we must recognize that almost every resource development activity currently operating or planned is occurring within 200 kilometres of a First Nation community and in the middle of our traditional territories.

If we consider resource activities alone, we can see that current patterns and approaches and governmental policy only hinder economic potential and further hold back and deny First Nation rights to resources and economic participation. We need to smash the status quo.
Currently, First Nations are often the last to know about major resource development. This relegates our communities to few options and usually results in confrontation. So we end up with protests and legal battles that frustrate opportunity for everyone and deepen tensions today and in the future.

First Nations are not opposed to development but we must be involved from the outset. First Nation rights and responsibilities demand that we are full partners in discussion about exploration, ownership, participation and production and long term sustainability of our environments, our communities and our futures.

Recent federal announcements about streamlining the regulatory process have created further fear and concern for many First Nations. Our rights have never been properly addressed in the existing processes. While we can all agree about efficiency – we must see a clear and explicit commitment for our rights and interests to be addressed, as required by the federal constitutional duty.

There is a path to win-win solutions for all involved.

The path forward requires that we look back to Treaty and our early joint economic ventures such as the fur trade. We can re-capture the essential elements of shared gains that were hallmarks of those efforts. This required developing an understanding – it required respect and a relationship.

Just as companies have learned well the importance of protocol in breaking open lucrative foreign markets ... so too can relationship-building create the path forward to unleashing economic potential throughout Canada.

Our economic visions are not dissimilar to the rest of Canada – we envision sustainable communities with healthy families as central to our overall success. At the same time, our Indigenous values, our traditional knowledge and our connection to our lands and waters is and will always be an unshakeable bond.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples calls on states to work in mutual partnership and respect with Indigenous peoples and sets out the standard of free, prior and informed consent. Rather than a backend loaded requirement for consultation or threat as some suggest, I see free, prior and informed consent as not only possible but – practical for business and governments and necessary for sustainable, mutual benefit.

The best of the Canadian corporate sector has already advanced impressive commitment regarding the UN Declaration and specific corporate social responsibility measures in dealings with First Nations. I believe corporate Canada increasingly ‘gets’ this. This is the path to certainty – through recognition that will yield mutual benefit.
THE ECONOMICS OF RECONCILIATION

What does this mean in specific terms for business? It means supporting local economies and investing as good corporate citizens – something already done in the vast majority of places where business operates. Dealing with First Nations should be no different – in fact we invite corporate Canada to understand and work with our communities. Investing in our communities is a strategic, long term economic stimulus plan for all of Canada.

The resource sector continues to be a prime driver for Canada as a whole. As Prime Minister Harper recently noted, mining alone contributed $50 billion to GDP in 2011. We’ve seen increasing employment among First Nations in the mining sector and clearly more will be needed as 40% of the industry’s workforce will retire within the next five years.

We also see increasing involvement of First Nation owned companies emerging and winning contracts for every aspect of mining operations. Diavik Mines alone reported in 2010 that it spent $2 billion with Aboriginal businesses.

But what I am speaking about goes far beyond employment and service contracts. This is about ownership, partnership and profit. There is no question that First Nations have an entrepreneurial drive and there is every opportunity for increased success.

First Nations strive for innovation and above all else to grow economic opportunity that is sustainable environmentally and for the future of the community. The very best opportunities right now are those that are grown from within communities. Community driven economic strategies for growth responding to the needs and interests of the people are yielding dividends right now and are key opportunities for the future.

We see this happening across the country in new energy – sectors of the economy where First Nations enter at the same stage of development as others. First Nations are leading the way forward – here within Ontario – the M’Chigeeng First Nation’s Wind Farm and the Ojibways of Pic River are just a couple of examples.

There are compelling stories and examples across the country – without exception where First Nations have had the opportunity to drive change – the results are mutually beneficial. This is a sharp contrast to unilateral action which has created tension and even devastation. Take examples of hydro electricity for instance.

In the 1970s, unilateral action galvanized contention and confrontation, pitting the James Bay Cree against the industry and the province of Quebec. Through their leadership and foresight, they clearly asserted their rights and have – years later – now completely turned this situation around. They are now the undisputed economic engine of the entire region.
There are lessons and practical strategies to be seized upon in all of this.

As Grand Chief Coon Come said during the Crown-First Nation Gathering: “Clearly, a new way of doing things is called for... The federal government, the provinces and we ourselves must all have the courage to think outside the box, to find the workable and practical solutions that this country needs now.”

So let me sum up, the economic imperative is clear – we all have much at stake.

First Nations will become increasingly important economic agents unleashing our own potential and supporting sustainable opportunities in Canada’s critical resource sector, labour force and economy. Whether through agriculture, mining, fishing, forestry, energy or emerging technologies – our Nations and our rights are a reality and they present unlimited opportunities – if we can get this right. And I believe we can.

We need to speed up the pace of resolving land claims and fulfillment of legal obligations including resource revenue sharing. We need partners that support and enable our governance capacity to drive and unlock economic potential. We need progressive and innovative approaches to infrastructure and support for First Nations to operate in the modern business world, which includes things like entry into the digital economy. Tools like procurement strategies can assist and are proving successful in this province and others.

So in conclusion –

Let us not be daunted by the complexity … or fooled into thinking that someone else or a future generation will solve these problems. This is the harder path. One filled with despair and perpetually worsening pain and suffering.

Let us instead be seized by the opportunity this age old challenge presents. Let’s choose the hard work – the path of reconciliation.

The foundation of reconciliation – with the cornerstones of, first, legal rights, second, healing and education, and third, capacity – can and must be made complete with our full economic participation.

With this solid foundation – we will live the promise and fulfill the potential of Treaty, of partnership and of the greatness that this country has yet to achieve.

Through hard work and determination, we will have achieved our great, new national dream of reconciliation. And then, there will be no limit on what we can achieve together.