



**National Chief Perry Bellegarde
Assembly of First Nations**

**Opening Remarks to the
AFN Special Chiefs Assembly**

December 6, 2016

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY



Tawaw kahkiyaw,

okimâwak, nâpewak, iskwewak, kêhtêak, oskâyak. Okimaw piyisiw awasis nitisihkason. Miyo kisikaw anoch.

Chiefs, Friends and Relatives, Regional Chiefs,

Elders' Council Chair Elmer Courchene, Women's Council Chair and Deputy Grand Chief Denise Stonefish,

Youth Council Chairs Andre Bear and Jennifer Obomsawin,

Chiefs, Grand Chiefs, Hereditary Chiefs, Clanmothers.

Minister Bennett.

I want to begin by acknowledging the Algonquin Nation and Josie Whiteduck for our prayer this morning, and Chief Jean Guy Whiteduck and thank them for welcoming us to their traditional ancestral lands.

Today is the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, also known as White Ribbon Day.

Today we remember the victims of the 1989 École Polytechnique massacre. We remember the lives that were taken that day.

And as First Nations, we remember and honour the many – far too many – missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and their families. It is a stark reminder of the work we have to do to ensure safety and security for First Nations women, families and children. That is why we're here. That's what our priorities are about. And we must remember that in all our discussions over the next few days.

It has been one year since our last Special Chiefs Assembly. One year since I pledged to you as your National Chief to work with the Assembly of First Nations Regional Chiefs and all of you to ensure



Canada's new government keeps its promise of a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership.

As we approach the year's end, let us take stock of the accomplishments we will build upon ... and the areas where more work and greater progress is needed.

Over the past year, the Assembly of First Nations has been focused on ensuring progress for our people and for you as Chiefs, as we work to close the gap and improve our quality of life.

We've forged new relationships with federal, provincial, municipal, international and Indigenous leader, and other partners.

We've joined tables on health care, climate change and the environment, and on human rights both nationally and internationally.

And we've initiated tables to lead the way on a new fiscal relationship with the Crown to establish long-term, sustainable, predictable funding, a new way to approach Specific Claims.

Following the upcoming First Ministers' Meeting, a new way to respond to climate change.

We have a new protocol with the RCMP. We've re-established the Chiefs Committee on Languages, and brought back our First Nations Veterans Association.

We've held housing and infrastructure forums.

Urban forums for First Nations living in cities. And an energy forum that brought together people from all across the spectrum for dialogue, seeking balance between the economy, our environment, and sustainable economic development strategies, as we respect the land and waters.

Last week the Government announced it would proceed with the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline, and it would not go ahead with the Northern Gateway project.



Tomorrow at our energy dialogue session, we will be hearing from people with differing positions, those Chiefs who have satisfied themselves and their people that for their First Nation, the proposed development can be managed in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way. And we also heard from those Chiefs who are concerned that in their case, for their territories, the risks are too great.

We want to facilitate a respectful dialogue that may lead to a better understanding of why some First Nations are saying yes, and some are saying no.

Make no mistake, regardless of your position, we know that we all make decisions with the best interests of our people in mind now and for future generations.

And we can all agree on one thing: the world we live in today is far too dependent on fossil fuels.

And the way forward for all of us, is a future based on cleaner, greener, renewable energy.

Climate change is certainly one of the great issues of our time, and as Indigenous peoples, with our way of life living closest to the land, we are often the first to feel the effects and we have a leadership role to play in this fight for future generations.

Look at what was accomplished just this weekend at Standing Rock – and I know many of us have lent our support there – where efforts are now under way to find an alternative route.

But there are other, more immediate crises in many of our First Nations.

Some Chiefs have faced natural disasters – floods and fires. Shootings. And most tragic of all, the suicide crisis in some First Nations in northern Ontario, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where children as young as 10 years old felt so hopeless, they ended their lives.

So we remember, today and every day as we gather and talk about the economy, energy and the environment, education and the need for change. No matter what we are talking about we remember at the heart of it is our fight for a brighter future for our children and grandchildren.



Everything we do must be about our children because they are waiting, right now, for us to make progress.

That is what we work on every day.

At this time last year, we were building on our Closing the Gap platform, and advocating that the new Government make significant investments in housing, clean water, education, health care, infrastructure ... those things that will make a real difference in the quality of life for our people. Come budget day in March, a historic \$8.4 billion was pledged for First Nations priorities. More than Kelowna.

But we must ensure those resources get out to our people as soon as possible in order to have a positive impact on the ground!

A year ago the Prime Minister of Canada joined us, right where we are today. He responded to our ***Closing the Gap*** document which we shared with all parties during the election. And he made five commitments.

He's going to be with us this afternoon, and we'll hear from him then, but I thought it would be good for us to take stock on those commitments, and see where we are a year later.

The Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls Inquiry

A year ago, the federal government responded to the calls of family members, friends, and many advocates, including the Assembly of First Nations, when it announced a National Inquiry into the tragedy of more than 1300 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.



Since that time, the Assembly of First Nations has participated in a series of National Roundtables, and provided a Pre-Inquiry Report based on the AFN Forum held in Edmonton this April.

Five Commissioners have been appointed, led by Chief Commissioner, the Honourable Marion Buller of Mistawasis First Nation. This fall on behalf of the families, I wrote to Commissioner Buller and to the Ministers responsible for the Inquiry, calling for a response to concerns over a lack of communication about the status of the Inquiry.

Hundreds of people have waited years for the work this Inquiry is undertaking. But they should not wait any longer for information.

The situation in Val D'Or is yet another reminder that the justice system and police services continue to discriminate against First Nations and that racial and gender bias are real problems that must be addressed. We stand with the courageous women who came forward with their stories. We support calls for an independent investigation into the situation, which is simply wrong.

We believe them!

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action

Nearly a year ago, the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was released, and Canada committed to acting on all 94 Calls to Action. The foundation of these measures is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The UN Declaration provides the right framework for reconciliation and supports the full implementation of inherent and Treaty rights, title and jurisdiction. The Prime Minister recognizes this.



At the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in New York in May, Canada committed to working in full partnership with Indigenous peoples to implement the UN Declaration.

It is time to take the next step – to move to a joint process to plan implementation measures.

We are ready to move. It is time to embrace the Declaration as a set of human rights standards that must guide decision-making and the rebuilding of relationships.

This is the path to peace and TRUE reconciliation.

Speaking in New York in May, Minister Bennett said, “It means nothing less than a full engagement on how to move forward with adoption, and implementation done in full partnership with First Nations, the Métis Nation and Inuit peoples.”

This sends a strong message to all Canadians. The era of forced assimilation is ending. A new era of respect, recognition and partnership is beginning. And to ensure it takes hold, we must explore all options, including legislation, to ensure that progress we have fought so hard for, once realized, can never be taken away.

That is why the Assembly of First Nations has been working diligently towards the establishment of a joint ministerial working group to oversee the development of a plan to make progress on those 94 Calls to Action! We strongly believe that there must be regular monitoring of progress with our full involvement.

And that is why I wrote to the Prime Minister following our July Assembly to say that no decisions on how to adopt and implement the Declaration should be taken without the full and effective participation of First Nations. And that all options must be considered, together as partners, including legislation!



The 2% Cap and new Fiscal Agreement with the Crown

Last December, we secured the Prime Minister's commitment to eliminate the 2% funding cap – a cap that had been in place for 20 years – handicapping our potential, and crippling our ability to provide a bright future for our people.

In July, we signed a memorandum of understanding with Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada to begin building a new fiscal relationship with the Government of Canada that respects our inherent, Aboriginal and treaty rights ... one based on total population ... one based on meeting real needs ... and one that keeps up with inflation.

A relationship that respects our role as governments.

One that supports the delivery of effective and efficient programs and services, and recognizes that First Nations governments are accountable to their people first and foremost – one that delivers, in the Prime Minister's words to you last year, "sufficient, predictable and sustained funding".

Not only did we see \$8.4 billion in the last budget – an overall increase of 22% - but we have seen escalators of 4.5% on kindergarten to grade 12 education. A clear step forward in erasing the damage done over 20 years by the 2% cap on base funding for our core programs.

This does not mean that our work is complete. Far from it.

40,000 children are in care and their needs cannot wait.

The Government agreed with an all-party motion that called for Canada to comply with Jordan's Principle and for equitable support for First Nations children living on reserve.

I pressed the Premiers on this issue when we met in Haines Junction in the Yukon this past July, and they all agreed to make this their priority.



Yesterday, the first meeting of the National Advisory Committee on Child Welfare was held, and they will drive the total reform of the First Nations Child and Family Service program to address child welfare funding issues ... improve outcomes for families ... decrease the number of children in care ... and restore jurisdiction and recognition of First Nations child well-being laws!

I've always said, we can occupy the field ... If you don't want federal and provincial laws to apply, create your own First Nations Child Welfare Act and assert jurisdiction to look after our children both on and off reserve!

We expect to see this funding gap in child welfare closed in the coming budget.

And there are other investments we will be looking for that were not part of last year's budget.

Investments in post-secondary education to eliminate waiting lists and close the tuition gap.

Investments in other core services, like band support funding for the administration of First Nations governments, operations and maintenance on capital projects, and income assistance.

And we will work to ensure that future escalators on all programs and services are based on the sufficient, predictable and sustainable funding promised by the Prime Minister.

I want to acknowledge my co-chair, Chief Jimmie, who is helping to make sure this important work is getting done.

I lift up Minister Bennett for her dedication and her attention to the Chiefs Committee on Fiscal Relations over the past six months.

I also want to recognize Scott Brison, President of the Treasury Board, for his participation at our most recent meeting and his attention to these important discussions.

As we work towards a new fiscal relationship with the Crown, Treasury Board's involvement is important, because our fiscal relationship is with the Crown, not only one federal government department.



Our work includes exploring new transfer mechanisms to replace the short-term, narrowly defined contribution agreements we have been working under.

Education

First Nations education was an area where the Prime Minister said “we can’t afford to wait”! Come March, the Federal Budget made a historic investment in First Nations priorities -- \$8.4 billion ... including \$2 billion for First Nations education ... money that came without the imposition of legislation, instead respecting the need for First Nations control of First Nations education. Our advocacy efforts are now focused on Budget 2017, and realizing additional investments to eliminate post-secondary education waiting lists, and ensure that every First Nation person can realize their potential through college, university, vocational programs and apprenticeships in the trades.

Federal law and policy review

Throughout the past year we have advocated for a fulsome federal law and policy review to be conducted in partnership with First Nations, to address the laws and policies imposed by past governments and that systematically deny us our inherent rights, title and jurisdiction. You have the judicial branch through the Supreme Court of Canada upholding our rights in decision, after decision. The executive and legislative branches need to keep pace! Comprehensive claims, specific claims, additions to reserve, self government, laws and policies originally written to deny us and terminate our rights, must be reviewed with First Nations involvement and rewritten to respect and realize our rights!



Languages

We still need to make progress on the revitalization and recovery of our original languages.

Languages define nationhood. They shape our thoughts and ideas.

First Nation languages are spiritual. They describe our relationships to the world around us, to each other, and to all that is sacred.

Languages are linked to the right to self-determination.

We have our own laws, our own lands, people and identifiable forms of government and we have our own languages! These are the five things needed for self-determination – so we cannot lose our languages.

And we are taught by our Elders, our knowledge keepers, that we have to use what was given to us by the creator.

Ceremony is language, and language is ceremony.

We have to let go of the myth that Canada was founded by two peoples, speaking two official languages.

Those are both beautiful languages, but no longer will our languages be in the shadow of French and English.

There were hundreds of unique languages. Today, there are approximately 58 Indigenous languages. And many of them are on the verge of disappearing.

This cannot be allowed to happen. And we know of some cases where languages with few speakers are being turned around.

That is why our current pre-budget advocacy includes support for language recovery and revitalization.



That is why we must begin the work to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action to establish Indigenous languages legislation, and an Indigenous Languages Commissioner – work that must be driven and guided by First Nations priorities and expertise. We've re-established the AFN Chiefs Committee on Languages to guide the work in this important area.

The year ahead will be a busy one for all of us. The needs are great. The desire for change is huge. And I share with you the desire to accomplish more faster!

Next year this country will be focused on celebrations. Celebrating 150 years. The Sesquicentennial.

People ask me: what do we have to celebrate as Indigenous Peoples? After the genocide of Residential Schools, after the control and colonization of the Indian Act?

I say: we are still here!

We're still here - speaking our languages.

We're still here - holding our pipe ceremonies, potlatches and sun dances.

We're beginning to design the processes to move beyond the Indian Act.

And we still live true to our world view.

So, in closing, I want to thank all of you for journeying to be here.

We have a packed agenda. Several Ministers and special guests will join our discussions over the next few days.

We have a great deal of work to do in the year ahead.

We need your ideas. We invite your feedback.

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As always, we are guided by the seven natural laws, our sacred teachings. And they will guide us throughout this Assembly.

Love. Respect. Courage. Humility. Wisdom. And truth.

Thank you.

Kinanâskomitin.