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“...how we can work together to further improve the quality of life and long-term economic prosperity of Canada’s Aboriginal Peoples.” PM Harper, 1 Dec 2011, Ottawa, Ontario.

This paper will focus on the statement above by the Honourable Prime Minister Stephen Harper and will provide a context and path of development from a remote and northern community perspective.
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Introduction:

Let me introduce myself: I was born and raised at Berens River, Manitoba and I have spent my whole life in economic development initiatives with my community. I am 58 years old and I am now beginning my fourth consecutive 2 year term as Chief of the Berens River First Nation. I believe I bring a wealth of experience at the developmental level, operational level and recently at the political level in terms of economic development in a remote and northern First Nation setting. I have seen my share of failures and a few successes along the way, but I have never seen long-term success in the field of economic development as it relates to remote and northern communities in Manitoba. However, the recent statements of the Honourable Prime Minister, Stephen Harper offers me a beacon of light that long-term economic prosperity is a key goal of his vision and this is also my goal. Therefore, I will offer a plan of development for remote and northern communities in the Manitoba region but where appropriate it can be applicable to other regions of Canada. Thus, achieving long-term economic prosperity in such a setting is a relative term based upon reality factors and logistical factors.

What does long-term Economic Prosperity mean in a remote or northern community setting:

Economic development in a remote or northern community setting is a very limited opportunity at the best of times and in many instances, economic development must be built on local and logical opportunities. There can be no standard measure of success under such circumstances; for some communities local achievement will be the measure while in other communities connected to the mainstream Canadian economy by all-weather roads, feasible air freight costs, etc., there is room for growth beyond the local level and obviously greater opportunities for economic prosperity. However, to achieve these ranging goals and make the vision and goals of the Honourable Prime Minister meaningful, it will take “long-term commitment” to make “long-term economic prosperity” a reality. It is my firm belief that if we all fail to combine long-term commitment with long-term economic prosperity, the words on this paper shall ring hollow for another 140 years.
Economic prosperity simply means a society and culture with things to do in a happy way:

In Canada we are overwhelmed by national goals to achieve economic prosperity through the creation of a modern industrial and high tech society. And indeed this is the case throughout most of the rapidly developing global economy in the western world and lately in communist countries like China. At the end of the day all of us seek a society that strives to attain overall net happiness in our lives. But also, the measure of happiness is not a standard that societies in the western world must set for the world and indeed within its own borders. Thus, long-term economic prosperity is a relative term for societies and cultures within nation states the world over. And from my perspective, people will survive as a people if they are generally happy by doing the things that fosters their state of being.

For example, Laplanders in northern Finland and similar peoples in northern Siberia continue to live in long-term economic prosperity based on their strong connection to migrating herds of reindeer on their traditional lands. These societies and cultures remain strong today because I believe they are happy with their state of being. And it is not about wealth as we define it here in Canada, but about the wealth of their traditional lands and reindeer herds that provide them happiness with their way of life. However, if global warming is for real and the herds of reindeer disappear, happiness for these peoples in Finland and Siberia will also disappear. In Canada’s far north the Dene and Inuit people are suffering such loss today.

Of course for the purposes of this paper, the term happy is not meant in the literal sense of the word “happy” but a broader context to mean the inner drive that keeps a person doing things despite great challenges and obstacles. Take for example farmers in Canada. Great hardships are endured by the farming society in Canada, but at the end of the day, farmers are happy and proud of what they do! Otherwise they would give it up. Farming is what they do and it gives them the things to do that make them happy in the practise of farming and tending their farm lands. Likewise fishermen in Newfoundland face great odds to make a living but it is the very essence of their life by the sea. In other words, long-term economic prosperity is not just about wealth in monetary terms but a “happiness” cement that binds a people to an activity that is the essence of their being.

Here in Canada, this type of long-term economic prosperity based on traditional lands and resources is all but gone today for the majority of First Nations communities. Standing in a welfare line is not a happy activity or thing to do for anyone. And tragically, this is the case today in many of our remote and northern communities. And, the question becomes how do we pick up the pieces and build a new happiness for our people living in our remote and northern communities of Manitoba? The answer simple, we must find a new “happiness cement” for our people. And how do we build a new “happiness cement” for our people living with the challenges of remote and northern communities living? And what is the right mix for the cement we need? The answer lies in looking at what is already there, what is the logical component of the mix? Again the answer is simple and it jumps out at you and it has jumped out at all of us on newspapers across Canada; housing! For remote and northern communities without access to the mainstream economy of Canada, long-term economic prosperity means good housing and ample housing to address overcrowding problems. Economic prosperity is defined by building of a good home by those living in it and having the means to expand housing for the family as it grows. Having 21 people living in a 3 bedroom, 1000 squarefoot bungalow is not a happy way to live if the essence of your being is to exist in a remote or northern community. So how do we build long-term economic prosperity for our people in remote and northern communities of Manitoba? Let me explain!
Building long-term economic prosperity in remote/northern First Nation communities:

The answer I believe must be founded on the housing crisis and shortages faced by many remote and northern communities. I believe the meaning of long-term economic prosperity for many of our remote and northern communities is people living in good quality housing built in part at least by their own hands and maintained by their own hands. The happiness of having a good home to live in and raise a family in is the essence of their being today, rather than the happiness of trapping that once fostered daily living. This is not to say that trapping is not important, but it is a hobby that a few of our people practise because it gives them happiness not money.

Keeping in mind the images and pictures of Attawapiskat and the terrible conditions our people are faced to cope with on a daily basis; this is the backdrop that must guide our hopes for future long-term economic prosperity. If we fail to focus on these images and pictures we will fail to address the fundamentals of remote and northern community living for the majority of our people.

1. Let’s get the Assumptions right for remote community living.

It would be a grave mistake to assume that all people in remote communities want to get an education and leave their homelands to make a living in the western industrial world. It would be a grave mistake for policy makers in Ottawa or within First Nation organizations to make the same assumptions and agree to proceed down a path that is at odds with remote community peoples’ wants and needs. The correct assumption to start with, is to accept that remote community people want to live in their communities and live happily in their communities. It is this essence that we must build the assumptions upon in order to develop long-term economic prosperity in remote communities. Keep in mind that we must not assume prosperity means riches and wealth. Prosperity in our case is living happy and comfortable as discussed early in this paper. Therefore, the question becomes how do we properly address the needs and wants of remote community peoples?

However, the answer to long-term prosperity for remote community peoples does not mean we shut out the goals and dreams of our young people who want to leave the community and get an education tailored to the western industrial economy. This is a separate issue but connected in one very fundamental way: A healthy home environment will create healthier and happier youth to go out and meet the challenges outside of their community. The problem of overcrowding in remote First Nations is such a very stressful and defeating environment that will undermine any and all plans prepared for our youth and their future aspirations. Thus, preparing an education plan for our youth that assumes all is well in the home would also be a very grave mistake. All the best educators in the world armed with the best education plans and opportunities for our youth will fail if the life of the child is stressful. And sadly, this is the case in most remote First Nation communities. There are many facts that bear this out such as high suicide rates, high dropout rates in all levels of schooling, violence, solvents, drugs and so on. In creating a healthy environment for remote community living, the benefits will be long-term and far reaching for everyone.

2. Long-term economic prosperity in remote communities means good homes to live in:

Again, the photos and images of Attawapiskat come to mind of houses built with conventional housing materials shipped in from urban centers that are mostly in a state of disrepair. This is an image that is applicable to most remote First Nations communities in the northern regions of Canada. These homes are
the standard “bread box home”, a 1000 square foot, three bedroom bungalow supplied by CMHC and Aboriginal and Northern Affairs Canada. The pictures of these homes show mould and decay in the homes on the exterior, interior and under the floor. These homes were never designed for northern living nor were they designed to house 14 to 20 people under one roof. The doors and windows are falling apart and the floors are rotting away from underneath. Many of the homes built 15 years ago and more were built with two foot crawl spaces with little ventilation under the floor and no pressure treated lumber. On my First Nation and in many others, one third of the housing stock has rotting floors and soon these homes will be unliveable. This is a looming crisis in many remote First Nation communities that will cost in the billions of dollars to fix. Normally these houses last anywhere from 10 to 20 years and then they are uninhabitable. In the near future, the housing crisis on remote First Nations is going to get much worse due to inappropriate design and construction materials. A better housing plan and program is badly needed to replace “the same old same old” government housing programs of today.

3. The logical plan for remote First Nation communities surrounded by the boreal forest:

The use of local materials, found often times, within a few miles of the community should be the source of the next generation of housing programs for remote communities. However, we must keep in mind it is not a quick fix solution but a path of development that must be developed, learned and expanded with long-term commitments by the community and Ottawa. The target group for this type of “local resources” housing plan would be the people in their 20s, 30s and 40s who are living in overcrowded conditions with their children. These people are often forced to live with their parents and grandparents. It must be remembered that many of these young family people are not going anywhere; these are the people who mostly choose to live the rest of their lives in their homelands. These are the people who make up the rapidly growing populations in remote communities. However, presently these people are forced to live in deplorable conditions with no hope for change under the current system of federal housing programs. And, due to these stressful living conditions they all have one common desire; to have their own home. Furthermore, if you ask these people if they would be willing to build their own homes they will answer a resounding “yes”, if they had the means to do it.

Given that the key desire and ambition of people in remote communities is to own a good home, this is the energy upon which to build long-term economic prosperity for remote community people; through their own eyes. Of course there will be a few of them that will get an education and leave the community but for the most part, the majority desire to remain in the community. And for these people who choose to live in the community, a different kind of education agenda is needed for them. The educational skills needed for local remote community living must be based on learning practical housing skills; carpentry, foundation building, electrical and plumbing, household maintenance, etc.. At the end of the day, these people will be expected to build and look after their own homes rather than depend entirely on the band office to build and maintain their homes. The current social housing programs termed Section 95 housing, creates dependency on the band office for everything, and this is wrong. The new “local resources” housing program envisioned here would be a “helping hand up” for remote community people to build, maintain and own their own home. But such a plan is in keeping with what remote community people desire the most; dignity, happiness and a good home. However, the “helping hand up” housing policy needed for such a plan requires a major overhaul of policies and existing programs and the creation of a few new local programs to make it work.
4. **Overhauling existing housing programs and creating a remote community housing program:**

Under the current Section 95 social housing system, First Nations rely on CMHC and Aboriginal and Northern Affairs to provide an allocation of houses that falls far short of the needs in remote communities. For example, in my community we presently receive an allocation of 2.0 houses per year while our birth rate is approximately 35 per year. The current housing program offers mainly a 1000 square foot bungalow designed to accommodate a family of 5. If you do the math, is it any wonder that housing shortages are at a crisis level in many remote communities?

Moreover, these houses are tendered out to housing materials suppliers in Winnipeg and shipped out over the winter road system to remote communities. Many of the remote communities have no warehouse storage facilities to receive these materials and often the materials get damaged, spoiled or go missing once they are unloaded on the ground in the community. Many remote communities are faced with huge cost overruns with their housing programs due to these factors and in the end, many remote communities are forced to spend future capital funds to make up the loses. Often times, remote communities are forced into third party management due to housing cost overruns. To say the least, it is a self-defeating exercise; deficits keep going up, poor housing is being built that lasts 10 years at best, housing shortages continue to rise rapidly, and yet, we keep going down the same old path. And the rotting floors problem with houses built 15 years ago and more will wipeout 30% of the housing stock in remote communities within the next 5 years or so. It is time for change; and drastic changes are needed before housing shortages in remote communities such as Attawapiskat become the norm across Canada, tenfold!

It is high time to scrap all the non-sense of dependency and the current government social programs that go with it and create real long-term economic prosperity for remote communities in Canada. It is high time to end the use of jurisdictional wrangling between the provinces and the federal government as a means of denying responsibility for the sad state of affairs in many of our remote communities. Both levels of government are responsible for what we and the world has witnessed at Attawapiskat. Not far from Attawapiskat a diamond mine reaps the riches from the lands. And indeed throughout all of northern Ontario, the resource extraction economy provides billions of dollars in tax revenues to the provincial and federal government coffers. Is it not time to share some of this wealth with the original owners of this land rather than continue finger pointing and denying responsibility for tragic state of affairs in many remote and northern communities across Canada? We are not asking for much, just a good home to live in and a good home to be happy in.

In essence, it is not only Attawapiskat that operates under third party management, it is all remote communities in Canada. The provincial and federal governments reap the taxes and wealth of our lands and resources by virtue of the treaties signed with us and we are all left by the wayside as a third party to beg for the crumbs of this country’s wealth. The paper work and reporting to run this third party system of dependency is a 9 billion dollar industry in this country that benefits no one, least of all, the people living in remote communities across this land. It is a state of affairs that must change if we hope to avoid another 140 years of denial and subsequently, dependency. In meantime, what are the small steps we can take to begin the process of transforming the current system to improve living conditions on many remote communities in Canada. The answer for many remote First Nations must be found in the housing crisis itself; as a tool for building a brighter future for those living in a remote community and for those wanting to leave for a higher education in the outside world.
5. Developing a remote community housing plan with local resources and SIP panels:

The one critical factor to keep in mind is the high cost of shipping and building houses in remote communities that requires a plan that best tackles these issues. In many remote communities in the boreal forest, the Precambrian Shield rock formation makes foundation construction very difficult. Most remote communities lack the proper equipment to install proper foundations and therefore, a concrete grade beam is the primary method of starting the footing for a house. However, concrete often spoils in remote communities before it is used. Thus, the use of concrete must be minimal at best to reduce these losses.

Given the problems with foundation construction, the other important factor to control is mould and rotting of the floors. A lot of First Nations lands have high water tables and this dampness in the soils eats away at the houses from underneath. Overtime the mould and rot creeps up the walls of the house and becomes a health hazard to its occupants. Leaking roofs and moisture build up in the attic is another source of mould and rot that is affecting many older homes in remote communities. It is therefore imperative that a housing plan for remote communities must be developed to address these problems as well. And lastly, there is a great need for warehousing infrastructure in remote communities to stop the practise of truckers dumping all materials on the ground to spoil or disappear. When the spring rains come, the drywall will all spoil where it was dumped back in March and when the ground thaws for construction, half of the materials may gone to fix up other homes badly in need of repairs. Is it any wonder why houses stand unfinished in places like Attawapiskat? Material shortages can only be addressed in the following year when the winter road opens, however, the band must make up this shortfall from its capital budget. And often times; remote communities have expended their capital monies by the time winter road season opens since it is the end of the fiscal year. And on and on it goes!

Therefore, the use of local materials is a far more efficient method of building houses in remote communities if the proper equipment is installed in the community. The less reliant housing is on shipping over winter roads and the more materials that can be produced locally, the better. This is the opportunity that is available for most remote communities situated in the boreal forest regions of Canada, like Attawapiskat. What is needed in remote communities for this plan to develop is to introduce new small scale sawmill technologies to the communities. The production of square timber housing to create the wall systems is now feasible with small portable sawmills. As well, small planner/moulders and portable dry kilns are relatively inexpensive pieces of equipment to purchase and operate. Square timber and lumber grading courses are readily available for First Nations to enhance their quality of workmanship. These pieces of the plan are out there and just need to be pulled together.

In terms of the flooring and roofing structure, structural panels are now available made of lightweight steel and foam infill. These SIP panels are manufactured in Winkler, Manitoba and can be flown into remote communities if need be. The flooring comes with radiant heating built into the floor to provide heating for the home and prevent mould and rotting setting in from moisture underneath the building. Likewise, roofing panels provide for a metal roof that prevents air loss and moisture build up in the attic. The end product is a home constructed out of thick square timber walls and enhanced by lightweight SIP panel technology. The foundation for the SIP panel flooring also provides a foundation that is adjustable and requires very little concrete to setup. The basics of this program is currently under development and there is now a need expand this program to other First Nations, if the political will and interest exists to look at a new system of house construction in remote communities.
6. Developing a first project and business plan for implementation:

Leaving aside the bigger picture items of revenue sharing and jurisdictional issues to make this housing plan a self-sustaining initiative, smaller steps can be taken and developed in the meantime. There are two parts to developing this project into a remote housing initiative to address all the issues raised in this paper and build a better future for remote community living:

A) Restructuring government funding to accommodate this new remote housing initiative:

- Create a small focus group from Aboriginal and Northern Affairs to steer the project with minimal bureaucracy.
- Revamp the Social program currently called Work Opportunities Program (WOP) to accommodate this initiative.
- Revamp the Pathways training fund program (AHRD Canada) to accommodate this initiative.
- Restructure the EI program to accommodate this program.
- Create a research and development fund to finalize CMHC standards/design approvals.
- Create an educational component based on carpentry, electrical and plumbing skills.
- Create a capital fund to provide the infrastructure for this initiative.
- Restructure current housing funding programs to accommodate this initiative.
- Identify a meaningful role and partnership with the province for the initiative.
- Set a quick time line for development and implementation; suggested 2 years.
- Identify two communities to for development and implementation.

B) Preparing, introducing and implementing the concept at the local First Nation level:

- Introduce the concept at community meetings.
- Develop a focus group to design and implement a “new” housing policy for the program based on “private home ownership” from a remote communities perspective.
- Setup a selection process with rigid guidelines to select at least 6 candidates to participate in the program based on a commitment to finish the program working as a group to build 6 houses.
- Develop a life skills component to the program.
- Identify an acceptable educational component based on “a remote community perspective” of education.
- Develop a certification program for all participating candidates.
- Identify and selection of timber resource area for the project for long term harvesting.
- Identify local resources to contribute to project.
- Prepare and identify reporting and deliverables component for the project.
- Identify mechanism for tracking the results of the program over the long term.
- Identify and prepare annual reports to measure the costs and achieve greater efficiencies for the program.
- Identify expansion plans for the project based on proven results.
7. **Photos of the houses under development:**

Cutting jackpine logs at Berens River, Manitoba for square timber housing 2008.

Squaring logs for square timber house construction with D & L Double Cut sawmill; rough cut primary mill.

Fine cut and trimming square timbers with Wood Mizer band saw. Hand push operated to “feel” true cut.
Finished product strapped and ready for move to building site

Assembly process; square timbers and sealed with foam gaskets.

The house is assembled and immediately stained to protect the wood.
Almost finished, except for chinking the seams on the exterior with Cetol cement.

Finished Product: a beautiful solid home built with local timbers.