First of all, I want to thank Philanthropic Foundations Canada President Hilary Pearson for the kind invitation to be part of your national conference. I am truly honoured to be here.

I understand you’ve had a full two days of thoughtful discussion and presentations and I am hoping I can draw on that momentum to encourage you all to join our efforts in igniting change and transforming the status quo in the most challenged communities across Canada. I believe that the philanthropic community is absolutely uniquely placed to play a pivotal in challenging the assumptions of the past and finding new ways to work together on the ground and to transform the reality – starting now.

In that spirit, I want to begin – as is the tradition of Indigenous peoples across this land – by thanking the people on whose traditional territory we gather: the Mississaugas of New Credit.

I am Shawn A-in-chut Atleo. I was honoured to accept the position of National Chief in July of 2009.

I am from the far west coast of Vancouver Island, a small fishing village called Ahousaht. We are Nuu-chah-nulth.

Many of you may be hearing the name of my Nation for the first time. Such is the way with the history known of this great country Canada, a history that too often denies or disregards the vibrancy and richness of Indigenous peoples.

My Nation, the Nuu-chah-nulth has existed for hundreds of thousands of years. We are people of the ocean, people with a complex governing system grounded in laws of responsibility and respect, sacred ceremony and a guiding philosophy that we are one – we are all inter-connected.

My message today is about the action we can take as individuals, as groups ... as Canadians to appreciate this inter-connectedness we all share. We need to set aside misconceptions, misunderstandings and false choices, and capitalize on the strength and opportunity of working with First Nations in this country.

We invite you to join our call to action and use your networks and opportunities to support First Nations in developing and driving plans forward.

I’d like to set out for you a path of cooperation and partnership, based on the vision of a future where First Nations enjoy a quality of life similar to that of other Canadians, where our people are educated and employed, where our children can dream of a future of hope and opportunity.

I am speaking about a major shift, a massive transformation ... one that is possible, even essential, and it does not require new ideas.
After all, our original relationship was founded on mutual respect, mutual recognition and partnership. This vision is still instructive and it grounds our work today.

Our ancestors and past leaders had a dream of a better future through partnership and alliance. A dream codified and formalized by many First Nations through Treaties and Treaty-making. The survival of Indigenous Nations today tells us all that that dream is still possible.

We know that it was not only First Nations peoples who had a dream for a better future. Samuel de Champlain – often referred to as Canada's first Governor General – had a different kind of dream too. David Hackett Fischer’s recent book describes Champlain’s dream of a society based on partnerships between Indigenous peoples and Europeans to strengthen and to enrich one another. It was a plan completely different from what was being directed by other colonial governments at the time. Displacement, destruction and domination were the objectives across much of the Americas and the Caribbean.

So today, as I talk to you about igniting the need for change, I am really talking about realizing the dreams of ALL of our ancestors.

These are not dreams that are beyond our grasp. These are not dreams of a perfect world, but a better world – dreams of a great nation. Dreams of harmony, of mutual respect, mutual strength and prosperity.

First Nations are already advancing plans to make this vision a reality.

As you will all appreciate – there is no question – we have a lot of work to do.

Since contact between European settlers and Indigenous peoples in Canada, there has been a constant and aggressive erosion of First Nation economies, laws and ways of life. Today, we suffer exponentially the poorest socio-economic conditions of all people in Canada. While Canada consistently ranks within the top ten countries on the UN Quality of Life index, First Nations fall well below, ranking among developing and third world nations.

Statistics tell a tragic tale of communities with the highest youth suicide rate in the world, a rate of TB infection 30 times the national average, an education gap that will take over two decades to close and the reality that our children are more likely to end up in jail than to graduate high school.

I could continue to cite a series of numbers that would leave us numb, but suffice to say, we have communities and families engaged in a life and death struggle every day.
This is NOT the dream of our ancestors. This is a harsh reality, one that I see on a daily basis.

I spend a great deal of time traveling to First Nation communities across this country. In my two years in this role, I have been to every region – to the urban centres and the most remote villages. I have seen great suffering and have heard first-hand of the day-to-day challenges.

Some of the most powerful moments of these trips are being with families and youth. I see great potential placed against incredible odds.

I was in Ft Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan earlier this year, talking with a group of young teenagers. I asked one young boy, probably 14 or 15, what was on his mind. He slowly looked up at me and said: “life on the rez is hard. It makes you scarred.” In that moment this young man captured the fear that grips too many of our people.

But I have also seen the spark of determination in the eyes of our young leaders – a spark that can light the flame to a better future.

It’s the kind of spark that fuelled the drive of young Shannen Koostachin from Attawapiskat who had a dream of a safe and healthy school for her classmates – a dream that is a reality for most Canadian students. Shannen believed in this dream so much, and was such a powerful advocate that she convinced her grade 8 classmates to cancel their graduation party and instead raise money for a delegation to go to Ottawa and meet the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs to push for a new school. Shannen had never gone to a real school – she attended classes in portables that plenty of toxic mould in the walls but no library or gym. Her efforts spawned a movement called Shannen’s Dream that is inviting kids across all communities to learn more about this urgent call for quality education.

It is inspiring that such a young person would take on this challenge, yet shocking that she would have to in a country like Canada, a country that has prospered from the wealth off the traditional territories of its First Peoples.

Our kids deserve good schools. That’s the bottom line and that’s the first priority in a holistic agenda for change.

Our work is to NOT to cast blame or cultivate guilt. Quite the opposite – our work is about inspiring action both due to the critical needs and the tremendous opportunities.

Our work is to actually realize the requirement – affirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada – that Canada must reconcile its laws, policies and actions with First Nation rights and interests. Reconciliation was committed to in the apology given to survivors of residential school. But an apology is about saying “sorry” – reconciliation is about action and fundamental change.
For First Nations and Canada, Reconciliation is about smashing the status quo!

We know this has to happen. Otherwise progress will be incremental at best, non-existent at worst. Former Auditor General Sheila Fraser undertook 32 audits related to First Nations and in her final report, after a decade of service, she concluded that things have actually gotten worse. She said the way forward is fundamental transformation.

We also face a demographic urgency. First Nations are the youngest, fastest growing population at a time when the Canadian labour force is aging. Closing the education and employment gaps for our people would contribute $300 billion to the national economy and save $115 billion in expenditures.

Investing in our peoples will create jobs, open new economies and new opportunities. Many of our communities are moving forward and taking matters into their own hands, especially in sectors like clean energy and green technology.

But in order for this effort to truly succeed we must unlock the full potential of First Nations and sever the shackles of paternalism under the Indian Act.

The Indian Act has piled layer upon layer of bureaucratic interference and control on our people. It pins us down. The federal bureaucracy that rules by remote control has ballooned to over 5,200 employees. INAC’s operation costs shot up by 71% over the past 3 years while funding for basic services to First Nations was frozen at 2% growth.

This is completely wrong. We need to transform this situation; look to the First Nations that are blazing trails forward, support that success and increase the rate and pace of change across the country.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – endorsed by Canada – compels us to work together in mutual respect and partnership. This means upholding Treaties, allowing First Nation governments to govern and respecting our rights.

Over the past two years, First Nations have come together and shared their worldviews on re-establishing our governments. We are diverse people so there is not only one path but it is a journey with a clear destination – a destination that affirms our rightful place in our lands and territories, that cherishes our children and creates a better future for them. Ultimately, it is the pursuit of self-determination and a clear respectful partnership within Canada.
IGNITING Change: Smashing the Status Quo

There are four clear elements leading us down this path:

1. The First Nation-Crown Relationship
2. New Fiscal Relationships
3. Implementation of First Nation Governments, and
4. Structural Change

Each element has possible paths and each element must be advanced in balance with the others.

Advancing the First Nation Crown relationship means making progress to give life to the Treaty relationship. We have called for a First Nation-Crown Gathering to kick-start this work and Canada has agreed to it. We are working to confirm the exact time hopefully this winter. This is more than a meeting between me and the Prime Minister. This must be a first step that affirms the relationship, sets an agenda and marks progress and priorities for the future. This must signal the beginning of transforming the relationship away from unilateral control to one of partnership.

We need new fiscal relationships built on agreed-to principles that guarantee and deliver sustainable, equitable services based on agreed-to standards.

We must implement our governments through building our institutions, through planning and accountability mechanisms.

…and finally we must break down the bureaucracy and institute structural change.

This has to be done in a way recognizes First Nation jurisdiction – our responsibilities as governments and Nations. Right now, the bureaucracy and its policies are controlling our people and failing them. We want nothing more – and nothing less - than the ability to make the decisions that affect our lives, our lands and our nations, and to take responsibility for these decisions.

First Nations and our organizations have work to do and we are doing it. We are aligning to support and enable nation re-building and the successful development of governing institutions with clear accountability, reporting and direction grounded in our languages and cultures; we are creating nations that are ready to take on the challenges of today.

We envision a time in the near future when our Governments – at their choice and their direction – are operating outside the narrow barriers of the Indian Act.

This is not only possible – it is underway, well underway. And this is where I call on you – as we mobilize our energies, create momentum and inspire all Canadians – I call on you to join with us.
IGNITING Change: Smashing the Status Quo

I am personally energized by the interest in our issues, as a growing chorus of Canadians from all walks of life say “we get it … And what can I do to be part of that change?”

First Nations are determined to strengthen our citizens, governments and communities for the future of our children and all of Canada.

And, as outlined in Treaties, we are willing partners to work with governments, businesses and neighbouring communities as we move forward.

Philanthropies have played an important role in pilot funding and in capacity building. Foundations have worked to help communities build and enhance economic development opportunities. Together you have supported early stage projects that are now self-sustaining.

(I could cite many examples but one I heard about recently first hand at Nipissing University. A service learning initiative supported by J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is an example of how to transform approaches, encourage full community engagement and directly affect change with a bottom line of improved education success for children.) The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada is another example of where we can enhance networking and coordination and drive greater mutual understanding of the needs for shared effort.

These and many examples where individuals and Foundations have had clear goals, have challenged institutional leadership and said we don’t accept poor outcomes and we’re going to do something about it – are the hallmarks of New thinking and new approaches that will drive lasting change.

All of you are people who have dedicated your time to firing and driving change, change that smashes the status quo and we look forward to continuing these and new partnerships.

So, if I may conclude where I began, most of what we need is your voice, your networks and your advocacy for this vision of a better future for our peoples and for Canada.

So today, I call on you to join our call to action, remembering that First Nation citizens should not need charity in their own lands.

If we honour and activate the vision of our ancestors, if we work together, we will enable progress and prosperity. And this will replace any need for charity but rather we will uphold our scared partnerships.

By lending your voice in support, by learning more about our peoples and by supporting our advocacy – we can together turn the tide, to push the tipping point to transformation.
I believe strongly that this is Our Time … Our time to press forward, push harder, engage openly and honestly and have the challenging conversations – and ignite the change that’s needed today!

This is a fight for our children – our future.

We cannot afford to lose another generation. We need to reassure every young person – like that young man in Ft Qu’Appelle who expressed the fear we must banish, and young Shannen Koostachin who fought for fairness and freedom.

They need to see and feel our support so they know they are not alone, that they don’t need to carry the burden of the struggle for a better day for all our peoples – that we are there with every child to make sure that they grow up in safe, secure communities and have every chance to learn and to succeed.

We made this country together. We can re-make it in the spirit, the vision and the dream of our ancestors. We all have a stake. We are all Treaty partners. We are all Treaty people.

Now – more than ever – it is OUR time!