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Ryerson University
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REMARKS - CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY
Good morning and thank you. I want to acknowledge the Mississaugas of New Credit and thank them for welcoming us today into their traditional territory. And I thank you for inviting me here to join the celebration of Ryerson University’s Fall 2012 Convocation Ceremonies!

I thank Chancellor Chang and President Levy. I humbly accept this gracious invitation and this great honour.

Today is a day filled with excitement and proud achievement for all of you, a day of new enthusiasm and new opportunity, a celebration of learning, growth and transformation. I congratulate all of you on your achievement.

You see, education is particularly important to me and to all First Nations. The leadership and I have been pressing on the priority of education as the key that unlocks the full potential of First Nations people. This effort builds on over three decades of First Nation education leadership.

In this struggle, we look beyond our own circle in this work and reach out to all Canadians, extending a hand to invite everyone who will walk with us on this journey. And it’s encouraging to see so many people joining us. Educational institutions, corporate Canada, civil society and so many others.

The First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) – Ryerson partnership is an example of hidden successes occurring across the country where Indigenous institutes of Higher Learning are working in partnership – in a valuable exchange of knowledge and capacity.

The one message I hope to share with you today is that you can be part of this journey. You can play a role in transforming this country into a better, stronger, more fair and just Canada. There is so much more that can be done – must be done.

We all like to believe Canada is fair and just. And Canadians have reasons to be proud. But the situation facing First Nations is a deep scar on our national soul.

It does not have to be this way. It was never intended to be this way.

In the early days of contact, we made a promise to one another – First Nations and the newcomers – a sacred vow to share in the beauty and riches of this land. First Nations were generous in those early days, helping the newcomers survive in this land.
In those early days we entered into Treaties and other agreements to live and work as partners. We see this in the earliest records of these agreements, like the Iroquois’ Two Row Wampum Belt. This belt shows two ships traveling down a river, representing the First Nation way of life and the European way of life, each with their own laws, traditions and beliefs. The ships travel side by side, but never getting in the way of one another, never interfering or trying to steer the other’s ship. In this way, they live in respect and harmony.

This same view of the relationship is what First Nations secured in the Treaties: a sacred promise of mutual respect and partnership. We would live side by side and work together when it was desirable, but never try to dominate or control one another.

First Nations have kept our word. Canada’s record is not admirable, to put it most gently. It is time for Canada to honour its promises and work with us – not for us, but with us – to chart a new path forward.

For several years I have spoken to my people, to the Government of Canada, to Canadians from coast to coast about the possibilities that a return to a more genuine partnership would open for all of us. In January, we created the Crown-First Nations Gathering – much was promised by Prime Minister Harper and his ministers – much less has been delivered thus far.

The clock is now ticking, my friends. My people will not wait on the delivery of promises forever. And we have seen the tragedies that explode when patience runs out. I don’t need to repeat the names and the dates of those painful days, there have been too many. As Santayana and many others have tried to teach us, if we do not learn the lessons of history we are doomed to a cycle of repetition.

We all know the cycle: promises made, promises broken, anger builds, confrontation – then an embarrassed government sets up a task force or commission. It makes recommendations, and new promises are made. My people are fed up with this vicious circle. And you should be too.

I am very concerned about the news I hear, about important innovations right across the country – examples like the west coast First Nations Education Steering Committee. This was the first and the largest innovation in the delivery of education to First Nations students in Canada. Over 80 First Nations, their provincial and municipal partners have made great strides in the past decade. Now their future is in doubt because of battles with Ottawa over funding.

If we cannot keep pushing one of our few successes in First Nations education across the finish line, the consequences would be painful. Faith in the value of bargaining with this government would collapse. Faith in the word of this government already low and failing is in rapid decline.
My friends, it does not need to be this way – we do not need to re-open the debates of the past. We need to move forward. We need to ensure that when promises are made – THAT THEY ARE KEPT. Or we will head down the same painful road to confrontation as we have in so many times past.

First Nations are the youngest and fastest growing part of the population. Canada is ageing but our people are coming of age. We are the future of this country, the artists and entrepreneurs, the engineers and educators, the doctors and diplomats that will drive this country forward.

Now is the time to act on the reality that strong First Nations make a stronger Canada.

Working together, we can raise First Nations education and employment levels up to those of the average Canadian. That will add literally billions to the country’s economy and save a billion more in costs related to our poverty and poor health.

We literally and morally can not afford to lose another generation.

In a country like Canada, how can we tolerate the despair and disparity that sees First Nations children living in overcrowded, collapsing shacks with no running water?

How can we tolerate families poor and starving while surrounded by the riches of their homelands?

How can we tolerate more than 600 missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls – the stolen sisters, mothers, daughters and aunties crying out for justice?

How can we tolerate more than 30,000 First Nations children in state run child care away from their families – more than at the height of the residential schools? Children taken from their homes mainly because of poverty, a poverty that wasn’t created by their parents but by a system that denies us our right to control our own lives, manage our resources and build safe and secure communities.

How can we tolerate the system that is at the root of so many of our problems? A system created by Canada and imposed on us in spite of the Treaties; a system codified in colonial legislation like the Indian Act that controls our lives from cradle to an early grave; an approach that says: “we know what’s best for you,” when in fact it is not working and has never worked for us.

It’s time for change. Now is our time. We will. Not. Wait.

First Nations are pushing and pursuing every opportunity for cooperation. We are ever mindful of the dangers but we owe it to our children to seize and drive every opportunity for change. We’re putting
plans on the table. We want to be constructive. We know there are ways we can work together that benefit all Canadians and honour the promise we made to one another:

I travel to First Nation communities across the country – in remote, rural and urban areas – and I can tell you that the fire for change is igniting across this land; the passion of our people is sparking a demand for a new direction.

When our people see no movement from the government to work with us, when they see backsliding, undermining and continuing threats and pressures on an already burdened population…the flames only grow stronger. The voices grow louder. Our people will not stand for it. Rightly so, there is growing anger and frustration.

But we can channel this energy into a positive path. And I encourage all of you to be agents of change, to fight for social justice and a Canada that embraces that original Treaty relationship as the way forward.

Together we can return to the path of partnership, we can provide signals of co-operation to angry young men and women in our communities. We can call our MP, our MPPs, our political leaders and express our concern about this slide back in to confrontation.

Now, some of you may not feel an investment in this work. You may be thinking: “I didn’t create this situation so this isn’t my fight.” Let’s just take a moment and compare it to the actions many of us are taking to deal with global warming and the environment. None of us are directly responsible for creating that situation but we can all be responsible for creating the solutions. It’s in all our best interests to do so.

In spite of the challenges, I believe we’re living in an exciting time – perhaps a tipping point in transforming the relationship between First Nations and Canadians.

It’s a true moment of reckoning, a time to shift away from bemoaning the “Indian problem” and maximizing the “Indigenous potential”. Why would we pay to perpetuate poverty when we can plan a path to prosperity?

First Nations want to be full partners in designing a collective future – for our communities and the country as a whole.

This is about justice, reconciliation and our fair share.
Those two words are important. “Fairness” means honesty. It means being honest with one another about our plans and our expectations, as well as being honest about our responsibilities to one another.

It means being honest about honouring our promises and agreements. First Nations have kept our word. It is time for Canada to honour and act on its promises, promises like those made in the Treaties; promises made in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which commits Canada to uphold Indigenous rights, ensure First Nations enjoy the same quality of services and care as other Canadians, ensure our languages and cultures are protected and promoted, and ensure that First Nations are at the forefront and fully involved in any activities that affect their lands and resources.

It means honouring the promises made at the Crown-First Nations Gathering convened earlier this year, where the Prime Minister committed to working with First Nations to reset our relationship and move forward, together, to create stronger First Nations.

Fairness also means equitable treatment. It means ending the massive under-funding of First Nations, under-funding that sees our people denied access to safe housing and healthy communities. Under-funding that sees our children denied access to quality schools. Did you know that under the government’s system for First Nations education, things like libraries and computers are not considered essential? How many of you here got through high school and university without using a library or a computer? It’s hard to understand how anyone can argue that these aren’t essential to a modern education.

And fairness is a two-way street. First Nations must do our part by articulating the kind of change we want to see. Each community and nation must work with their citizens to identify their priorities and design their plan forward.

We are calling for fairness and if we honour these promises and live up to these principles, fairness will also mean justice.

And finally – sharing, this is how we agreed to live together on this land. Our lands and resources were used to build this country called Canada and continue to be the backbone of our economy.

Sharing means that First Nations are active and involved in any development that could affect our traditional territories. We are not anti-development but any development must be responsible, sustainable and we must have a say.

Sharing doesn’t simply mean a cut of the benefits. It means opportunities for jobs, training, skills development and being involved in planning and policy. This strengthens the country and strengthens First Nations. Our people can use these opportunities to slash the cycle of dependency and build our communities and economies. That is a win-win for everybody.
I invite all of you to join with me, with First Nations, on this new national dream towards a better, stronger Canada. There is so much you can do that makes a difference.

Today, for example, is the first National Day of Action to End Violence. As we speak, there are events and activities across the country to raise awareness about preventing violence. We have a postcard on the AFN website that you can download, sign and send to the Prime Minister calling for a national inquiry on missing and murdered Indigenous women.

For those already involved, I thank you. To those thinking about it, there are so many ways you can take the first steps to walk with us. Find the cause that speaks to your heart and get involved. There are many organizations, many websites and groups where you can learn about our issues and find out about activities you can get involved in.

We can join together and work together for a brighter future, in the same way that our ancestors came together with a vision of a nation founded on mutual respect, partnership and sharing.

You, the class of 2012, can be key players in this exciting journey. We can create change in our lifetime. We can create change tomorrow. We can create change, together.

You CAN deliver the change that will allow us to avoid the confrontations of the past and we can DELIVER school and learning for our people that provides the spark igniting the fire of potential in every child.

Kleco, Kleco!