



Healing Path Forward:

**2021 Federal Priorities for Strengthening
and Rebuilding First Nations**

A Commitment to Nation Building

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The Healing Path Forward is a strategic direction toward evolutionary and positive change. First Nations are on the cusp of transformative change. There have been unprecedented investments since the last federal election and First Nations are poised for action on priorities. As the country and globe face the economic challenge of rebuilding following the COVID-19 pandemic, we must ensure First Nations are at the center of this effort and that every single person in this country is aware of how First Nations priorities impact Canada's success.

The Healing Path Forward is about creating a unified effort on longstanding issues that have faced First Nations. The process of rebuilding the strength of our nations has been a long challenge, but our efforts have begun to be recognized—progress is being made, and there is hope for a brighter future. To continue the work of building stronger First Nations and, as a direct consequence, a stronger Canada, the federal parties will need to work in close partnership with First Nations by honouring and respecting our ongoing relationship and working together for the betterment and wellness of our common future.

The Healing Path Forward means any engagement about First Nations' the Inherent and Treaty Rights must fully respect and keep First Nations and jurisdiction central to the dialogue. First Nations continue to uphold our sacred promises and commitments to peace, wellness, friendship, and mutual respect. It is the right thing to do for all levels of government, on behalf of Canadians, to do the same. Those commitments are for as long as the sun shines, the rivers flow and the grasses grow. They have been passed down through generations and are held in ceremonies. First Nations also have rights, title, and jurisdiction, as well as self-government agreements (or Modern Treaties), all of which are recognized under Canadian law. All of these rights are obligations on the Government of Canada. Canada has a great deal of work to do to fulfill its promises to help build safe, vibrant communities and a more prosperous society, for everyone.

The commitments First Nations seek from the next federal government are not new. They are, at the core, about respecting First Nations' jurisdiction, and Treaty rights, and supporting First Nations governments' fiscal capacity to exercise those rights and jurisdictions. They are also about how we can build, together, a better future for everyone in Canada, one that creates greater equity and prepares the country for challenges such as climate change and post-pandemic recovery.

The Healing Path Forward: 2021 Federal Priorities for Strengthening and Rebuilding First Nations plan reflects a shared vision and expression of First Nations' collective priorities at the national level. First Nations seek all federal parties willing, ready, and able to commit to working with our leadership to build a stronger Canada.

The Healing Path Forward means any discussion between the Crown and First Nations must have its starting place with the recognition that we are equals as peoples and nations. The next federal government must welcome First Nations leadership, create space at decision-making tables with the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, and work with First Nations to improve our relationships. The next government also must support First Nations governments to improve the lives of our citizens by guaranteeing equality and equity in socio-economic outcomes. For too long, successive Canadian governments have allowed injustices to build into intergenerational conditions that do not properly honour the true founders of Turtle Island, now known as Canada. When First Nations people are strengthened, then Canada's economy and its social fabric is made stronger, from which we can all enjoy a more prosperous country. We are making progress working in partnership with those who share our vision and respect our rights. We must maintain this momentum.

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The Healing Path Forward means that there must be Truth before Reconciliation. Guaranteeing equality and equity between First Nations and others in Canada will result in growth of the gross domestic product¹ and it will reduce the social costs that arise from keeping people in poverty². It will protect the most vulnerable and empower women and youth who are so critical to economic growth. Building First Nations economies will translate into certainty for investment and increase self-sufficiency and the self-determination of First Nations. It will promote a fairer and stronger Canada for everyone.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) urges all voters in Canada, regardless of political affiliation, to understand First Nations priorities as Canadian's priorities. We know that Canadians agree. Presented throughout this document, the views of Canadians regarding the priorities detailed here show strong support³.

A Canada that respects the rightful place of First Nations will benefit everyone. There is a healing path forward and we can only get there working together.

As detailed in this document, First Nations are seeking commitments from the next federal government to act in five (5) priority areas:

- 1. Truth, Reconciliation and Healing for First Nations and all Canadians**
- 2. Climate and Conservation Leadership with First Nations**
- 3. Economic Growth, Prosperity and Wealth Building for First Nations**
- 4. Promoting Peace by Respecting First Nations' Jurisdiction**
- 5. Rebuilding and Strengthening First Nations**

¹ The National Indigenous Economic Development Board. *The Indigenous Economic Progress Report 2019*. [2019]

² Royal Bank of Canada and CANDO. *The Cost of Doing Nothing: Presentation on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)*. [1997]

³ References to the opinions of Canadians in the text boxes of this document are derived from polls conducted for the Assembly of First Nations by Abacus Research and Nanos Research. Abacus surveyed 3,000 Canadian between June 4 and 8, 2021 using the Lucid exchange platform. The margin of error is +/- 1.76, 19 times out of 20. Nanos conducted an RDD dual frame random telephone survey of 1,028 Canadians, 18 years of age or older, between April 1st and April 3rd, 2021. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.1%, 19 times out of 20.

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1. Truth, Reconciliation and Healing for First Nations and all Canadians

The Healing Path Forward means acknowledging all 'Indian Residential School' survivors and the intergenerational survivors. Anishinabe-Kwe scholar Dr Pamela Toulouse wrote that "100% of First Nations people suffer from Intergenerational Trauma. 100%." We are all survivors, and we are all doing our best to heal and walk forward with dignity.

It was in Te'Kemlups Te Secwepmc, Kamloops, B.C., that Canadians and the world first learned about how 215 innocent children died and were buried in unmarked graves. This is a crime against humanity and a crime against these little children. The United Nations have called this genocide. We call this genocide.

The ground-penetrating radar technology revealed evidence, indisputable proof that crimes were committed. Cowessess First Nation Chief Cadmus Delorme stated that "this is a crime scene." And crimes must be investigated. The criminals must be held to account.

What is equally important is that these little ones were loved. They were cared for by their families and communities when they were forcibly removed, often by the RCMP and Indian Agents. Certainly, it started with government policy. For many Canadians and for people around the world, these recent recoveries of our children - buried nameless, unmarked, lost and without ceremony - are shocking, and unbelievable. NOT FOR US. For decades, we were not believed. Some may still not believe. But today I once again state an undeniable truth: Canada, alongside the Churches, committed genocide against First Nations through our children.

This recovery of our children is not over and there will be many reports to come. People and media have been referring to them as discoveries. These are NOT 'discoveries' - these are 'recoveries.' It's time to find our children and bring them home. This agonizing exercise and grim reminder of this country's history will continue until we recover all our family members and bring them home to rest in peace, in proper ceremony.

Even after the institutions of assimilation and genocide closed, survivors and thousands of families continued to suffer - no one talked about the horrors they witnessed - so children, grandchildren and descendants are now coming to terms with the fall out.



CANADIANS SAY:

"58% of Canadians agree the residential school policy was genocide. This is 3 times the number that disagree."



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All levels of government must work with urgency on the issue of the burial sites across this country and in finding ways to heal the trauma that our peoples have experienced for generations.

Each party must outline how they will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with First Nations to rebuild, recover, heal and move forward together.

We ask every Canadian to stand with First Nations as we continue this painful but important work. I ask that you listen, learn and reflect on the history we share as a country.

The AFN calls on all political parties and candidates to endorse the following commitments:

- Invest in an updated process for healing, a National Indigenous Healing organization that must continue the important work of the former Aboriginal Healing Foundation.
- Canada must fully implement all Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action that fall under the responsibility of the federal government and develop a joint action plan with First Nations to ensure that all calls to action are implemented.
- If we examine the costs of establishing the 139 recognized institutions, with 1300 in all, it would be in the billions by today's standard. These institutions had a genocidal purpose. We need to reverse that process and it is incumbent upon all political parties to commit to investing the equal amount of energy and resources to strengthening and rebuilding First Nations.
- Provide sufficient funding and other resources to those First Nations affected by unmarked or mass burial sites of children at former residential schools.
- Provide long-term, sustainable, and sufficient funding toward a better future through the ongoing healing of First Nations.

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2. Climate and Conservation Leadership with First Nations

The Healing Path Forward means addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and its structural drivers, in order to rebalance the relationship with all of creation. As record heatwaves and wildfires devastate Canada, it is clear there is no more pressing issue for all of humanity. In 2019, Chiefs across Canada recognized this issue, working together to declare a First Nations Climate Emergency, recognizing that "...climate change constitutes a state of emergency for our lands, waters, animals, and peoples." New commitments in the Government of Canada's climate plan supports this role, committing to "...position Indigenous climate leadership as a cornerstone of a strengthened climate plan." The development of an AFN National Climate Strategy will ensure that First Nations governance, laws, and priorities breathe life into such approach.

The AFN calls on all political parties and candidates to endorse the following commitments:

- Reduce emissions in Canada by 60% below 2010 levels by 2030 and reach net-zero emissions by 2050.
- Work with First Nations as full and effective partners in the implementation of the Government of Canada's climate plan and related decision-making processes, including with respect to their fair share of revenues generated from greenhouse gas pollution pricing.
- Work in full partnership with First Nations in the implementation of Indigenous water rights in their territories.
- Support the application of First Nations perspectives and knowledge systems to assess the impact of climate change on all other issues by including First Nations at all decision-making tables that impact land and water.
- Seek out and utilize First Nations leadership, deep knowledge and experience of the environment in mobilizing against climate change.
- Support the establishment and maintenance of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas and embed permanent support for Indigenous Guardians to assist in achieving Canada's international biodiversity commitments and integrate efforts toward conservation, reconciliation, and climate action.
- Affirm and support the rights of First Nations to develop and implement their own environmental regulations to manage traditional territories and resources, such as efforts related to the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA) review, as well as to address the Environmental Regulatory Gap on Reserve.



CANADIANS SAY:

"71% of Canadians believe First Nations should have a role in the response to climate change, 43% believe that should be a "major role"."

3. Economic Growth, Prosperity and Wealth Building for First Nations

The Healing Path Forward means recognizing that health and resiliency are tied to prosperity and wealth building. Being a part of the wage economy allows families and communities to build pride through a strong work ethic that has always existed in our people. Further when communities build wealth, they almost always invest in local programs and services that encourage growth and independence and so the cycle of health grows and continues. Ultimately, self-sufficient First Nations are self-determining. The AFN continues to focus on advocating for economic stimulus support for First Nations businesses and flexibility for the First Nations labour market. The economic impacts of the pandemic were devastating for many. First Nations, already among the most vulnerable, were particularly hard hit. The pandemic continues to affect new development projects, trade, natural resources development, human resources development, procurement, fisheries, tourism, agriculture, connectivity, transportation, and other sectors. Sustained investments are needed to support growth and sustainability. As businesses continue to adapt to the changing economic landscape, access to affordable and reliable broadband will be vital.



CANADIANS SAY:

Canadians are three times more likely to say that addressing economic inequalities between First Nations citizens and others in Canada will increase the speed of economic recovery than the contrary.

Additionally, First Nations governments require the fiscal capacity to exercise their jurisdiction, rights and title, to improve the quality of programs and services offered to their citizens, to improve governance systems that help ensure the most effective use of the fiscal capacity that does exist, and to close the gap in socio-economic outcomes between First Nations citizens and others in Canada.

The AFN calls on all political parties and candidates to endorse the following commitments:

- Provide resources for First Nations to develop post-pandemic recovery plans that have a strong component for economic, health and social recovery.
- Establish a National First Nations Economic Growth, Prosperity and Wealth-Building Table between First Nations and federal partners.
- Support and coordinate community-driven legislative and regulatory forward-looking solutions that can assist First Nations to move beyond a government funded economic base to true economic self-sufficiency for First Nations that is based on their surrounding economies and resources.



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- Meetings with provincial and territorial leaders to negotiate trilateral revenue sharing agreements with First Nations.
- A statutory funding agreement that First Nations may opt into that will guarantee equality and equity in socio-economic outcomes between First Nations people and others in Canada.
- Enhanced First Nations participation and investments in the agricultural industry through increased capacity supports and venture capital investments to address existing inequalities, inequities and barriers First Nations face in entering and expanding businesses within the agriculture agri-foods sector.
- Recognize First Nations Jurisdiction over cannabis and remove regulatory barriers that exclude First Nations from the marketplace.
- Direct and targeted funding to address systemic discrimination against First Nations women and gender diverse individuals to enhance access to equity and support business development initiatives.

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4. Promoting Peace by Respecting First Nations' Jurisdiction

The Healing Path Forward means committing to Peace with First Nations. Too often we have seen the negative consequences of conflict. For Canada's economy, conflict has meant the loss of investor confidence and lost opportunities. For First Nations, conflict has too often meant the loss of hope and the loss of life. This conflict is due to a lack of respect of First Nations' rights; it is the legacy of the colonialism and paternalism historically exercised by the Government of Canada. It is a legacy for which Canada has offered apologies and promises. It is time that those promises were made concrete through commitments to recognize, respect and promote First Nations rights while, at the same time, providing justice for First Nations citizens both within Canada's legal framework and through the recognition of First Nations laws. By doing so, conflict is lessened, investor confidence is restored, and Canada's economic future brightens, for everyone.

The AFN calls on all political parties and candidates to endorse the following commitments:

- Hold a Council of Federation meeting with First Nations Leaders from across Canada.
- Enter into fulsome and meaningful dialogue on how to respect First Nations' Sovereignty and Jurisdiction.



CANADIANS SAY:

By a margin of more than 2 to 1, including First Nations as partners in resource development projects decreases the uncertainty of development decisions.

5. Rebuilding and Strengthening First Nations

The Healing Path Forward means that all sectors of First Nation communities are supported through guarantees of equality and equity. The AFN has worked on legislation co-development processes with respect to Indigenous languages, child and family wellbeing. The pandemic made it evident that First Nations need more control over their healthcare to better serve our populations and to eliminate systemic racism in healthcare against our peoples, which is why First Nations also have been working with the Government of Canada to co-develop First Nations' distinction-based health legislation. More recently, Bill C-15 was passed on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These are all part of the ongoing effort to confirm Canada's commitment to redesign its legal framework whereby First Nations governments can control the programs and services offered to their citizens.

With respect to the many sectors that First Nations administer, the AFN calls on all political parties and candidates to endorse the following commitments:

Self-Government

- Fully implement all elements of self-government agreements as specified in those agreements

Treaty Rights

- Create a federal Treaty Commissioner's Office to support the full implementation of Treaties.

Land Rights and Title

- As part of reparations for First Nations, at the very least, return crown lands to First Nations.
- Work with First Nations to re-design the Additions-to-Reserve Policy ensure impartial, timely and fair resolutions to outstanding specific claim, with the goal of ensuring First Nations can effectively and efficiently grow their communities and participate in the Canadian economy, generating wealth for all.



CANADIANS SAY:

"Almost 9 in ten Canadians support the Government of Canada ensuring First Nations have services matching the level of service provided to others in Canada."

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Women, Youth and 2SLGBTQIA+ Peoples

- In partnership with the provinces and territories, ensure that the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls are fully implemented.
- Fully engage women, youth and 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples through empowerment, capacity building and leadership development.

Justice and Policing

- Engage in a joint process with First Nations to develop and implement a statutory framework recognizing First Nations Police Services as essential services with equitable funding and capacity supports.
- Support the development and implementation of community safety and security action plans to ensure that all First Nations people – women, men, girls, boys, 2SLGBTQIA individuals and others – are free from violence.
- Support the development and implementation of restorative First Nation justice systems and implement actions to end over-representation of First Nations people in the criminal justice and correctional systems.
- Ensure Indigenous people are appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada as well as other decision-making bodies.
- Acknowledge, affirm and respect First Nations laws as part of the legal system on a footing equal to common and civil law.
- Repeal the Safe Communities Act and eliminate mandatory minimum sentences.

UNDRIP

- Ensure that the action plan for Bill C-15, *An Act respecting the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, respects First Nations' Sovereignty and jurisdiction.
- Ensure all policies, legislation, and operational practices are consistent with First Nations and Treaty rights, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Canada's international obligations.

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Health and Wellness

- Continue work to affirm First Nations jurisdiction over all aspects of health and wellness services for their citizens, while affirming that the Treaty right to health is a non-negotiable foundation for any such discussions.
- Work with First Nations, early and throughout the budget cycle, to identify ten-year projections for new federal investments into the continuum of First Nations health and wellness services across the lifespan, including mental health.
- Identify, in collaboration with First Nations, funding that would adequately support existing service delivery processes in health promotion and prevention, primary care, wellness, and health systems transformation.
- Collaborate with First Nations to identify and implement strategies to address anti-Indigenous Racism in Health Care Systems in Canada.
- Co-develop and implement a National Substance Misuse Strategy addressing the opioid and methamphetamine crises.
- Recognize and support, First Nations led health interventions that are grounded in culture to support a natural continuum of care across the lifespan, including full funding for treatment centres that incorporate land-based healing and traditional ceremony.

Infrastructure and Clean Drinking Water

- Repeal the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act and replacing it with First Nations-led legislation.
- Fund 100% of actual operations and maintenance costs for all federally funded assets as an integral part of a clear action plan that includes eliminating remaining boil water advisories on First Nations.
- Co-develop and fund a National First Nations Infrastructure Modernization Strategy that will focus on building sustainable, renewable, and climate-resilient infrastructure for First Nations.
- Close the infrastructure gap between First Nations and the rest of Canada by 2030.
- Ensure that First Nations have access to sufficient infrastructure stimulus funds for shovel-ready projects in First Nations communities as part of a post-pandemic recovery plan for First Nations.

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Housing and Homelessness

- Provide the full short, medium and long-term investments needed to implement the 10-year National First Nations Housing and Related Infrastructure Strategy developed by First Nations with the Government of Canada, including long-term funding to support First Nations and their regional organizations to participate in discussions with the Government of Canada on the transfer of control of housing.
- Make significant investments in Social Housing programs for First Nations.
- Work with First Nations to develop a National Action Plan to address and eliminate First Nations homelessness.
- Work with First Nations to fully implement and fund a National Action Plan to address and eliminate First Nations homelessness.
- Support First Nations' efforts to care for and provide services to their members experiencing homelessness no matter where they live.
- Support green housing initiatives that are developed at the community level to meet the particular needs of First Nations where housing challenges are complex and very different from what most Canadians face.

Education and Lifelong Learning

- Support an investment in First Nations students for costs associated with learning loss and recovery due to COVID-19, with a focus on mental health, numeracy, and literacy.
- Invest in constructing, renovating, and redesigning First Nations schools and teacherages to address needs such as the 140 First Nations schools that are overcrowded and require additions and the 46 in need of total replacement.
- Invest in an additional 78,000 First Nations graduates, helping to guarantee equality and equity in post-secondary educational attainment.
- Invest in transitional/adult education as 2016 Census data shows that 36% of First Nations population aged 25-64 have not attained a high school diploma.
- Improved access to funding and supports for First Nations post-secondary educational institutions.

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Indigenous Languages

- Fully fund the implementation of the *Indigenous Languages Act* to increase the number of language learners and speakers to support the preservation, revitalization, normalization, and fluency of First Nations languages, centered on the principle of Indigenous control.

Child and Family Wellbeing

- Honour Canada's responsibilities to ensure the wellbeing of First Nations children with no further appeals from the rulings of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal on First Nations Child and Family Services and Jordan's Principle.
- Ensure First Nations are fully and properly involved in the creation of a Canada-wide system of early learning and childcare, including committing funds to support First Nations capacity to lead and engage in this process.
- Support First Nation-led bilateral agreements over child welfare jurisdiction.

Basic Income

- Ensure that no First Nations citizens are left behind by supporting recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic through investments to support First Nations-led poverty reduction efforts, the creation of measurement tools, data, and research.
- Work with First Nations to reform income assistance, including increased rates for individuals and increased funding for pre-employment supports and explore options for a guaranteed basic income for First Nations citizens.

Fisheries

- Support the development of a mandate and framework for a National Secretariat to promote the implementation of all Supreme Court of Canada decisions related to fisheries.
- Recognize and respect the authorities of First Nations to govern their fisheries resources in their territories
- Recognize and respect the equivalency of First Nations laws with Canada's fisheries regulations over fisheries resources in First Nations' territories.



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Conclusion

Polling shows the majority of Canadians support First Nations priorities. First Nations voters themselves can determine the outcome of this election. And Canada will be economically and socially stronger under a federal government that reflects an understanding of this reality.

The commitments detailed here are the steps needed to restore the relationship envisioned in the treaties that built Canada, the means by which First Nations can rebuild our nations, and the means by which we can all build a stronger, fairer and better nation, together. The AFN calls on all parties to support these commitments in the upcoming election and to take immediate action on those commitments during the mandate that the election will provide to the next Government of Canada.



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