
STATEMENT

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Office of the Premier

PREMIER'S STATEMENT ON THE NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

VICTORIA – Premier Gordon Campbell made the following statement today in the legislature regarding the New Relationship with Aboriginal People:

[Check against delivery]

“Mr. Speaker, we are privileged to be joined today by the members of the BC First Nations Leadership Council, representing the BC Assembly of First Nations, the First Nations Summit and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

“On behalf of all members, I want to thank the Leadership Council and First Nations elders, chiefs and communities across B.C. for helping to forge a new relationship with our government, for all British Columbians. I want to thank you for your dedication, resolve and perseverance in working to build a better British Columbia for all of our citizens.

“Together, we are committed to building a constructive, new government-to-government relationship, based on mutual respect, recognition, and reconciliation. We are working to build a new, vital, modern British Columbia. One that sees its true potential in the strength of its people, cultural diversity, common heritage, and land and resources.

“We are committed to pursuing new horizons of hope and opportunity, by moving beyond the barriers that have held us back for far too long. We are committed to opening up new dialogue, new understanding and new access to resources – to close the gaps in health, education, housing and economic opportunity that have failed Aboriginal people throughout Canada’s entire history.

“Mr. Speaker, this is my government’s commitment to British Columbia’s Aboriginal people. It is the also the Government of Canada’s solemn undertaking, as a signatory of the Transformative Change Accord it signed last November with our Province and the Leadership Council representing the First Nations of British Columbia.

“That tri-partite agreement stands as a binding declaration of our governments’ mutual resolve to act upon the vision and commitment of all first ministers and national Aboriginal leaders, as set out in the Kelowna agreement. That document was the product of an unprecedented government-to-government collaboration. It was agreed to by the Prime Minister of Canada and all Premiers as an article of good faith and as a compact to restore trust, hope and confidence with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

“More importantly, it is ‘a shared commitment to action by all parties’ – including the Government of Canada – that speaks to ‘a 10-year dedicated effort to improve the quality of life of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.’

“On Tuesday, the new federal government tabled its first budget since that historic agreement. This government recognizes and appreciates that that budget includes a considerable amount of new funding in each of the next two years for improvements to housing and other services for Aboriginal people. Indeed, the amount set aside for new housing, water and other infrastructure over next two years is nearly half of the amount anticipated within the next five years under the Kelowna agreement. It is also noteworthy that the federal government has reiterated its commitment to close the gaps in education, health determinants and economic opportunity.

“It is difficult at this point to precisely quantify how much new funding is being budgeted pursuant to that agreement, because it has nowhere been identified as such. However, it is undeniable that this effort will take a multi-year commitment that stretches far beyond the next two years. I understand that the new government may well have its own ideas on how to best advance the objectives set in out in that document.

“It must be stated unequivocally that this will require significant financial resources beyond what has been committed to date. After an 18-month cross-Canada collaborative effort, the identified amount for the next five years was \$5 billion.

“The trust relationship that was the core of the Kelowna meeting demands decisive action and unflagging affirmation. As I said at that meeting, the honour of the Crown is at stake. The Crown, represented by its federal, provincial and territorial governments, must uphold that trust and act honourably. It must respect the letter, spirit and content of the undertaking of all 14 of Canada’s first ministers only five short months ago.

“Today, I want there to be no doubt where this Premier and this government stands. We stand behind our word. We stand firm on the commitment we made in Kelowna and to the Transformative Change Accord. And we will stand up strongly to ensure both of those documents are honoured in British Columbia.

“We cannot stand passively by and let this product of unprecedented consensus and collaboration wither and die for lack of Crown commitment. This government will work with the federal government to achieve the goals set out in Kelowna. We will work with the Leadership Council and Aboriginal people on- and off-reserve to ensure that the Crown’s commitment to closing the gaps is met – one way or another.

“We know that will demand new approaches, new partnerships, new revenue sharing and significant new stable, long-term resources. I meant what I said at that forum – and our government will deliver on its promise for all British Columbians.

“While there may be disappointment in this part of the federal budget, there is also significant room for hope. The Prime Minister has reiterated his clear commitment to reform intergovernmental fiscal relations that will ensure stable, long-term funding mechanisms that better serve all citizens.

“Municipal and First Nations governments also need to be considered as part of that undertaking. British Columbia will put that issue squarely on the table in addressing the fiscal imbalance at the first ministers meeting later this year. It will pursue new vehicles that are less susceptible to the uncertain winds of political change. Treaties can be instrumental in that regard, and this government will pursue them with renewed vigour and new flexibility.

“The future of First Nations as a true partner in Canada, with constitutionally protected rights and title, warrants a fundamental rethinking of confederation. All governments, including First Nations governments, need to know they can count on stable revenue streams to provide the services for which they are responsible. That was implicit in the five-year commitment made in Kelowna. Long-term funding must be found, focused and committed if we are to meet the goal of closing the gaps for Aboriginal people within the next decade.

“Mr. Speaker, I characterized that agreement as Canada’s ‘moment of truth.’ It was our time to do something that has eluded our nation for 138 years. It was our chance to end the disparities in health, education, housing and economic opportunity. All first ministers rose to that moment of truth alongside Canada’s Aboriginal leaders to undertake that challenge. Having made that extraordinary national commitment, any unilateral reversal will invite consequences that only make us poorer as a nation.

“We have seen the consequences of Canada’s collective political failure to its first citizens. We know the toll it has taken on Aboriginal children and families – and there are no more excuses.

“We have seen the consequences of shattered hope spawned by over a century of betrayal, denial and negligence by governments of every stripe. There are no more excuses.

“We have seen the consequences of confrontation, litigation and opportunities lost. We know too well the consequences of frustration, anger, mistrust and despair. There are no more excuses.

“So I say to the federal government – this is Canada’s moment of truth. I believe that the Prime Minister and his government are committed to closing the gaps identified in health, education, housing and economic opportunity. The Prime Minister and his government have committed to the objectives and principles of the agreement reached in Kelowna and hundreds of millions of dollars have been earmarked to advance them in the next two years.

“Let us confirm the new partnerships that were promised, let us confirm long-term funding and let us find the strength and the commitment to meet this challenge on behalf of all Canadians. Let us talk about how to invest that money to maximize its benefit to Aboriginal people. Let us talk about the results we will see in the lives of Aboriginal children and communities across this country as we build a stronger Canada.

“And let’s move forward together, guided by the light of hope that was lit by all governments in Kelowna, to build a better Canada for Aboriginal Canadians.

“Thank you.”

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