

Assembly of First Nations

Premier Gordon Campbell

July 11, 2006

Check Against Delivery

First, it is a pleasure to be with you here in the traditional territories of the Coast Salish people, and I want to say to Chief Ernie Campbell of the Musqueam Nation, Chief Leah George-Wilson of the Tsleil-Waututh and Chief Ian Campbell of the Squamish Nation thank you for welcoming us here, welcoming me here and welcoming First Nations from across our country to this place for this week for these deliberations, because they will be very important to the future of British Columbia and to Canada.

To have 630 First Nations from across Canada come to these territories, to this place, to discuss your future and the direction you would like to go is a true honour for us in British Columbia, and I want to start today by saying thank you. Thank you, first, to the Assembly of First Nations, but more importantly, thank you to the elders who have persisted and who have kept a vision of the future of their First Nations, who have relentlessly pursued keeping their culture, traditions and their belief in their First Nations alive so that today we can all share the bounty of those traditions and that culture.

To the elders who join us today, I say thank you for coming to this place and thank you for the example that you have set, because it is an example of honour, an example of commitment, an example that leads future generations.

And I want to say thank you to the Assembly of First Nations today. I was elected, as Chief Atleo said, in 2001. Shortly after the last election of the Assembly of First Nations, your national chief, Phil Fontaine, asked if he could come and speak with me in my office and talk about your plans for the future of Canada and First Nations in Canada. From that has built a strong relationship that I believe has helped touch the hearts of First Nations across the country and, indeed, the hearts of many of my colleagues at the elected level of office and provincial governments.

Our first significant accomplishment, I believe, was in 2004, when we brought together First Nations leadership from across Canada and we said it was time for us to deal directly with First Nations health. We said it was time to focus resources and time and attention on the health of our First Nations and our First Nations children so that indeed First Nations people could have the same future, the same healthy future, as every other Canadian. And the Assembly of First Nations, after months and months of work and tireless consultation with First Nations across the country, came with a solid, practical, sensible plan that would help us accomplish that goal.

It is that leadership that you take as an assembly that is so critical to our future in our country and in our province. It is leadership that recognizes challenges openly, that faces the facts of today and asks “How do we build a better tomorrow together?”

Over the last year, we have worked in our province with the leadership council to build a new relationship. I should say to all of the members of the leadership council how much I appreciate their guidance and their vision as we strive to develop a new relationship in British Columbia that recognizes the goals that we set for ourselves and set for every British Columbian. They're goals we set for First Nations kids as well as for non-First Nations kids, they're goals we set for our entire province working together, and I can tell all of those of you assembled here today that without the leadership, the commitment, the dedication and the strength of purpose of B.C.'s leadership council, we would not have made the small progress we have made today.

On behalf of all of the people who live in our province, let me recognize, acknowledge and say thank you to the leadership council for your vision and your direction. You've been exceptional.

I had the opportunity last fall to go across the country, meeting with many of you in your traditional territories or in the regions from which you come, and I want to say thank you for also welcoming me and my colleagues with open arms. You were straightforward. You lent your expertise and your knowledge to us as we strived to map out a plan for First Nations in Canada and for Inuit and for Métis people that would ensure that everybody who is on this land shares in the bounty of this land.

Last November, all of us gathered together in Kelowna as leaders and representatives of our governments — provincial government, federal government, First Nations leaders and the Assembly of First Nations — and we said we would work together to close the gaps that currently and obviously exist. We must turn our back on the denial of the past. For 139 years we have not recognized the true contribution of First Nations and Aboriginal people across our country. In British Columbia we are determined not just to recognize but to reconcile with First Nations, to build a new relationship that opens up worlds of opportunities and recognizes the strength of First Nations in British Columbia in making us the place that we are as a province.

We take small steps, and I can imagine the frustration that is felt by many who have worked so long to get us to our destination, but we are acting to take step after step after step in each area of endeavour to ensure that over the next ten years, we accomplish our goal.

We signed a transformative change accord in our province which says quite clearly that we are committed – Minister Christensen and I and my government and the First Nations Leadership Council – we are committed, with the federal government, to closing the gaps that currently exist between First Nations and Aboriginal people in Canada and the rest of Canada.

I was meeting with the Governor General last spring, and she talked about removing the solitudes. For too long in Canada we have talked of just two solitudes, and you know and I know there really have been three solitudes. Our task — which is shared by the Governor General; it's shared by all of us, I believe — is to eliminate those solitudes, to strengthen us on the basis of our diversity, on the basis of honouring the traditions and the cultures of all who have come here and of recognizing the enormous contribution that First Nations have made. Since last November we have taken steps to put that transformative change accord into place.

Just last week we signed a historic tripartite agreement on education. That agreement says First Nations children should be educated first and foremost by First Nations communities. First Nations can decide on certification for teachers, on graduation requirements, on curriculum. First Nations can decide for their children what is best for their children as they build the education their children will want to have and they will want their children to have, to take full advantage of the world that is in front of us. What a long journey that was. It started in 1972 with the National Indian Brotherhood saying First Nations people should be given responsibility to ensure that their children got the education they deserved.

We have made small progress over the last few years in our province. We have watched as First Nations graduation rates have gone up. But they are still far behind non-First Nations graduation rates. The example is there for us to see, if we are willing to open our eyes to see it. When the Nisga'a assumed responsibility for the education of their young people, we watched as those young people's graduation rate increased by almost 20 percent. There is a lesson there for all of us. And the tripartite agreement gives us a chance, an opportunity to assure that First Nations young people get the traditional education, the full, complete and whole education that they need to take pride and have confidence in their future.

Chief Ed John was with us at the signing of that agreement. He was there with his grandson. His grandson's name is Connor. Connor came home one day and Chief Ed John said to Connor, "How are you doing in school today?" Connor said to him "I'm brilliant." Ed said to him: "You're brilliant?" He said "Yes, grandfather, I'm brilliant. I'm more brilliant than you are."

The important thing about that is here's a young First Nations child who says "I am brilliant. I am me. I am Connor. I have strength in who I am and the family that I come through and the First Nation I come from, and there is nothing that I can't accomplish." That is a gift that we want all First Nations children to feel across our country. I believe this tripartite agreement is an opportunity for us in British Columbia, at least, to set the stage for that, to set out a course that will allow that to happen.

Education is the key to our futures, for all Canadians, for all First Nations and Aboriginal people. Education is the linchpin of opportunity that lies ahead of us. It is the best preventative health care program we've discovered. It is the best economic development program that we have developed. It is the gift to people to be the best that they can be in

the world in which they live, and we have taken a small step in that direction since last November.

Last November, under the leadership of the Assembly of First Nations, there was a call for an improvement in housing conditions across our country and improvement of community conditions, and we have seen steps taken. There is a new water improvement program which will be put in place across the country. In British Columbia there are seven communities that we will start with.

We have just recently had a major transfer of the administration of social housing resources to British Columbia from our federal government. In turn, we will transfer 2,660 off-reserve Aboriginal social housing units to the Aboriginal housing management association, because we believe that the best people to manage Aboriginal affairs are First Nations and Aboriginal people themselves.

As we look to the future we all know that it is not just education, it is not just housing; it is health care that is critical to each of us. What currently exists in First Nations is simply not acceptable in a country like Canada. There is a huge gap in health care determinants across the country. In British Columbia we have a ten-year plan to eliminate that gap. It is not acceptable to me nor to you nor to any other British Columbian that there is a 400-percent greater incidence of type 2 diabetes in First Nations people than non-First Nations. It is not acceptable that life expectancies are seven-and-a-half years shorter for First Nations people than non-First Nations. It is also not acceptable that we have not had a health service that responds directly to the needs of First Nations, takes benefits from the traditional medicines and traditional healing of First Nations and brings it together with our modern medicine and our modern practices. We can do that in Canada. We are committed to doing that in Canada.

On behalf of the Premiers, I will be inviting First Nations leadership to come and join us this fall in British Columbia as we have a second health summit to determine the plans we have, what we can learn from one another and how we can make even greater progress in terms of health care. And all of those efforts once again touch back to the younger people that we have in our communities.

Today First Nations' athletes are participating in the North American Indigenous Games in Denver, Colorado. They can be an example that we hold up to First Nations communities across the country. They are our leaders in healthy living.

And in case you doubted how good our athletes were, already at the North American Indigenous Games in Denver we have won 102 medals from British Columbia First Nations' athletes alone.

I was proud to be joined by the leaders of the Musqueam, the Tsleil-Waututh, the Squamish and the Lillooet First Nations when we went to Prague in 2003 and said to the world we invite you to come and host an Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2010 here in

Canada, in British Columbia, in the traditional territories of the Squamish, the Tsleil-Waututh, the Lillooet and the Musqueam people.

And it made a difference to me when I was in Torino and, at the beginning of the invitation, First Nations chiefs were on the stage inviting the world to their traditional territories, as they welcomed Europeans when they first came to these shores and said welcome. Our chiefs held out their arms and said welcome, welcome to Canada, welcome to British Columbia, welcome to the traditional territories of the Coast Salish people.

Our goal in 2010 is to be sure that standing on that podium, on some podium for some event, will be First Nations' athletes that we can all look to with pride and with confidence, and that young First Nations children will follow their example.

The Olympics that we host here is not just Canada's Olympics; it is not just British Columbia's Olympics; it is the Olympics of the four host First Nations that will be part of it.

Each of us can do some small thing to make our health better. We can be more active; we can encourage more physical activity; we can walk more. We can follow more of the traditional actions that, in fact, many of your First Nations have carried out. Learning from one another, feeling the land, walking on the land, hiking through the land: all of those are part of making us a healthier community to live in.

As we strive to do that, we know that economic activity is critically important. I am very proud of the First Nations' leadership in British Columbia who've done such an exceptional job of being part of the economic resurgence that we felt here.

The Blueberry River economic benefits agreement which we've signed ensures opportunities for First Nations in energy, in mineral activity and petroleum resources. The Osoyoos revenue-sharing framework which provides opportunities for the Nk'Mip Resort ensures that there are jobs for all the people of that community. We have undertaken forest and range agreements with 106 First Nations, with access to 17 million cubic metres of timber and more than \$120 million in revenue.

We have doubled the first citizens' fund in our province. There's \$100 million provided to the new relationship trust, which is under the management of the First Nations' leadership council. We've committed additional resources to save Aboriginal languages. All of those are parts of building a new relationship, a better and a brighter future for First Nations across our province and — it is my hope — across our country.

So today, as I stand before you, I stand again to say thank you to the leadership that has brought us to this day. Thank you to the elders who created the opportunities upon which we can all stand and move forward.

It is often easy to say what we have not done. It is often easy to stand aside and say we can do better.

The true partnership that we are trying to build is a partnership that recognizes that as we build a new relationship, there will be difficult days. There will be times when we disagree. There will be times when, purely by accident, we don't connect with one another in the way we should. But I have a great sense of confidence in the leadership of First Nations people across this province.

I should tell you I have a great sense of confidence in the leadership of the Assembly of First Nations because your leadership is based on values that are timeless. It is based on the values of service. It is based on the values of reconciliation and understanding and recognition.

Just a few weeks ago we welcomed back to British Columbia a Haisla totem that has been out of our province and out of its traditional place in Haisla territories for decades. Because of the commitment, because of the time, because of the vision of the Haisla leadership, we were able to repatriate that totem back to the Haisla people. We were able to take that pole and put it back in front of Haisla young people in their village and traditional territories so they can see it and feel the strength of that spirit that was given to that pole by their ancestors.

I started by saying thank you to your elders of the First Nations. And I'd like to close with that.

The gift we give as we turn our eyes to the future is a gift that recognizes the strength of First Nations in the past. It fully recognizes and embraces the problems and the challenges that we face today, but it says that working together in partnership, building understanding in the spirit of reconciliation and respect, there is nothing that we cannot accomplish.

We have set our sights on a goal. The goal is to close the gap – the educational gaps, the healthcare gaps, the housing and community gaps, and the gaps between communities that have existed for far too long. In British Columbia we are committed to closing those gaps.

We will pursue that goal relentlessly, guided by First Nations leadership, guided by First Nations people. And in being our guides, they accept the responsibility of leadership, but we also have the opportunity of opening up a whole new world to the generations that follow. That is your ancestors' and our ancestors' gift to us.

Let us move forward together so we can give the same gift to the next generation that will follow. Let us ensure that the next generation has an even better life to live.

There's a philosopher who once said: "Whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

The Assembly of First Nations has helped us begin. Let us work together, let us be bold, let us be committed to one another, and we will accomplish your goals for First Nations across our country.

Thank you very much.