



Re-setting Our Relationship: Achieving Real Change

NATIONAL CHIEF SHAWN A-IN-CHUT ATLEO

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We are gathered here on an historic day – an historic day in the midst of urgent needs and demands on us all.

On behalf of our First Nations leaders here and across Canada, we greet the Crown in the spirit our ancestors, with sincerity and with the pride of all of our Indigenous Nations, at this Gathering of our leaders and yours re-calling our earliest interactions.

(Nuu chah nulth)

Let us begin, the way our people do, by acknowledging this territory, Algonquin territory. Meegwetch to Elder Bertha Commonda and the leaders of the Algonquin nation here. It was the Algonquins who greeted newcomers to their lands on the shores of the Ottawa River in front of us here. Bertha and today's Algonquin Chiefs carry forward that tradition of leadership.

Their Excellencies, Governor General David Johnston and Mrs. Johnston's presence are an essential feature of our gathering. It reflects the solemn commitments made to uphold the Honour of the Crown. Your participation recalls the sacred alliance between our ancestors, the leaders of the First Nations and the British Crown.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper let me express my personal thanks to you for the leadership you have shown in making this historic Gathering possible. Together all the leaders here gathered – the Ministers, Members of Parliament, Senators and the hundreds of First Nations Chiefs – are making a solemn and public commitment to our people and to all Canadians to this new beginning. We must not fail.

Today must mark the beginning of renewal – the beginning of realizing our shared potential foretold in the visions of our ancestors. But the proof of our commitment will begin tomorrow, and in the weeks and months ahead, demonstrating that **this time, this generation of leaders**, will not fail to make the changes we all know are urgently needed.

I understand that there will be some who regard today's events with scepticism. I know there will be Canadian and First Nations people who will see this as merely another event promising much and delivering little. I understand those feelings, I respect that scepticism. It would be disrespectful of the suffering of our peoples over two centuries of agreements followed by broken promises, if I did not.

There will be others who say, why do you need this meeting? Why not just get on with it?

My answer is very simple – because first we must repair the trust that has been broken. To renew the partnership we need to rebuild the trust on which it must be based.

It is up to us – to all of us – to ensure that this time we deliver new hope and new opportunity, not the bitter ashes of disappointment to our peoples. I pledge myself to the task, to the hard work ahead, to full acceptance of the responsibility and accountability that First Nations have in this new beginning. I respect the commitment made by the Prime Minister on behalf of the Government of Canada. We have made promises in public today before all our peoples. Their disappointment, if we were to fail to win real progress, would be powerful and understandable.

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Today's Gathering reminds that our leaders then had the courage and the wisdom to fight for a vision – a better future delivered through partnership and alliance. Our Treaties are the sacred proof of that vision and that shared commitment.

On a day such as this it is important to recall those leaders and their courage.

Indigenous Nations were powerful – politically, economically and militarily. Our Nations were sovereign and recognized as such. Leaders of our Nations AND those from Europe approached these relations with openness, confidence and conviction to secure our collective futures. First Nations communities stood shoulder to shoulder with newcomers. We ensured their survival through our generosity and sharing our wisdom of the land.

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 built on decades of Treaty making in the East, codified the Crown's obligations and established Treaty making as an essential requirement for obtaining access to our lands, to our resources. The Royal Proclamation was a direct result of concern over Pontiac's rebellion and the need to assure Indigenous Nations that our land rights would be secure under the British Crown.

It is no exaggeration to say that without the courage and military skills of First Nation leaders and warriors in the War of 1812 that followed, Canada might be a very different place today. Our ancestors were central to every campaign and to the ultimate victory.

Among the many breaches of that commitment was the Indian Act in 1876. Built on the disgraceful premise of our inferiority, aimed at assimilation and the destruction of our cultures – it was a complete abrogation of the partnership between respectful nations. Largely unchanged, it remains a painful obstacle to re-establishing any form of meaningful partnership.

It is well past time that we began to undo the damage that Act has inflicted on our peoples, and to our partnership. For, from it grew the reserve system, the tragedy of residential schools and offensive prohibitions on our cultural and spiritual practices, a breach of faith that has devastated families and communities ever since. As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concluded over 15 years ago, this legislation has utterly failed our people – and failed Canada.

Despite those attacks on our history, our culture and on the partnership of Treaty peoples – our Nations, our peoples fought on. We continued to support Canada when its survival was under threat. First Nation soldiers were among the first and the most courageous fighting in every major conflict Canada has fought – and this continues today.

Indeed, it was those very veterans who forged our First Nation organizations including the Assembly of First Nations over forty years ago.

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth has affirmed our Treaty relationship. She said, "You may be assured that my Government of Canada recognizes the importance of full compliance with the spirit of your Treaties". Justice Lord Denning, during the constitutional patriation debates, affirmed the integrity and durability of the First Nation - Crown relationship. The 1982 Constitution Act again underlined this historic partnership, including the recognition and affirmation of treaty and inherent rights, as the supreme law of the land. This year marks the 30th anniversary. Rather than an empty box, the Supreme Court of Canada has affirmed section 35 as a "solemn commitment that must be given

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meaningful content”. It is imperative that we move forward on this basis – the basis of recognition and affirmation not denial and extinguishment.

The historic Apology, made possible by the leadership of Prime Minister Harper set the course for reconciliation – a journey together that helped enable today’s gathering.

My own late grandmother, with whom I witnessed the apology, turned to me and said, “... Grandson they are **beginning** to see us.” With the usual clarity and wisdom of our Elders – she summed up the challenge and foretold the work before us.

Just two years ago, Canada endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples. Canada’s endorsement must be taken with full sincerity and must take us forward on the path to reconciliation.

And this work we will undertake together **cannot wait**.

We need only to look to Attawapiskat, Marten Falls, Pikangikum, and St. Theresa Point – among dozens of other communities, on reserve and in our cities, to see the impact of broken promises, the pain of broken lives, the tragedy of lost opportunity. **Our people cannot wait**.

They insist that we stop lurching from crisis to crisis. They ask us to begin anew, to re-build understanding and trust as the way forward.

Indigenous Nations have come together to support one another. Shuswap Grand Chief George Manuel advanced the critical connections between Indigenous peoples – across Canada and around the World. He forged shared vision among First Nations throughout Canada including the monumental campaign to oppose the 1969 white paper. Forty years ago, under his leadership, First Nations called for ‘Indian control of Indian education’.

Today, we stand firm in our convictions and take this vision forward.

I see it in the eyes of our young leaders fighting for change. I hear it in the words of support and encouragement from Canadians in all walks of life – including those of faith groups who have told us they are praying for us today. And I am hopeful in the commitment of our Crown partner to gather with us to begin this important dialogue.

I see it in the work of our leaders who have broken through the barriers of the past to develop exciting new plans in education, health and economic opportunity.

At the center, though, remain our Treaties and our relations, just as they did centuries ago. Respect for and sincere implementation of our Treaty and inherent rights and our agreements is the foundation on which we must build.

Collectively, First Nations leaders made education our top priority. Our kids, just like every Canadian family’s children, deserve good schools. That’s basic, that’s proof of respectful partnership.

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We are committed to financial accountability yet this must be mutual accountability from the Government as well. Former Auditor General Sheila Fraser undertook 32 audits related to First Nations. She concluded that the quality of life conditions had actually gotten worse after her decade of study.

Our people can make an enormous contribution to Canada if we tackle these obstacles. Our people are the youngest, fastest growing community in a Canadian labour force that is rapidly aging. Closing the education and employment gaps for our people would contribute 400 billion dollars to the national economy and save 115 billion in expenditures.

Many of our communities are already moving forward, taking economic matters into their own hands, in sectors like clean energy and technology.

Like a rock that sits in the middle of the road – a boulder that blocks the path of collaboration – remains the Indian Act – along with the age-old structures and policies that administer it and steadfastly resist change.

Today First Nations look to smash this status quo in tangible ways – seeking support for our pursuit of self-determination not the limitations of departmentally driven policy and process. We seek fairness and respect for the rule of law and this means recognition of our land rights and title. Policies of denial and extinguishment have no place today and have cost Canada and First Nations billions in legal fees and lost opportunity as claims languish blocking development of both our economies and that of Canada.

We struggle under layer upon layer of wasteful bureaucratic interference, useless and expensive controls are piled upon our people – squandering tax dollars and frustrating change. Now, we must turn this around – increase the rate and pace of change so that all First Nations children can achieve success.

We see today's Gathering as only the first step in a commitment to a re-newed relationship. **Next** must come new fiscal relationships that guarantee and deliver sustainable, equitable services based on mutually agreed standards and shared responsibility.

We need to build new structures and processes that affirm our relationship and uphold our responsibilities to one another. Structures that guarantee our ability to make the decisions that affect our lives and our lands – agreements that allow us, and the Government of Canada to assume their responsibilities.

Today our young entrepreneurs – together with partners, can generate the economic levers that rebuild our economies. At the same time, we must not forget the basic needs that touch families most closely. As neighbours, we must all find a sense of community and extend a helping hand.

So I can say with confidence, with certainty that our work and the vision of our ancestors is not only possible – it is underway.

If we do our work here together, seriously and sincerely, if we follow it up with shared commitment to maintain and monitor progress toward the goals we set out here, we will make that transformation.

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This is Our Time. Our time to press forward, push harder, to make real change.

This is a struggle for the most vulnerable among us. This is a struggle for First Nation children from coast to coast to coast.

Our success will be Canada's success. Our future is Canada's future.

The step we take today, recalling the words of my late grandmother – an ability to **see** one another – is the first step. This, recognition, opens all possibilities.

The possibility of a renewed dialogue, as partners. A dialogue that honours who we are as nations and honours the spirit and intent of our Treaties. A partnership that realizes the potential of Canada – a country founded on partnership and respect.

We made this country together. We can re-make it in the spirit, and the vision of our ancestors.

I invite all Canadians to join us. Let us ensure, at this historic moment, we do begin to re-build trust, to renew faith, and to re-construct the partnership of nations, so courageously forged by our ancestors centuries ago.

In closing, I paraphrase our collective ancestors, more wise than us, upon concluding their agreement of friendship and alliance. As depicted in the gift we presented today – they took up a silver chain to represent the bond created and said “if ever that Chain should tarnish, slip or break, we must together brighten and strengthen it anew”. This must be our collective pledge to move forward in strength and support to create a better day for our children and all of Canada.

Mr. Prime Minister, First Nations are ready to meet this challenge. We need and want Canada to work with us.