

Address by the Honourable Jane Stewart Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development on the occasion of the unveiling of *Gathering Strength* — *Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*

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Check Against Delivery

Thank you Elders for your guidance and spiritual blessing on us all.

Introduction

Elders, Chiefs, Commissioners, my colleagues, leaders, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen. I have been looking forward to this opportunity to speak to you about the work of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and to speak in the broadest terms about the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country.

We are here to share what we have learned from the Commission and outline the direction we intend to take, using the insight we now have as a result of its powerful report.

Of the many, many individuals and organizations who spoke to the Commissioners, I am reminded today of the testimony of a young person who said: "One of our great spiritual leaders advises us that we must look back seven generations and look forward seven generations and realize that we are the balance." The seventh generation philosophy, a traditional way of thinking and decision making, orients us between past and future. It tells us to be conscious of the lasting impact of our decisions today and to do the very best we can for coming generations.

I feel that today we are indeed the balance. We have been informed by the past, particularly through the work of the Commission, and we can see opportunity in the future. We must proceed with care, because just as we are living with the past, what we do today will stay with us for generations.

Let me begin by putting the Report in context. The Commissioners' terms of reference were exhaustive. They were asked to review everything from the origins and structures of Aboriginal governments and the nature of claim settlements, to the *Indian Act* and social, economic and cultural concerns.

I would like to thank Chief Commissioners Erasmus and Dussault and all of the other Commissioners, staff and witnesses who made the Report of the Royal Commission such a comprehensive body of work. The Commissioners crossed the country gathering the stories of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. Their report spans five volumes, 3,500 pages and makes 440 recommendations. Their task was daunting; so was the outcome. Having received the report, the federal government found itself in the same position as the Commissioners must have been in at the outset, wondering where and how do we begin?

Without question, this historic body of work has had a tremendous personal and institutional impact. From talking with the Commissioners, I know that this work clearly transformed them. It has also transformed the ideas and understanding of others, including myself.

Over the last year, we've come to understand where we've already made progress in line with the Commission's suggestions. We see now where there is new work to be done; what we can consider in partnership with others down the road; and what we might not ever get to.

In a few minutes I will outline four sets of objectives and program initiatives that, guided by the work of the Royal Commission, form the basis of an action plan for this government. However, we first need to understand that over and above hundreds of individual recommendations, the Commissioners directed us to examine the very core of how we have lived together in this country.

The Commissioners identify four stages in relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. First, separate worlds – prior to European arrival in Canada. Then, contact and cooperation – a time when settlers and Aboriginal people were co-dependent. Next, a deterioration to displacement and assimilation – the period from the early 1800s until about 30 years ago, a time when colonial governments imposed their ways on Aboriginal people. Finally, renewal – our chance now in this generation to correct past wrongs and move forward in cooperative relationships once again.

Simply put, the Commissioners had a profound message for us. The Commissioners said, and I quote, "The main policy direction, pursued for more than 150 years, first by colonial then by Canadian governments, has been wrong."

Today we are here to say that we have listened and we have heard. The time has come to state formally that the days of paternalism and disrespect are behind us and that we are committed to changing the nature of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada.

Having said that, we cannot look forward without first looking back and coming to terms with the impact of our past actions and attitudes. History cannot be changed, but it must be understood in a way that reflects that people today are living out the legacy of decisions made in a different time.

Chief Steven Point of the Sto:lo Nation in British Columbia points to that legacy in describing day-to-day life in his community. As a lawyer, he talks about "Indian Day" at Chilliwack court, the day on which all of the Indian cases are dealt with. He can even laugh a little when he says that these court days are a little like a family reunion because there are mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters all there in trouble from the same families. As a Chief, he says there are not enough hours in the day to help members of his community struggling with alcoholism, devastated by suicide, or tempted by crime for lack of anything better to do. He says that trying to cope with it all is like trying to hold water in his hands. And the worst part of all, he says, is that his people have little hope, little confidence, little faith in either him or themselves to regain their pride and sense of self-worth. There is a poverty of spirit, a poverty of the soul. What Chief Point describes is a reflection of the grief and pain of Aboriginal people. But where there is difficulty and distress, there is also leadership and vision. Chief Point and all First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities are determined to restore hope and strengthen their communities. I believe they can and they will. For its part, I believe that the federal government must acknowledge its role in the past relationship so that the transformation can begin.

To that end, the Government of Canada wants to make a solemn offer of reconciliation:

Statement of Reconciliation

As Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians seek to move forward together in a process of renewal, it is essential that we deal with the legacies of the past affecting the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, including the First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Our purpose is not to rewrite history but, rather, to learn

from our past and to find ways to deal with the negative impacts that certain historical decisions continue to have in our society today.

The ancestors of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples lived on this continent long before explorers from other continents first came to North America. For thousands of years before this country was founded, they enjoyed their own forms of government. Diverse, vibrant Aboriginal nations had ways of life rooted in fundamental values concerning their relationships to the Creator, the environment and each other, in the role of Elders as the living memory of their ancestors, and in their responsibilities as custodians of the lands, waters and resources of their homelands.

The assistance and spiritual values of the Aboriginal peoples who welcomed the newcomers to this continent too often have been forgotten. The contributions made by all Aboriginal peoples to Canada's development, and the contributions that they continue to make to our society today, have not been properly acknowledged. The Government of Canada today, on behalf of all Canadians, acknowledges those contributions.

Sadly, our history with respect to the treatment of Aboriginal people is not something in which we can take pride. Attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of Aboriginal culture and values. As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices. We must recognize the impact of these actions on the once self-sustaining nations that were disaggregated, disrupted, limited or even destroyed by the dispossession of traditional territory, by the relocation of Aboriginal people, and by some provisions of the Indian Act. We must acknowledge that the result of these actions was the erosion of the political, economic and social systems of Aboriginal people and nations.

Against the backdrop of these historical legacies, it is a remarkable tribute to the strength and endurance of Aboriginal people that they have maintained their historic diversity and identity. The Government of Canada today formally expresses to all Aboriginal people in Canada our profound regret for past actions of the federal government which have contributed to these difficult pages in the history of our relationship together.

One aspect of our relationship with Aboriginal people over this period that requires particular attention is the Residential School system. This system separated many children from their families and communities and prevented them from speaking their own languages and from learning about their heritage and cultures. In the worst cases, it left legacies of personal pain and distress that continue to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day. Tragically, some children were the victims of physical and sexual abuse.

The Government of Canada acknowledges the role it played in the development and administration of these schools. Particularly to those individuals who experienced the tragedy of sexual and physical abuse at residential schools, and who have carried this burden believing that in some way they must be responsible, we wish to emphasize that what you experienced was not your fault and should never have happened. To those of you who suffered this tragedy at residential schools, we are deeply sorry.

In dealing with the legacies of the Residential School system, the Government of Canada proposes to work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, the Churches and other interested parties to resolve the longstanding issues that must be addressed. We need to work together on a healing strategy to assist individuals and communities in dealing with the consequences of this sad era of our history.

No attempt at reconciliation with Aboriginal people can be complete without reference to the sad events culminating in the death of Métis leader Louis Riel. These events cannot be undone; however, we can and will continue to look for ways of affirming the contributions of Métis people in Canada and of reflecting Louis Riel's proper place in Canada's history.

Reconciliation is an ongoing process. In renewing our partnership, we must ensure that the mistakes which marked our past relationship are not repeated. The Government of Canada recognizes that policies that sought to assimilate Aboriginal people, women and men, were not the way to build a strong country. We must instead continue to find ways in which Aboriginal people can participate fully in the economic, political, cultural and social life of Canada in a manner which preserves and enhances the collective identities of Aboriginal communities, and allows them to evolve and flourish in the future. Working together to achieve our shared goals will benefit all Canadians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

I have signed this statement today with the Federal Interlocutor, to affirm the government's commitment to reconciling the past and building a better future together with Aboriginal people.

Our words must be supported by concrete actions. We must work together to help Aboriginal individuals, families and communities to heal the wounds caused by physical and sexual abuse in the Residential School system. Today, the federal government commits \$350 million for community-based healing as a first step to deal with the legacy of physical and sexual abuse at residential schools. It will be First Nations, Inuit and Métis people themselves, along with health and social professionals, who will help us in shaping support that is culturally sensitive and reflects the experiences of different communities. I believe that much can be learned from the British Columbia

Residential Schools Project, which was initiated by the B.C. Summit Chiefs and is supported by the federal government. The project is coordinating support and referral services, and providing for inter-agency co-operation to ensure that the needs of victims of abuse are not compromised by jurisdictional boundaries.

Renewal

If the past gives us pause, certainly the way ahead gives us hope. This is a time to build; to gather strength. And if we are to seize the opportunities before us, we need to do it together.

I am confident that the majority of Canadians support building a new partnership with Aboriginal people. In my travels, I've spoken to provincial and territorial ministers, municipal leaders, bankers and business people, scholars and social activists, and individual Canadians. They all clearly see the need for change.

We can't change everything overnight – the Royal Commission itself called for a 20-year process of renewal. But we can certainly get started, and that's what we are here to do today.

We are announcing today a comprehensive framework for action based on the following objectives:

- First, we will renew the partnership to engage all possible partners and resources so the relationship will be a catalyst to better the lives of Aboriginal people in Canada.
- Second, we will strengthen Aboriginal governance so that communities have the tools to guide their own destiny and to exercise their inherent right of self-government.
- Third, we will design a new fiscal relationship that provides a stable flow of funds in support of transparent and accountable community development.
- Fourth, we will sustain the growth of strong, healthy Aboriginal communities, fuelled by economic development and supported by a solid, basic infrastructure of institutions and services.

Let me now outline our thoughts on each of the objectives and our goals in each area for First Nations and Inuit people. My colleague, Ralph Goodale, the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, will then speak to

our goals related to the Aboriginal people that he serves on behalf of the Government of Canada. Renewing the Partnership

Let me begin with our goal of renewing the partnership.

Partnership. It's a word often used without any clear definition of what it really means.

The Royal Commission challenged us to construct relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people characterized by mutual respect and recognition, responsibility and sharing. This is the basis of the partnership we seek. It includes Aboriginal organizations and individuals, all levels of government, the private and voluntary sectors, other interested parties and all Canadians. It implies a celebration of our diversity while sharing a common vision. It also implies a practical and constructive working relationship.

In this context, and particularly with respect to the working relationship, our commitment to partnership is:

- to work out solutions together beforehand, instead of picking up the pieces after the fact;
- a commitment to negotiate rather than litigate;
- a commitment to communication;
- a commitment to meaningful consultation; and
- a commitment to prompt action to address concerns before positions get too polarized to move.

I see the partners in this working relationship in this room: Leaders of national Aboriginal organizations representing First Nations, Inuit, Métis, Non-Status and off-reserve people and Aboriginal women. Aboriginal youth and Elders; Aboriginal business and social organizations. Representatives of many federal departments – Health, Justice, Human Resources Development, Industry, Natural Resources Canada – who will help make our relationships real and productive. Companies in the banking and resource sectors that are models of how to do business with Aboriginal communities. Representatives of many other labour and social interests who appreciate the need for Aboriginal people to take their rightful place in this country. Together with all levels of government, these are the parties in the broad multilateral relationships we want with Aboriginal people.

Our commitment began today with the Statement of Reconciliation and the \$350 million for healing to address the legacy of physical and sexual abuse at residential schools. To help renew the partnership, we are also proposing:

- a First Nations and Inuit language program to preserve and enhance the use of Aboriginal languages;
- a public education campaign to increase the understanding of all Canadians about Aboriginal culture and history; and
- a capacity-building program to help Aboriginal organizations in the design, development and implementation of initiatives affecting Aboriginal people.

Strengthening Aboriginal Governance

I'd now like to turn to our second objective: strengthening Aboriginal governance.

Government is about people. It is about making lives better for people. We need to ensure that Aboriginal people have the tools and capacity to improve the lives of those they serve. To be responsive and accountable to community needs, Aboriginal governments must have the legitimacy and authority to be effective. That is why we are committed to assisting Aboriginal people to design, develop and deliver the programs and services they need from their governments.

Self-government means well-defined, negotiated arrangements with rights and responsibilities that can be exercised in a coordinated way. And the result of this will be that other governments, the private sector, other individuals and institutions can easily establish a relationship with Aboriginal governments and communities and participate in the partnerships we are talking about here.

A stronger economic base is absolutely essential to achieving this outcome. That includes working with First Nations to provide increased access to lands and resources. We must also continue to address Aboriginal land claims in a fair and equitable way. Claims settlements in the Yukon provide a good example of how claims and economic development go hand in hand and are the basis for strong self-government.

This commitment to strong self-government and to open, inclusive dialogue will also guide us as we and our partners create the new territory of Nunavut

and proceed with constitutional development for the western part of the Northwest Territories.

Our goal is even greater success, more models of good governance. To that end, we will pursue the following key initiatives:

- an Aboriginal governments recognition instrument to guide jurisdictional and intergovernmental relations;
- governance transition centres to highlight best practices and maximize shared experience and expertise;
- the commemoration of historic treaties and the establishment of additional treaty commissions like the Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan; and
- the continuation of work already begun with First Nations to create a new independent claims body.

Developing a New Fiscal Relationship

Strong governance is in turn closely linked to our third objective of developing a new fiscal relationship.

In a relationship based on sharing and mutual responsibility, one government cannot completely depend on the other for all of its revenue and resources. It's just not workable. We are working to help Aboriginal governments become self-reliant with the fiscal autonomy and financial capacity they need to support their responsibilities.

This is a tremendous challenge. It means that our system of transfers must be forward-thinking and predictable so that elected representatives can plan, make informed spending decisions and be accountable for those choices. It also means that we have to look at helping Aboriginal people to develop their own sources of revenue, including taxation.

Aboriginal governments, like all governments, must be both politically and financially responsible. The legitimacy of Aboriginal governments depends on their ability to be accountable to the people they represent. Canadians also want to ensure that we are investing in strong, effective and accountable Aboriginal governments. Currently, Aboriginal governments are developing and operating within a framework of financial standards comparable to other levels of government. This is a foundation upon which we shall build to

further strengthen transparency and accountability and foster strong, modern governments.

The following initiatives are part of a new fiscal relationship:

- We'll work with Aboriginal people to develop a system of public accounts and consolidated audits that comply with generally accepted accounting principles but that at the same time make sense to community members.
- We'll work with First Nations to support the establishment of a National Association of First Nations Financial Officers.
- Together with Aboriginal people, we'll develop data exchange mechanisms for timely and accurate information.
- We'll provide assistance to Aboriginal governments to develop their own sources of revenue.
- We'll work with Aboriginal people to design a statistical training program to help improve data collection methods.
- And finally, we commit to work jointly with Aboriginal people on an Aboriginal Peoples Survey following the Census in the year 2001.

Supporting Strong Communities, People and Economies

Fundamentally, it's our fourth objective, supporting strong communities, people and economies, that really brings us back to the very essence of what government is all about, and that is making people's lives better. A partnership approach, responsible government and a solid fiscal relationship that I've just outlined are the foundation we need to support strong communities and deal with the issues that touch individual daily lives – education, housing, health care, jobs and economic opportunity.

As individual Canadians, we're focused on keeping a roof over our head, putting food on the table and trying to make sure our kids have it even better than we did. But for Aboriginal people, the urgency and uncertainty around these issues are far greater.

The Aboriginal population is growing at twice the national rate, and now totals 3.8 percent of the national population. That's approximately 1.3 million people. Half the Aboriginal population is under the age of 25.

Against this backdrop, conditions in many Aboriginal communities are appalling:

- Infant mortality rates in Aboriginal communities are nearly double those of other Canadians.
- The youth suicide rate is seven times higher than the Canadian average.
- The unemployment rate on reserves is three times the Canadian average.
- Literacy rates are half the Canadian average.
- Most Aboriginal people live below the poverty line.

So, the action plan I have laid out for you today really boils down to one simple thing, as I've said - making life better for Aboriginal peoples in this country. Together, we need to give hope to the teenager who sees suicide as the solution, end the vicious cycle of welfare dependency, and create jobs for the unemployed. It is time to ease the poverty of spirit.

The following specific initiatives are designed to give immediate hope, support and opportunity to Aboriginal people and communities:

- We're going to put more money into improving community infrastructure. Working with our partners at Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, we'll speed up repairs to housing and build new houses according to community needs and priorities.
- We'll address a 25 to 30 percent backlog in water and sewer systems.
- We'll reform the welfare system and shift our investment to economic development and job creation.

- We're going to invest in children by expanding the Head Start program onto reserves through Health Canada, allowing for the reinvestment of the National Child Benefit and continuing the youth employment strategy through Human Resources Development Canada.
- With our other federal colleagues, we'll find ways to foster economic development by increasing access to markets, capital and resources, as well as developing a human resources strategy.

These are just a few highlights of the initiatives that underlie our plan to renew partnerships, strengthen Aboriginal governance, design a new fiscal relationship, and support strong Aboriginal communities and economies. Together with our Statement of Reconciliation and the initiatives to be outlined by Minister Goodale, I believe that what we are presenting here today is a solid framework for progress.

What encourages me is that we are not starting from zero in our efforts. We can build on the significant achievements of our first mandate, such as the Inherent Right of Self-Government policy; the Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business; the settling of land claims; the new housing policy; and the building of schools and water and sewer systems across the country. In reflecting on the last four years, I think that when we took office in 1993, we saw a desperate need for action on all fronts and we immediately tested the water with both feet, so to speak. Our focus was to stem the tide of deterioration in living conditions in Aboriginal communities, as well as to jump-start work on settling claims and stimulating economic development. We saw that the federal government couldn't do it all alone, and that there was a need for partnership.

Today we go farther. Partnerships must now be the defining principle of our relationships. They must guide us at every step we take in this generation and the next and the one after that.

Partnership is something you have to work at to get it right. And may I say that we would not be here today without the thoughtful advice and counsel of the Aboriginal leadership here with us.

My colleague Minister Goodale and I have had a series of excellent discussions with our counterparts Harry Daniels of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples; Okalik Eegeesiak, the newly elected president of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada; Gérald Morin of the Métis National Council; Marilyn Buffalo of the Native Women's Association of Canada; and Phil Fontaine, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. Each of you have brought a unique perspective to our discussions, and have helped build the foundation for an ongoing

collaborative relationship. We've still got room to grow, but we are building a true partnership. Together, we will get there.

Conclusion

So what comes next? As I agreed at the outcome of the Premiers meeting with Aboriginal leaders in November, in the months ahead, I will be meeting national Aboriginal leaders and my provincial and territorial colleagues to build a common plan of action to make renewed partnerships a reality.

This is not the end of the work of the Royal Commission. It is the beginning of how we will conduct ourselves with our newfound insight and knowledge. Just as the Commission was struck at a pivotal point in history, I hope that we will look back on this time as an important turning point – not unlike the seventh generation principle – one at which we turned the page to a new and more prosperous future together.

Internationally, we pride ourselves as peacekeepers and advocates of what is right and just. Today, I believe our offer of reconciliation was right and just, and offers us the opportunity to move forward. For years, the United Nations has said that Canada is the best place in the world to live. The time has come to make sure that this indeed reflects the reality of all peoples in this country.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people live side by side in this great country. In its recent decision in the Delgamukw case, the Chief Justice wrote: "Let us face it, we are all here to stay." This simple but profound statement is one we all need to take to heart. I look to all of you in this room for commitment to partnerships. If we all bring our collective resources and will to the table, we can make significant progress.

I hope that Aboriginal people can shortly say with pride that they feel "of" this country and not just marginalized within it. I hope that in gathering strength we can restore the balance and chart a new course in partnership.

Thank you.