

Statement of Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development

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Honourable Jane Stewart

Good afternoon everyone. Karin, thank you very much for the introduction. President Morin, there you are, and President Eegeesiak, Grand Chief Fontaine, Elder McGregor, Charlie Coffey and Angie; it's wonderful to be here as one of the partners with Chiefs and members of corporate Canada to help identify, continue to build and forge a stronger partnership for us together in our commitment to ensuring strong economic development capability in Aboriginal communities.

I want to congratulate the Royal Bank and CANDO for giving us the opportunity to come together, to talk about the Royal Commission and their incredible documentation and picture that work has given us to use as we together find the something that will stop us from doing nothing.

You know, it was just a little over a month ago that our government presented its Speech from the Throne, and first and foremost in that speech we talked about the need to continue to fight the deficit, to get our fiscal house in order, to recognize that we have made tremendous progress, but there is still more that we have to do. And as Mr. Coffey pointed out, what we also identified in that Speech from the Throne is that for us as a government, deficit fighting is not an end in itself, but it is something we must do so that we again have the choices to make

that allow us to focus on what government really is, that is, a way and a means of making life better for people. So further in that Speech from the Throne, because we anticipate, because of the incredibly hard work of all Canadians and the success that we are seeing in our fight against the deficit that we are going to have dividends, that we are again going to do what governments are supposed to be about, to respond to the needs and the hopes of its citizens. And as we move to that position we identified in the speech the areas that we feel are of prime importance today for Canadians.

We talked about the importance of our children and our youth. We talked about the importance of modernizing our health care system, a system that really does define us as a nation. We talked about the importance of working together, to identify the impact of this changing economy we are coming to know, the knowledge-based economy, and how we together can ensure that Canadians connect with that economy and move into it and benefit from it as quickly as possible.

But also in that Speech from the Throne — and this as Minister of Indian Affairs is what I'm particularly proud of — we identified in each of those sections, in each of those hopes and dreams of Canadians, that in fact those are the same hopes and dreams of Aboriginal Canadians, that indeed our First Nations, our Inuit, our

Métis are concerned for their children, their children who have a higher mortality rate, their children who suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome, fetal alcohol effects and other barriers that hinder them from participating fuller in their later lives.

In the Speech from the Throne we recognized that Aboriginal people are concerned for their youth, the employment opportunities that just aren't coming as fast as we need them, unemployment levels that are far above even those too-high levels facing non-Aboriginal Canadian youth, and the fact that suicide rates are five to seven times higher for Aboriginal youth than for non-Aboriginal youth.

In the Speech from the Throne we identified too that Aboriginal people want to be part of this new economy and through education, partnership, they can be part of this knowledge-based economy, recognizing though that so many of the communities are remote, not just rural, remote. And the issues that they face in that regard are different and more intense.

Recognizing the statistics that John McCallum presented, that I've referred to, the Speech from the Throne also identified that we need to do more, that in fact we as a government have to take very squarely on our shoulders a broader focus, a stronger focus, a bigger commitment to Aboriginal issues.

We write it in response to what our public is saying, what the people that the government serves are saying. And indeed Canadians are saying the government must make Aboriginal issues a priority. Eighty percent of Canadians in a 1996 Angus Reid poll said the federal government should make Aboriginal issues a higher, medium priority, and as we look to other levels of government, provincial government, as I have met with my counterparts, there is an interest, a drive to partner more effectively, to help make things better for Aboriginal people in this country.

Their interests are varied—a focus on economic development, a focus on socio-economic aspects, a focus on justice—but the interest is there, and we have to work together to bring that interest into focus and build programs and strategies that will be effective and give us the tangible results that Chief Fontaine said are so important. We look at corporate Canada. We are here today thanks to corporate Canada—a part of our society that too is saying we want to

help, we understand things can be better and we feel we can play a role.

I look at different circumstances, having been up in the North and looked at BHP, the company that is building diamond mines in the Northwest Territories, and the model that they have embraced for resource development that starts with the Aboriginal people that are in that territory, doesn't ignore them, it starts with them. That company built a relationship, talked with the First Nations, has included them in their employment programs and strategies. It's a new model that has to find its way right across this country. I think of the conversations I've had with Brian Smith, the President of BC Hydro, and his commitment and focus and understanding to how important a strong partnership is for BC Hydro to have with the Aboriginal communities in that province. I listened to Charlie Coffey and identified the things that the Royal Bank is doing, directly in response to their commitment to playing a role in making life better for Aboriginal people. And then of course there are Aboriginal peoples, and they too are saying things must change. Things can change. We want a different relationship—you heard the Grand Chief today, you've heard it in Professor Newhouse's comments. And what we have to allow us, to assist us, to harness that interest, to harness that commitment is now the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

It's been defined and described in many different ways, but for me as the Minister, the Minister responsible for Indian Affairs and Northern Development, I look at that documentation and take from it the critical message that we need structural change. We need to do things differently and we are presenting to you a way in which to do that. And as I've been through the Royal Commission I find things that we are doing that respond to the recommendations already, and I see many things that are there that together we can build a plan around that will take us much more hopefully, much more brightly into the future together.

When you start with the Royal Commission, for me probably the most important aspect of it is the model of relationship, of the new relationship. Actually you know it's not a new relationship—it takes us right back to the original relationship that we as newcomers had with First Nations and the First Peoples in this country when we met. The model talks about the need for mutual respect, for mutual recognition, for

responsibility and sharing. And with that model in mind I can build plans for the future. You as corporate Canada can build plans for the future, the future that we want to have with Aboriginal people. As I look at the report it talks so dramatically about the need for a renewed partnership, a renewed partnership between Canadians, Aboriginals, and non-Aboriginals. It takes us to those issues of mutual respect and mutual recognition, and you know, as we build and think about that new relationship, we have to, we have to find its foundation in the treaty process.

Ladies and gentlemen, when people ask me about what it is to be Canadian or what distinguishes us as Canadians any more, I talk about the treaty process. I talk about the fact that when the newcomers came to this vast territory and were met by its First Peoples—while there were skirmishes and difficulties and questions and challenges—the fundamental relationship that we chose to build was a treaty relationship—a relationship of peace, a relationship that understood that together we could live in a great country, benefit from its bounty and be friends, peacefully. It's that treaty relationship that will help guide the renewal of our relationship.

It's the fiduciary responsibility between the parties, Aboriginal people and the Crown, that we always have to be conscious of—those commitments that said we will help each other just as in the very early days Aboriginal people helped the newcomers understand the land, the food, how to get on and how now and through the course of time we've provided health, education, and other programs, but that fiduciary responsibility, mutual responsibility for each other, is still very much a part of what we have to build.

In the Royal Commission there's a great deal of conversation about the aspect of governance, and in the Speech from the Throne we identify the importance of working in partnership with Aboriginal people to build good, solid Aboriginal government. We need to have a government-to-government relationship, one that is defined and understood, that is reflective to Aboriginal people of who they are, what they are and what they want in their leadership, one that we can understand as the federal government, as provincial governments, as corporate Canada, as individual Canadians, so that the partnership can flourish because if we don't understand and can't describe ourselves we can't be functional, we become dysfunctional, and we see blockades

and we see arguments and we see stereotypes built and we see people being unable to talk. Strengthening that government-to-government relationship is critical and it is based on an understanding of how important it is for Aboriginal communities to govern themselves, to be legitimate, to have the power and the resources they need to govern. We have to focus on that and on the issue of accountability, and as Chief Fontaine said, it is with that control that accountability will increase and improve, and I believe that sincerely.

When I look across the country and as I've had the chance to travel I see with great optimism the strength and value of self-government. I know the new President must be very proud of what is happening as we develop Nunavut. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a symbol of democracy in action, that here in this country we are not static, that we understand democracy is changing and we are building a new territory that will be reflective of the people that it is going to govern. Eighty-five percent of the population in Nunavut is Inuit, and they will have a government that is reflective of who they are and reflective of the kind and model of governance that they want. It's a tremendous challenge and together we will do it right, and it will be a beacon in the world of how democracy can change and respond to the people that it represents.

I think of the Yukon and the self-government agreements that we have with First Nations up there. I had the benefit of signing some of the final agreements, and as those are being signed and inked, we are seeing First Nations join together in larger communities. I'm thinking of the northern Tshone here, who are naturally coming together and wanting to share their resources so that they have the capacity and the capability to use their resources as wisely as they can for their people, and this is an indication that the suggestions made in the Royal Commission, that Aboriginal people will come together in larger groups to maximize the resources available if given the chance—it's happening. And we talk about modernizing the treaty system and indeed, in Alberta and Saskatchewan and Manitoba we are doing just that—looking at the treaty relationship, understanding it and modernizing it. And in British Columbia, where we didn't get a chance to write treaties—for whatever reason, we either got tired or lazy or whatever—we are now actively

pursuing the development of a full treaty relationship with the Nisga'a, with the Sechelt and with others.

When we talk about governance and capability, we can't help but talk about the fiscal relationship. Larry Sault is here, and Chief Sault has done a tremendous amount in supporting the thinking amongst Aboriginal leadership in the area of financing, the fiscal relationship and the requirements we need to have so that First Nations and Aboriginal communities and governments can be autonomous—concrete, autonomous and effective. When we talk about this fiscal relationship we do indeed have to have a system of transfers that is predictable, that allows the government to make decisions and function appropriately. We have to talk about access to resources. We have to talk about own source revenues, some very difficult things, taxation. But it's happening; it's happening because of the work of Chief Sault and so many others. In the province of Saskatchewan we have a table, a fiscal table with the First Nations, the province and ourselves building that new relationship, and I know, having met with the Chiefs of Ontario, that there is a strong interest in this province to do the same thing. And then we get to what this is all about. As I say the role of government is not about power. The role of government is to be a mechanism to make life better for people, and so greatly described in the Royal Commission are the issues facing individual communities, individual Aboriginal people that are not great, and the focus on building strong communities is where we're going to find the tangible indications that we can do things differently and there can be a positive result. And it's here, it's here in this area where corporate Canada can probably play the most significant role.

First and foremost we have to settle land claims, we have to find that land base that will allow communities to feel at home and comfortable. Along with those land claims comes money, because in many cases we can't supply all the land, and with that money comes the capability and capacity to do the kinds of things that Chief Sault was speaking to you about first this morning—building an economy for his community, a commercial plaza among other things. As the federal government and as the Minister, I understand the importance of settling these claims and the value that it, they have, not only for Aboriginal people but to all Canadians. It's a piece, an important piece to encouraging economic devel-

opment and improving the social aspects in our First Nations communities.

Beyond that we talk about the need to restructure our programming. The provinces as you know have spent the last number of years understanding welfare and how the dependency model that we have managed to develop over the years isn't appropriate for today. They have made changes in the provinces, but we have yet to make that change in our relationship with First Nations, and again so clearly in the Royal Commission it was indicated that this model of dependency has to be dealt with. We have to change just as the provinces have been changing, and we need their support and encouragement, and the leadership of the First Nations and the Aboriginal people in this country want that change but as we make the change, as we move away from a dependency model, there has to be something to move to.

We need jobs; we need full robust economies. We need opportunities, and we need that partnership to allow us to build those economies so that we can have a social assistance system that is a trampoline, that encourages and has opportunities for those who find themselves without work, have some support, that are allowed to get training and experience for a job or a business that is there for them to move into, and to make their contributions.

Today we've heard of so many examples of how that's happening. Professor Newhouse talked about the different ways in which you as corporate society can begin to now play a role. What I am suggesting though is you don't have to think of the relationship that we have with First Nations, with the Inuit, with the Métis as having to be directed through the federal government. I do agree that the relationship that we've had in the past has created a model where as soon as we say Native, Indian, Aboriginal, Indigenous Person, people think "Oh, that's the federal government," and everything stops. But we have to blow that up. Aboriginal people are not just in this country, they are of this country, they are friends, our neighbours, and you can talk to them directly. John McCallum said it right at the end of his comments. I was afraid he was going to say that we, corporate Canada, have to talk to the federal government about what we can do, but he said we, corporate Canada, have to talk to the First Nations about where we can help and that is the right connection. This is all part and parcel of defining how we all fit in, painting

the model, painting the pictures so we know the lay of the land and we know how to partner communicate and evolve with each other.

Ladies and gentlemen, I can't tell you how optimistic I feel about our future together. As I hear the Grand Chiefs speak, as I hear Charlie Coffey speak, as I hear the professor and others talk about the issues that we face, we're saying the same thing. We're all on the same page. The stars are lining up for us and the challenge that we face is to not miss the opportunity. The

opportunity is here, the time is right, Karin, as you point out. We've taken a long time to get here but by golly we're here, and if we're able to paint the same picture, if we're able to see it together in somewhat the same way, I am absolutely convinced that we can find the plans, the strategies, the models, the pathways that will allow us to move from doing nothing to doing something and to doing something very significant. Thank you very much.