

Notes For Grand Chief Fontaine's Speech to the  
Canadian Club of Toronto  
Monday, November 17, 1997

I am honoured to be your guest at this prestigious gathering. The Canadian Club of Toronto is a much-coveted platform where few Indians have stood before. Thankyou for the opportunity. As a matter of fact, as I stand before you today, I feel a little like Voltaire did on his deathbed. When asked if he was ready to renounce the devil he replied, "No, at times like this, I don't need to make any enemies!!"

I welcome this opportunity to share some thoughts

with you about my people, this country we share, and our future relationships with non-Aboriginal Canadians. My theme today is that the time is right for a fresh start, for new partnerships, better understanding, tolerance and the creation of mutually beneficial opportunities. My talk is about the Canada of the new millennium - a Canada I envision as unified and vibrant - a Canada which has come to terms with its past, and which will go forward towards being the best country in the world for **all** its citizens.

In my remarks I will first outline the historical context that must inform this new beginning; secondly; I will describe the reasons why the time is right **now** to achieve a fresh start; and thirdly, I

will discuss how, in practical terms, it can all happen.

## 2.) The Historical Context

You may be asking yourselves, why must we go back to history before we can talk about the future? The answer is a simple one. The barricades to progress will not fall unless we understand how they were built. Without an understanding of who we are and where we have come from, the serious tensions that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people will not be resolved, as they must be in order for progress to occur.

First of all, you should not be surprised to learn that

the AFN's present policy is to develop peaceful and co-operative partnerships with our non-Aboriginal brothers and sisters. It is also our policy to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations, our ancestral territories and our ethnic identity as the basis of our continued existence as peoples, in accordance with our own cultural patterns and social institutions. The reason you shouldn't be surprised with any of this is because our policies are old news. They are more than 400 years old. They are precisely the same policies **our** ancestors adopted in their dealings with **your** ancestors when they entered into treaties to share the land of Canada and its resources so many centuries ago.

These mutually agreed- upon policies were

successful for 200 years or more, where for the most part, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples saw each other as separate, distinct and independent peoples, each in charge of their own affairs. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 defined the relationship. It said that Indian Nations were autonomous political entities, living under the protection of the Crown, but having their own internal political authority. In other words, the Proclamation created a balance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples such that a power sharing arrangement over the lands and resources was maintained.

Then the settlers' needs changed, and so did their relationship with the Aboriginal peoples. The

economic partnerships established to facilitate the fur trade were no longer needed, nor was the military assistance the Aboriginal population provided. As a consequence, the policy of partnership and co-operation was replaced by an imposed policy of domination and assimilation. This policy was implemented in a variety of ways, but most thoroughly and brutally, through the residential school system, the reserves, the Indian Acts, the prohibition of indigenous languages, cultural and religious events, the pass system, the forced relocation of communities, and the re-interpretation of treaties to deny Indians the land base they required to survive as sustainable communities.

The disastrous effects of these horribly misguided,

cruel policies exist to this day. Poverty, ill health, apathy, and social disorganisation are legacies First Nations continue to struggle against internally, while externally, relationships with non-Aboriginal peoples are too often characterised by lack of trust, resentment, accusation, anger and, more recently, violence and confrontation.

### 3.) Why now?

As we approach the next millennium, there is a powerful, global sense of renewal in the air. The aspiration for fundamental change - to respond to past cruelties, human rights violations and various forms of barbarism that occurred during the twentieth century, are evident in various movements

toward democratic rule and associated human rights. Truth Commissions have been established all over the world, for the purpose of enabling governments to take collective responsibility for past wrongs, to allow victims to heal, and to provide a mechanism whereby all parties can be reconciled. It is widely recognized that only after such as process, can a country genuinely move forward, towards unity, prosperity, and moral regeneration As William Gladstone recognized as he contemplated the centuries-old conflict in Northern Ireland.....“the Irish never forget, while the English never remember.” Much the same could be said about our relationship with non-Aboriginal peoples and their governments.

Growing international awareness of indigenous issues is also helping our cause. We are presently in the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples created by The General Assembly of the United Nation in 1994. The UN Commission of Human Rights is in the process of drafting a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples for consideration and adoption by the General Assembly within the Decade. The goal of the Declaration is to reflect the unique place of indigenous peoples in the world, to promote reconciliation and the protection of indigenous rights, to work effectively against discrimination, and to provide clear and practical guidance for the development of effective and harmonious relationships between indigenous peoples and their

states.

Here at home, there are parallel developments. First, after years of study, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples has reported that it is time for reconciliation and healing to take place between the Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canada. As a part of the reconciliation process, the federal government is now talking about making an apology to Aboriginal peoples for its role in the attempted cultural genocide, forced impoverishment and psychological and physical harm inflicted by the residential school system. Needless to say, it is long overdue. Such an apology would go a long way towards healing still festering, untended wounds, and creating an environment of forgiveness renewed

cooperation. But Such an apology must be authentic. It cannot be one motivated by politics or limited by lawyers' fear of litigation. It must be a genuine apology anchored in the truth, reflecting the experience of Aboriginal peoples as **they** know it. In other words, an apology drafted by government officials won't do the job. A country which holds itself out to be the best in the world, the most compassionate, and the most protective of human rights and human dignity, must craft an apology Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together can hold up to the world.

Secondly, the Royal Commission Report confirms another fact we all know.....we can no longer **afford** to ignore the enormous human and material

and social costs of domination that have been visited on Aboriginal peoples. A major, radical departure from present policies must occur which would recognize the continuity of Aboriginal nations and the need to decolonize them for once and for all. I will expand on this point in few moments when I talk about how the new relationship with First Nations and aboriginal Canadians will happen.

And there is one last reason why these new relationships must be developed now rather than sometime in the future, and that has to do with Canadian unity. Whether we like it or not, national unity continues to dominate the political agenda and the national psyche in Canada, creating

apprehension and uncertainty.

Attention is primarily focused on Quebec, for obvious reasons. We accept the significance and value of maintaining Quebec as an integral part of the Canadian family, just as we unconditionally support our Aboriginal brothers and sisters there. But we believe the concept of **unity** has a much bigger meaning and purpose than the short term goal of winning the next referendum. A quick look in a thesaurus lists the following synonyms for unity: harmony, fellowship, solidarity, stability, co-operation, and peace. Can true unity be achieved by focussing only on Quebec?

Inevitably, ordinary Canadians will realize, as

millions already have, that it is morally, legally and ethically impossible to arrive at any unity solution based **solely** on recognition of Quebec as a unique society. Unless there is recognition of the unique place of First Nations in Canada and that uniqueness is understood as integral to the history and governance of this land, we will create a mere **semblance** of unity, a unity built on lies and distortions of history. True unity will continue to elude our grasp. To use a tired but apt metaphor, the marriage will fail because it will rest on a dishonest foundation.

The most recent example of a failure to recognize this important principle was on September 14, 1997, when nine premiers of Canada and two territorial

leaders met in Calgary and produced the "Framework for Discussion on Canadian Unity." Neither the AFN nor any other Aboriginal groups were represented at the Calgary meeting, notwithstanding our request to attend and participate.

As a result, we were not able to contribute to the Declaration or the principles underlying it. There are many problems with the principles enunciated there, not the least of which is the failure to recognize First Nations as partners in the governance of Canada and failure to recognize relevant and compelling differences between First Nations' status and needs compared to all other ethnic groups in Canada. These and other issues will be raised, and hopefully resolved, at the next Premier's meeting which takes

place in Winnipeg tomorrow.

While it is clear to the Aboriginal community that recognition and reconciliation with the non-Aboriginal populations is essential to national unity, at the same time we recognize that we, too, have a large stake and a large role, in keeping our country together. We have no intention of sitting idly by while our interests and those of future generations are put at risk. We intend to contribute to the unity project by bringing the many and varied talents and skills our rich aboriginal cultures can provide, not the least of which are consensus building, healing and achieving harmony. We want Canada to be strong, united and prosperous with equally strong, united and prosperous aboriginal communities

within it. To us, unity means indivisibility with integrity, where all Canadians feel at home, regardless of their uniqueness.

So, armed with our understanding of the past, and with the national and international momentum for reconciliation, cooperation, and partnership behind us, I am confident that there has never been such a moment of unique opportunity for First Nations peoples in Canada to develop new values, mechanisms and strategies to guide and shape our future in better ways.

Now, sometimes I am accused of being an incurable

optimist, but I do not believe my optimism is unrealistic. In other words, I am not the same kind of optimist as the guy who fell out of the window on the fortieth floor, and while passing the twentieth, was still saying “so far, so good.” I am **cautiously and realistically** optimistic because I believe self-sufficiency is within our grasp. This brings me to the final section of my presentation today.

#### 4.) **How do we propose to move forward?**

The Royal Commission created a blueprint for a renewed relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, That blueprint rests on the four principles of recognition, respect, sharing, and

responsibility.

The principle of **recognition** requires that Non-Aboriginal Canadians recognize that Aboriginal peoples are the original inhabitants and caretakers of this land and have distinctive rights and responsibilities flowing from this status. Equally, it calls of Aboriginal peoples to accept that non-Aboriginal people are also of this land now, by birth and by adoption and that each must relate to one another as partners, respecting each other's laws and institutions and co-operating for mutual benefit.

The principle of **respect** requires positive mutual regard between and amongst peoples, respect for the unique rights and status of First Nations such

that our valuable culture and heritage becomes part of Canada's national character;

The principle of **sharing** calls for the giving and receiving of benefits in fair measure. This principle is the basis on which Canada was founded, and the basis of the treaties which were signed in good faith. It is also the basis for the possibility of real equality among the peoples of Canada in the future.

The fourth principle, that of **responsibility**, requires accountability. Accountability for promises made, accountability for behaving honorably, and accountability for the well-being of the other.

The new relationships we hope to establish,

therefore, be they with governments or the private sector, will be open, trusting and mutually supportive. A model I would hope will be replicated widely is the one which First Nations now enjoys with Air Canada. In my former capacity as Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, the Assembly negotiated an employment equity package which will result in the employment of 600 - 800 Aboriginal people with Air Canada. In addition to the changes in their hiring policies for front line jobs, a scholarship fund is being established to enable Aboriginal applicants to train for highly skilled technical and professional positions as well.

Another model we like to point to, is our relationship with the Royal Bank. It has been in the

forefront in terms of providing greater accessibility to Aboriginal people in the corporate boardrooms of the nation, and in creating innovative and creative services for their Aboriginal clients. We plan to enjoy similar relationships with other financial institutions and the corporate community in the future, as we see the private sector as being the real engine of economic development for First Nations.

We hope to engage government help in building bridges between First Nations and corporate communities in such areas as housing, public facilities and community infrastructure. Instead of government funding being the sole source of our resources, we believe these funds could be put to better use leveraging much larger investment funds

for building and developing communities and economies that will sustain First Nations in a way which meets their needs much more effectively than now. In a nutshell, what we are aiming for is an across-the-board commitment and participation from both the public and private sectors in support of First nation development that will be in everyone's best interests.

Finally, and most importantly, we propose to move forward by expeditiously implementing self-government arrangements, consistent with our treaty and aboriginal rights and the inherent right we have, of self-determination. First Nations government will restore to us the power to govern ourselves in the areas of training and employment, health care

programs and resources, and the administration of justice including community based institutions for policing, sentencing, healing circles, and corrections. Self-government will entail the development of comprehensive and integrated strategies to ensure that First Nations benefit equitably from land and resource use, dealing with everything from the settlement of land claims to cooperative management of resources, to wise stewardship of the environment.

In conclusion, what I have attempted to do today, is demonstrate the linkages between our shared history, present day imperatives, and solutions for the future. I have organized my presentation this way because I firmly believe the wise observation

that we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of history unless we incorporate their lessons in our planning for the future.

I am reminded of the words of that great comedian and political satirist Pat Paulson. He said, “all the problems we face today can be traced to an unenlightened immigration policy on the part of the North American Indian”. While it is a bit too late for First Nations to revisit those policies we can all strive to be more enlightened about our continued coexistence.

If I can leave one last thought with you, it is this: Canada can have no greater strength than to be seen as a society that respects the differences that exist

amongst its peoples, in its languages, cultures, values, and histories, and to thrive and build on this diversity. We are one people, one country.

Thank you/Meegwetch