



Assembly of First Nations
National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo

Speaking Notes

32nd Annual General Assembly
Moncton, New Brunswick
July 12, 2011

Opening Remarks
**PURSUING SELF-DETERMINATION:
REALIZING OUR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

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[Traditional Greetings]

[Acknowledge Elders, (host Elder John Joe Sark) Chiefs, Women and Youth Leaders, Regional Chief Augustine, Chief Knockwood, Premier, Mayor and to all our very special hosts and guests]

We have all already been welcomed so warmly and seen the world renown hospitality of our hosts through the activities throughout the weekend and yesterday and so look forward to all that is planned for us here.

What a tremendous gathering this is and such a powerful opportunity we have to gather under the inspired theme ... “IN THE SPIRIT OF PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP”.

This was the vision of our ancestors from within this territory and right across the country; a vision of Indigenous Nations working together, respecting and supporting one another. When newcomers arrived, our Nations extended this same support... but we did so in the full knowledge of our rights and our responsibilities.

Today, it is my great pleasure to reflect on an important year that has passed since we last gathered in Winnipeg but more importantly on the year ahead.

I believe there is both tremendous potential and urgent pressure on us all as First Nation leaders to facilitate, support and create real change in our communities.

The First Nation-Crown relationship is indeed alive. From pre-Confederation, to the numbered Treaties, to modern Treaties and to the Title and rights holders – this relationship, while it takes different forms and has different histories – is premised on common elements. It begins with our sacred rights and responsibilities, our identity and our jurisdiction.

This relationship frames in a permanent and enduring way - our self-determination, our future and our success.

As we gather in this region, we are reminded that the Nations that are part of the pre-confederation era are affirming their place. The Mi'kmaq have made tremendous strides in education and it started with affirming their role, their language, and their control!

Treaty Nations throughout the numbered Treaty territories are actively engaged in every aspect of their relationships. Strengthening their societies, economies, cultures and governments is all taking place grounded in the original vision of the ancestors set out in Treaty.

Through spending time with Treaty Elders, leaders and youth, we learn so much together. Ceremony and protocol are the foundation of Treaty. In early June – I had the honour of participating in a sacred ceremony in Pauingassi First Nation with Elder Dave Courchene along with elders from Treaty 3 and the Treaty #3 drum. The purpose of the ceremony was described

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to me as invoking the strength of our ancestors to support the challenging work that each and every one of us must do every day ...

Just last week, I was so fortunate to again visit within Treaty 9 territory – as I was hosted at Moose Cree First Nation on the shores of James Bay at a conference of the Mushkegowuk Council.

Recent research on Treaty 9 is confirming for Canadians what our Elders have always told us, and we pass this message on to our youth: our people did not surrender our land or our Treaty rights. This is a message that all of Canada must hear, for this is the foundation of our relationship - the promises we made that must be honoured.

Our Treaty youth are speaking out to carry this message forward. As young Trina Williams challenged us at the meeting:

"We need to make something actually happen instead of all of this talking. We need to make things happen together as one."

Treaty 9 youth leader Kerilee Nakochee encouraged her peers to speak out. She said: "If you have something to say, say it right now. If you want to make change, then do it."

I couldn't agree more. We find inspiration everywhere; in the wisdom of our Elders and the voices of our youth. They are our future right now.

I have said many times: we are all Treaty people. Beyond the numbered Treaties, Nations have advanced new Treaties throughout the country – the James Bay Cree of Quebec – their challenges and struggles and their tremendous success is instructive to all of us.

We look to the north, to the Yukon, where they have engaged in the hard work of reclaiming their jurisdiction, building their institutions and defining their relationship in the current context. This success has brought new challenges – challenges of maintaining the relationship, enforcing implementation. Because with all Treaties, the work does not end with agreement – this is but the beginning of the relationship.

We look also to regions in BC and elsewhere, title and rights holders advancing a way forward on many different fronts. I think of the celebration I joined with the Ma-nulth this spring and the moment that they brought forward the canoe – the symbolic conclusion of generations of effort – it was a moment of survival and of triumph!

Huu-ay-aht hereditary Chief Tom Happynook described the feeling to me by saying – "Shawn, we are free; we are finally free from the Indian Act". This was the feeling fired by the full expression of their rights and responsibilities, to break the chains and shake away the weight of colonial, imposed control.

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You see, regardless of your specific First Nation-Crown relationship: pre Confederation, numbered Treaty, modern Treaty or other agreements - we are all pursuing our own way forward based on rights and responsibilities. And it is so clear to me that we all must work together and support one another.

We know there are deep challenges, problems and even crises back home.

Emergencies like flooding and fires cause tremendous devastation to our communities and families that are already struggling. I visited First Nations struggling with difficult circumstances time and time again last year. I was in Peguis First Nation where flooding meant evacuating families 6 times in the last 3 years. This is completely unacceptable.

I also witnessed firsthand the trauma of our people dealing with the devastation of missing and murdered women and girls. There is no more important need than safety and security.

We cannot make progress if we cannot assure the safety of our children.

I spoke at a Women's Summit last month and I was heartbroken as I thought of the little boys and girls who would not grow up with a Mom... who would not grow up knowing the love that every child deserves.

And here I just want to take a moment. We've all seen the tragic news late yesterday From Samson Cree Nation and extend our deep sympathy to all of the people and families of Hobbema. This tragic loss of a young boy only 5 years old – taken from his family and his future – taken by senseless violence. We feel this pain deeply and we extend our prayers to every one affected. We will be addressing this a bit later as I have asked that a 'book of condolences' be created for all of us to reflect our thoughts and feelings and join in solidarity with those suffering.

We've reached out to the family and the leadership who accept our prayers and who also share that this is a terrible setback for a community that had been making progress to deal with violence.

This news is also a stark reminder. A reminder of our responsibility. This kind of tragic news brings heightened focus to the work we're trying to do here over the next three days. It reminds us that our job is to build healthier, stronger and safer communities for our people. Communities free of gangs and crime and senseless violence – absolutely these are the symptoms of poverty, despair and hopelessness. But we also know, we have to do more – we have to demonstrate the leadership and show the courage needed to say – no more! To say – that no matter what – we will protect our children and our families. And no matter what – we need to support one another. We need to foster understanding and connections within and among our First Nations to end violence.

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This is our call ... our call to be there for our kids – to love and honour the memory of all of those tragically lost and stand firm in our conviction to achieve a day when this violence is no more.

This is our task together. Creating the conditions for comfort, confidence, caring and security so that they don't have to shed tears for the most vulnerable of our citizens.

This reality is becoming clear to more Canadians. The Auditor General released her Final Report a few weeks ago. The report states that Canada has no guide, no clear targets or outcomes for its work with First Nations, and Canada has no strategy or ability to measure results for our communities.

The Report is no surprise to First Nations. We live this reality every single day. It is near impossible to plan for the long-term when there is no certainty in resources and extremely difficult to build our economies mired in restrictions and outdated policies. And even we have the department changing its name – arbitrarily becoming Aboriginal Affairs – and our communities left asking what does this mean, what is the impact?

The results of a unilateral approach are as predictable as they are tragic: the Auditor General says that over the years things have gotten worse and the gap in the quality of life is widening. She looked at cold, hard facts and found that our people and children are suffering.

The way forward, according to the Auditor General requires a dramatic shift. The unilateralism of the past has not worked – that the Federal Government and First Nations must now work together to overcome current conditions and to chart a better future for all First Nation citizens.

As you know, the AFN and the federal government set out the Canada-First Nations Joint Action Plan in response to the priorities established by First Nations leaders. Canada has signaled its commitment to work with us in key areas, making a direct link to the Apology and to the endorsement of the UN Declaration. This plan is guided by key principles that recognize and affirm Aboriginal and Treaty rights. That is the foundation.

We have been calling consistently for real engagement and real partnership to advance our priorities. This means free, prior and informed consent when it comes to any decisions that might affect First Nation rights or jurisdiction.

The Plan is about working together to strengthen the Crown-First Nations relationship, with assurances that it will not affect any local or regional processes. It identifies advancing the implementation of Treaty rights, improving negotiation and implementation, and reviewing the comprehensive claims policy as priorities for action. It also expresses support from Canada on the priorities of education, the economy and capacity building for First Nation governments.

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Make no mistake – this work is not new. As leaders, many of us have spent years, decades, working towards improving the lives of our people. The Plan is a focused agenda on some key priorities: we will of course still move on other areas that our important to our people.

First Nations governments are ready to exercise our rights and our responsibilities. Working in partnership and in mutual respect was the original vision of our ancestors and that vision will guide us forward.

For decades, our Treaty Nations have watched as resources drain from the north to the south with no benefit to our communities. We have watched as our rivers are harvested without our consent to power the bright lights in big cities, as our burial grounds are flooded and our people are relegated to slop buckets.

Now is the time for Canadians to learn the truth about our peoples, our Treaties and our nation to nation relationship so we can move forward in partnership.

At every step of the way, all of us - whether at the community level, Treaty or regional organization, or at the national office - have a role to play. The AFN National Strategy on Treaties advances key elements and supports every Treaty nation in their work.

This was the premise of our first ever International indigenous Energy and Mining Summit just a few weeks ago, a very successful event that we hosted with NCAI that involved over 800 Indigenous leaders and citizens.

Some will say there is either an economic agenda or a rights agenda. But let me be clear – there is only one agenda. And it is a rights agenda. This is the only path that respects our past and reflects our responsibilities to our future!

As stewards of this land, First Nations have been balancing development and the environment for generations. We are still leading the way today.

Our conversation with Canada will continue until we eventually find ourselves with a willing Crown partner to implement all elements of Treaty:

This conversation continues through our Assembly here. Our agenda is designed for specific strategy discussions on all of the major issues affecting us from education, to health, to community safety, environment, residential schools, lands, child welfare and governance.

We will not be pushed back where our rights are concerned. We will stand strong. We are playing offense on our rights. Our time together here is critical to discuss our work and setout strategies to maximize support and success.

I am open to the joint approach agreed to by the federal government, but it's our responsibility to hold the government to account because our objectives are action and outcomes.

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This is why we called for a First Nations-Crown Gathering to be held this year. This Gathering would be a meeting between First Nations leaders and the Prime Minister and key federal government representatives. We are calling for a focused agenda so that we emerge with a focused plan of action. We do not want a pan-Aboriginal approach and we don't want a lot of talk. Now is the time to act.

These efforts must culminate in critical investments. We know the needs at the community level. Our children cannot wait. There are priorities we can act on now. We cannot afford to lose another generation.

We are engaging all jurisdictions to generate a critical mass of support for results. We are working through channels like the Council of Federation, including the one coming up on July 20.

We have a major funding challenge and we are demanding that the inequity be addressed. We are calling for stable, sustainable funding that is, at minimum, equal to the guarantees enjoyed by the provinces.

As a priority, we need an education system that fully supports our kids. The Prime Minister told me that he supports this priority; that he'll work with us. The National Panel on Education is underway with its first visit at Akwesasne. They met with the grand council, visited the schools, spoke with educators and community members. They had their first key meeting last week with the AFN Chiefs Committee on Education. Right after that they met with the First Nations Education Steering Committee in BC. They are building their full schedule and will ensure that every region has the opportunity to engage in this process.

But let me be clear, every First Nations choice to engage or not will be fully respected. I know some Nations prefer a parallel process. Still others are focused on actions through the courts or through Parliament and still others are taking to the streets. We support EVERY effort. We NEED EVERY effort!

The work of the panel is to listen to you, to develop options and produce a report that will go to the Minister and First Nations at the same time. You have my full commitment that these options will come to every one of you for discussion. The next steps will be as a result of our collective deliberations and direction. There is no deal; there is no agreed-upon outcome.

This is about advancing your direction, getting the Federal Government to the table and working to deliver the results for our children. Ultimately the path forward is up to you and each and every community.

My role, as I have said, is to open doors or kick them down if I have to. We can stand strong against fear-mongering and division by our critics and those who try fight our agenda by trying to get us to fight one another. These old tactics have been used against us and within us. We cannot fight for our rights if we're fighting one another.

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But we can do is .. we can stand tall, together and lead. We must lead now for our rights, our responsibilities and our children!

We owe it to our people to seize every opportunity and turn it to our advantage. We don't go into initiatives like the National Panel or the Joint Action Plan with blinders on. We go in fully aware of the challenges. Our Elders and Ancestors achieved great victories because of their strategy and insight. We can do the same.

We will never compromise our rights, our principles or our people for the sake of an agreement. But we owe it to those same people to seize every opportunity to make their lives better. It may be we're successful only in one area, but that's success. And if we're smart and strategic and most of all united, we can achieve great success. But we must do our best. We owe it to our children and the children yet to come to do the work.

We have the protections we need, the armour and shields that protect us as we advance forward. Armed with the victories of our ancestors - section 35, the Apology and commitment to reconciliation and, now, the global endorsement of the UN Declaration – protect us in our ongoing struggle.

But without question, we must be vigilant every step of the way. We must assess this report and we must be fully satisfied. On each element we must put a stake in the ground – a stake that compels action on our terms. This is our work together ...

Chiefs have clearly instructed us to make the UN Declaration a guide to our advocacy and efforts. To take forward the approach that compels mutual respect and partnership and sets clear standards to achieve in everything we do.

That is where I see the role of the AFN: creating the space for Nations to advance their strategies and jurisdictions in accordance with their rights and responsibilities.

And so today, I am going to conclude here by sharing with you a paper that expands upon my remarks here. It reflects what we've heard from First Nations leaders over the past year about the challenges before us.

What you will see emerge is what, I believe, is a very clear picture.

It is a vast amount of varied activity, but it is built on a firm foundation of our rights. It is a dedicated effort to re-build and re-claim our jurisdiction and our responsibilities.

First Nations are all on a journey advancing their rights – there are different approaches, circumstances and realities –

But it is a journey with a clear destination.

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A destination that affirms our rightful place in our lands and territories; that cherishes our children and creates a better future for them.

I invite you all to take a look – it was in your kits this morning and is on the AFN website. It reflects back the work we are engaged in a way to help us all consider our efforts and next steps. There are four clear elements:

1. The First Nation-Crown Relationship
2. New Fiscal Relationships
3. Implementation of First Nation Governments
4. Structural Change

Each element has possible paths and activities that we are pursuing. Each element must be advanced in balance with the others to achieve our goal.

[Advancing the First Nation Crown relationship means progress through steps like the First Nation-Crown Gathering, First Ministers meetings with First Nations and a potential First Nation-Crown agreement that advances and affirms our rights.

We need new fiscal relationships built on common, mutually acceptable principles that guarantee and deliver sustainable, equitable services based on mutually agreed-to standards.

We must implement our governments through building our institutions, planning and accountability mechanisms...

...and finally we must drive structural change.

This is change that must first affirm First Nation jurisdiction, must include careful legal review and analysis and then advance structural changes to the machinery of the federal government. Right now, the bureaucracy and its policies are failing miserably. We need new structures that affirm the relationship and uphold the responsibility.]

But we too have work to do. Our organizations must be aligned to support and enable nation re-building and the successful development of governing institutions with clear accountability, reporting and direction.

I stood before you this time last year and said we can envision a time in the next 2-5 years when our Governments – at their choice and based on their direction - will operate outside the narrow barriers of the Indian Act.

Over the past year I have traveled to every region and many communities, and I can say: My friends, my fellow leaders – it is possible. In fact, it is underway – well underway. Our work is to continue to drive forward and find the ways that we can fully support one another.

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By looking at this journey, by assessing each element and each of our respective responsibilities – we can organize our efforts, we can mobilize our energies and we can inspire not only our own people, but others – right across this country to join in supporting us.

We are starting to see this happen. Whether it is at the boards of trades, the large gatherings of Canada's business and opinion leaders I have had the opportunity to address, the annual meetings of groups like the United Way, of academics, and institutions. We've advanced statements of partnership with many groups and we see increasing advocacy throughout the mainstream – leaders and ordinary Canadians saying – enough is enough! We get it! We have to do something! Yes, we still have work to do but we are approaching a critical mass of public support to turn the tide, to push the tipping point.

I believe strongly that this is Our Time ... Our time to push harder, to have the challenging conversations, to deal with each other openly and honestly. It is our Time to come together to support one another. It is Our time as the Indigenous Nations of this land.

We are not backing away from the fight for our rights and the fight for our children. I can guarantee you we will continue until we have achieved fairness and justice for our children.

So together - let's do our work to honour that young boy from Samson and every child, to honour all our people and let them know - we will make a better tomorrow, together.

Our citizens must come first. This work is not about press releases or playing politics – plain and simple, we must agree that we will no longer accept the tragedies we see every day in our communities. After all, this is life or death.

This is about all of us collectively lifting up our citizens - our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers, our grandparents – but most importantly – our children and grandchildren.

I thank you for joining with me and the entire Assembly today. I look forward to the days ahead, to our reflections and deliberations and setting our course forward, together.

Kleco kleco!