



First Citizens' Forum

Premier Gordon Campbell March 31, 2006

Check Against Delivery

I want to start by saying thank you to the elders and the chiefs from across the province who have joined us, and to all of you who have come to work with us on our fourth First Citizens' Forum here in British Columbia.

I think it's important as we start here today in the Dialogue Centre that we acknowledge two other important events that are taking place. First, I know there are several members from aboriginal communities who are not able to join us today because they are participating in the Highway of Tears Symposium in Prince George. I want to commend the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation for initiating that discussion. Solicitor General John Les is attending now, and I know that we all look forward to seeing a resolution of the issues that are being addressed there.

Secondly, today, and I think it's important for us to acknowledge the exceptional people of the Gitga'at community of Hartley Bay on the coast of British Columbia. Their courage, their compassion, their welcoming, their strength in helping the crew and passengers of the Queen of the North is a true inspiration to all of us in British Columbia and indeed across the country.

As a first recognition of their efforts, yesterday BC Ferries donated one of the rescue boats of the Queen of the North to the Hartley Bay division of the Coast Guard Auxiliary. I am looking forward to meeting with the chief and the community, because it seems to me as we recognize their contribution it's important to ask the Gitga'at people how they feel that recognition should be forthcoming.

It is, I think, important for us across the country to think and to reflect on how quickly, how unequivocally and how immediately they responded to the challenges and the dangers that confronted them last week, and I think it's once again a sign of how people respond in times of great need with courage and with strength, and I once again want to say thank you to all of the people of Hartley Bay from the Gitga'at First Nation.

Since our last First Citizens' Forum in November of 2004, we have experienced some significant events in the relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians. I think it's very important for us to reflect on the strength and the power of the aboriginal leadership that has brought us to the beginning of a new path towards reconciliation, and I don't think we should underestimate the strength that is required from leadership in these times of finding new paths to the future. Because of their leadership at the national level of all aboriginal communities, there was a First Ministers' meeting last November that was, I believe, an historic commitment to close the gap, the health care gap, the educational gap, the economic gap, and the relationship gaps that have existed for far too long, over centuries, between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians.

As a result of that dialogue, on March 24th we saw the first step from the federal government as they brought in a new plan to address drinking water problems in aboriginal communities. That plan includes action on safe drinking water at seven B.C. sites.

While we celebrate the fact that there has been action that has been finally taken, I think we should recognize that it has been a long time coming, and it is again because of the strength of the aboriginal leadership – their commitment and drive – that we have seen this progress made over the last year.

At this time last year, we also began meeting aboriginal leaders from British Columbia to discuss how we could forge a new relationship, a relationship that would be built on respect and reconciliation, and I want to say to this gathering here today and through you to your friends and your colleagues and First Nations and Metis people across the province, that I feel fortunate to have been able to work with the leadership council that was brought together again by aboriginal and First Nations people in this province.

First Nations Summit Grand Chief Edward John, Grand Chief Doug Kelly, Dave Porter, Danny Watts, Chief Leah George-Wilson, Union of BC Indian Chiefs Robert Shintah, Stewart Phillip, BC Assembly of First Nations Regional Chief Shawn Atleo, have spoken with clarity, with passion, with discretion, and, I believe, with confidence in the future of First Nations people across this province – the confidence that says we can build a new relationship, we can open new doors of opportunity. I want to acknowledge the First Nations Leadership Council for their commitment to their vision, and to those of them who are able to join with us today I say thank you very much for your leadership.

I also want to acknowledge today that we are joined by Bruce Dumont of the Metis Nation in B.C. We were honoured to have him join us as well when the Governor-General Michaëlle Jean visited us here in British Columbia.

Today we are also joined by the Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, Tom Christensen, who has on behalf of the government shown real leadership and dedication to opening up these new areas of opportunity for all of us.

Today we're also joined by the Deputy Premier and the Minister Responsible for Education, Shirley Bond; the Minister of Advanced Education, Murray Coell; the Minister of Health, George Abbott; the Minister of Economic Development, Colin Hansen; the Minister of Children and Family Development, Stan Hagen; and the Minister of State for Childcare, Linda Reid.

As well, I think it's important to note that this is an initiative of government as a whole, and I am pleased today we are joined by Dave Hayer, the MLA for Surrey-Tynehead; Gordon Hogg, the MLA for Surrey-White Rock; John Nuraney, the MLA for Burnaby-Willingdon; Joan McIntyre, the MLA for West Vancouver-Garibaldi; Mary Polak, the MLA for Langley; Val Roddick, the MLA for Delta-South, and Katherine Whittred, the MLA for North Vancouver-Lonsdale.

I mention that because I think that the critical component of what we are doing as we strive to improve on the lives of First Citizens across the province, is we are establishing new relationships, not just government to government relationships, but personal relationships, relationships that are indeed open hearted, that are recognizing and listening and learning relationships.

This is our fourth First Citizens' Forum. In 2002 we focused on aboriginal communities. In 2003, we talked about opening up access to opportunities including issues of education, skills training, employment and entrepreneurship. On March the 21 of this year, our government introduced legislation that established a hundred million dollar new relationship trust, which will help address many of our capacity building issues. In 2004, we focussed on the potential of aboriginal youth in British Columbia.

I had the honour of attending an Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Symposium here in Vancouver earlier this month. Almost half the population of aboriginal communities in B.C. is under the age of 25. And you know, one of the great opportunities that you have if you are in a position where you receive those invitations, is you get to meet young people who are excited about their future, who are dynamic, and who are going to in fact drive a better, healthier, more prosperous future for all people across this province. The leadership and the creativity and the innovation shown by those young people at the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Symposium, was truly enlightening, invigorating, and revitalizing in terms of our thinking about the future of our province and of First Nations across British Columbia.

Education outcomes for First Nations students continue to improve. We have seen a six percent improvement in graduation rates since 2001, but I want everyone in this room to recognize and understand that we have a long way to go in improving aboriginal graduation rates, and we will work with aboriginal education leaders, aboriginal communities and elders, to build the foundation for an educational future that does close our gaps so that we have the same level of graduation rate with aboriginal as with non-aboriginal people. That is of critical importance to us as a government, and I believe it's of critical importance to First Nations communities across the province.

I am pleased that post-secondary participation of aboriginal young people has risen 12 percent in the last year alone. We have signed 24 enhancement agreements to improve education for aboriginal students. And one of the tasks that we have set for ourselves in British Columbia is to assure we close the educational gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people between now and 2015.

Here is the critical part of this, and it is what's critical, I hope, for all of you who are here today. The leadership in reaching that goal and defining that plan is going to be First Nations leadership, aboriginal leadership, in British Columbia. We hope to work with that leadership, to empower that leadership, and to provide that leadership with the resources to assure that we do close that gap. It will take time, it will take commitment, it will take dedication, it will take all of our mutual abilities to overcome frustrations at sometimes the slowness of our progress, and also to participate in celebration when we succeed, but we will do it in British Columbia, with the strength of the aboriginal leadership that we have in this province.

This year, our focus is in many ways related to youth and education: preserving aboriginal languages. In a world in which the first language for most of us here has virtually become the language of global exchange, we rarely take the time to think about just what language means to us, how it shapes us, how it builds us and creates in us our whole way of looking and seeing the world.

Language is far more important than just the words we use. Language is the place we take in the world, as we work and live and walk in the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Language is the archives of our history." A language is not only the voice of a people, it is the voice of their past, of their ideas and values. It is the voice that shapes their culture.

There are six thousand languages spoken around the world today, and linguists predict that half of those will be extinct by the end of the century. It is the nature of languages that they change, that they blend and in some cases they fade over time. But just imagine, three thousand languages will soon reach the point where they will not be spoken again.

There are 53 indigenous languages in Canada. At the current rate of decline, without further action, only a handful of Canada's first languages are likely to survive. Thirty-two of those languages are indigenous to British Columbia – 60 percent of Canada's indigenous that are part of our province's past, of our province's tradition, and they are going to be part of our province's future as well.

It is important for us as we look at that to recognize that five of those 32 languages are already extinct. There is nobody left who can speak them fluently. At least six more are on the verge of being lost forever. So today, as we are joined by our elders, we should recognize that it is elders of First Nations across the province that will indeed be able to make sure that those languages are carried forward. If we do not act with focus, and again with dedication, we can see many more languages fade from our province.

The fourth goal of the new relationship commits us to work together to revitalize and preserve First Nations culture and languages, and restore literacy and fluency in First Nations languages. Think of the gift that we can give young First Nations children if we maintain, revitalize and re-establish their language in their minds, in their homes, in their communities.

To help achieve that goal, today I am announcing that an additional one million dollars in new funding will be provided to help protect B.C.'s indigenous languages. The First People's Heritage, Language and Culture Council will administer the funds. And let me just highlight a couple of things for you. Each year, the council dedicates six hundred thousand dollars to revitalize aboriginal languages. Last year, that supported projects in 36 communities, representing 14 language families, but it was only half the projects for which they received funding requests. This additional funding should help them meet the demand. It will support language immersion programs, expansion of the First Voices Internet program, which the province helped launch in 2003, and it will support examining the potential for a First Nations Arts and Language Preservation Centre here in British Columbia.

As we go through our day to day lives, it is not unusual for us to take language for granted, but I think it is important for us today to recognize that language is the cornerstone of culture, of belonging, and of who we are. It is recognition of that fact that will help us protect and revitalize languages across the Province of

British Columbia.

We know that preserving and revitalizing these languages has a profound impact, especially on First Nations young people. It says that we value their culture. We know that helps lead to greater self-esteem, to improved educational outcomes, and to improved literacy.

I want to acknowledge the work that is already being done. It was often lonely work in the past. It's already being done in so many aboriginal communities by elders and the leadership there, to protect and preserve their languages and their culture. Our goal here today is to identify what more we can do, and how we can all help preserve this vital part of the heritage of British Columbia. For the heritage of British Columbia is not tied to this history of the past two centuries. It is tied to thousands of years of stories and background and ancestors, as the Musqueam elder pointed out to us, who have given us our place in the world. It reaches back into time immemorial, when the languages we now seek to protect echoed from the trees and the mountains and the valleys of this province, and the history of its land and its people is irrevocably bound up in the language of the aboriginal people who have lived here. If we lose those languages, we lose a piece of our province's heritage, and in doing so we lose a piece of ourselves.

We have set an ambitious goal. We want to transform the relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal British Columbians. In a very real way, the survival of BC's indigenous languages will be a measure of our success. The good news is that with the good work that is being done in communities, aboriginal children around the province are speaking and learning the language of their ancestors.



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