

Statement of Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations

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Grand Chief Phil Fontaine

Madame Minister, Distinguished platform guests,
ladies and gentleman...

I want to congratulate CANDO and the Royal Bank for sponsoring this important and timely gathering. There has never been a better time for corporate Canada and First Nations to join hands. There has never been a more opportune moment to confirm friendships than the moment we are sharing today.

Loyalty and trust are at the very root of successful partnerships and I want to pay tribute in front of this distinguished audience to my friend Charlie Coffey. Charlie is a leader who leads by example. He leads by putting his heart into everything he does.

In my own province of Manitoba, Charlie used his years as a senior executive at the Royal Bank to help realize the potential of our people's energy and talent. His devotion is more than social responsibility; it is a labour of love.

He established innovative program on our reserves. He helped create a strategy to rebuild First Nation's economies throughout the province. He used his position and influence to advance entrepreneurship wherever he went and with anyone who would listen. He is truly a visionary whose pioneering work offers inspiration for those who will follow.

Charlie is an honorary chief in Manitoba and has been given an eagle feather and a star

blanket. There is no higher honour we can grant and there is no one more deserving.

Now is the time to take such examples of leadership and spread them right across the land. First of all, for most Canadians, economic times have never been better and governments of every stripe can take their share of credit.

Budgets are balanced or nearly so, interest rates are lower than they have been since our parents bought their first homes, inflation barely registers, unemployment is dropping, however slowly, and Canada's competitiveness in global markets is strong.

Look at your own businesses. Profits are at a record high, and these buoyant times bring with them renewed calls for corporate and social responsibility. Now is the moment to capitalize on the good news; to invest in our children's future, to reinvest in our communities, to bridge the economic gap between First Nations people and other Canadians.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples makes no bones about the risk of delay. The status quo is not good enough and its recommendations to pump investment into First Nations' communities is a forward-looking one. The time to move our people away from dependency towards self-sufficiency is now. RCAP says the cost of the status quo was \$7.5 billion in

1996 and will grow to \$11.0 billion by the year 2016.

Do we want to stand-by helplessly as the power of inertia paralyzes our people? NO. We refuse to sink deeper into the depths of dependency and despair. With the help of our friends, we will move forward, with determination, energy and hope.

We know that history informs the present and can foreshadow the future. I do not want to dwell on the misery that history has dealt out to my people, but we cannot ignore the scars and the pain. Before contact with Europeans we were self-sufficient. We developed trade and commercial links between Indian nations that produced working economies.

But as the CANDO background paper points out, contact with those millions who came, as a result, I want to tell you, of our exceedingly generous immigration policy, access to emerging economies was denied; access to capital markets and credit for First Nation people on reserve was denied; access to land for market gardening was denied. Dislocation and a loss of traditional ways led to despondency and dependency.

And there is pain to heal as well.

That is all I want to say about the past. I want to focus on opportunity, on the exciting potential that continuing partnership with government and the private sector can offer our peoples.

When we look at that future we cannot ignore the importance of taking control over our lives. Control means political freedom and that means self-government. This is more than political science and were talking about here.

It is worth reflecting on studies in the United States that show a direct link between self-government and economic development; as self-government takes root, economic development blossoms. That is only common sense because as people gain more control over their own lives, as they manage their natural resources, as they police themselves and administer their own justice system, it follows that jobs and entrepreneurship will not be far behind.

Leaders of the other two levels of government know very well that control over their own affairs is the only way to assure accountability. We are no different. And we insist on the same level of accountability in our own political culture that non-aboriginal Canadians demand in theirs. It is hard to believe, but First Nation Canadians have only enjoyed the right to vote

since 1960. Our political systems developed in different ways in different places, but the principles of democratic rule and accountability to our electorates are vital to us.

We ask for our diversity to be respected, just as we respect the diversity among governments at the federal and provincial levels.

I want to say to the minister of Indian Affairs, the Honourable Jane Stewart, that she can rely on her First Nation partners to be constructive, but assertive, respectful but mindful of our rightful place in the Canadian family.

I want to tell her that we will never abandon our right to self-government and we will honour always the treaties negotiated in good faith by our ancestors.

But it is not enough to talk about rights. We must also affirm our responsibilities. We are committed to self-sufficiency and that means we are responsible for our development and our own well being. We need our friends, we need you in this room, to offer encouragement and support. We need your good faith and your partnership to realize our full potential but it is First Nation people who must become the architects of their future, as individuals and as communities.

Nothing is more important to a young person than a job and nothing leads faster to a job than education. The more First Nation businesses that spring up the more jobs for our people on and off reserve. The news is good, but not good enough.

On the entrepreneurial front we can proudly boast that First Nation people now own 10,000 businesses across Canada. Compare that to the several hundred businesses under First Nation ownership as recently as the 1960s and you begin to realize how far we have come and how far we must travel still.

The Royal Commissioners say we must create 300,000 jobs before the year 2016, a staggering number and a daunting task. But, with the help of our friends, we will rise to the challenge. Just look at the number of First Nation peoples in colleges and universities across Canada today. The total is now more than 40,000. With knowledge comes power and with knowledge comes hope to fight the despair that for too long has blocked our path.

When our young people graduate from college or university they will be positioned to benefit from those improving economic conditions I spoke of earlier. They will have the poise and

the confidence to strike out on their own and establish new businesses or find good jobs. They will become role models for their brothers and sisters who will see that hard work and patience, discipline and determination are the ticket out of poverty and hopelessness.

It is important to remind everyone within shouting distance, of these uplifting stories. Too much of what we hear about First Nation people is negative and depressing. At every opportunity, all of us must sing the praises of those who have overcome the barriers and made better lives for themselves and their families.

I want to thank the men and women in this room for the encouragement and support you have given us. Your industry truly has taken the lead in hiring our young people, motivating

our entrepreneurs and offering services to our people.

You have well-developed social values and you are successful business people. You know that more and more First Nations people are entering the workforce, that our birth rates are high, that migration to the cities means customers are on the loose. Your stake in our success is not only emotional or motivated by conscience, but it makes good business sense as well. What is good for First Nations is good for Canada.

We welcome your partnership and we embrace a future of continuing co-operation and friendship. Let's get on with the job.

THANK YOU