



**SPEAKING NOTES FOR ASSEMBLY OF FIRST
NATIONS NATIONAL CHIEF PHIL FONTAINE**

**FROM POVERTY TO PROSPERITY: FIRST NATIONS
PLAN FOR CREATING OPPORTUNITY**

**5TH ANNUAL
ONTARIO ECONOMIC SUMMIT**

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEAKING NOTES FOR ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS NATIONAL CHIEF

- *(Traditional Greeting)*
- Thank you very much for inviting me to address this fifth annual gathering of some of the best and brightest corporate minds in Ontario and beyond. It is truly an honour to be within your company.
- The theme of this year's gathering is "REINVENT. RETHINK. RENEW: Strengthening Economic Resilience." In view of this theme I will argue that that First Nations are key players in strengthening Ontario's economy. And I am challenging all of you here, as well as the provincial government, to re-think how you deal with First Nations, from employment to investment.
- I am here this morning to speak about how First Nations citizens can fill the growing gap in the labour market. But first, let me give you a few brief stats about the peoples I represent.
- Many of you may not realize that there are now more than 800,000 status Indians in Canada. Fully half of our population is under the age of 25.
- Of the 633 First Nations communities across the country, there are 139 right here in Ontario. This province also has the largest population of First Nations citizens at approximately 180,000.
- The largest First Nations community in Canada happens to be just down the road, near a place called Caledonia. Six Nations has a population of over 20,000 citizens.
- Six Nations has produced a good number of successful business people, professionals, and artists over the years -- from one of the most iconic rock and country musicians of the 20th century—Robbie Robertson to businessman, athletes and political leaders such as Chief Bill Montour.
- Besides a growing population, we also have a growing land base. In the years and decades to come, First Nations will exercise control over this country's natural resources – from forestry, to minerals, to renewable energy.
- Therefore, if Canada is to succeed economically, the role of First Nations will necessarily grow as well.
- First Nations workers are key to filling Canada's need for skilled workers: our youthful demographic will be critical in staving off Canada's looming labour force replacement crisis.
- There is still much work to be done before we can begin to close the growing labour gap. First, we must close the poverty gap that plagues far too many First Nations communities.
- On that point, I'd like to tell you about the community of Pikangikum.
- Less than two years ago, Peter Sarsfield, health director at the Northwest Health Unit in Kenora, described Pikangikum First Nation as the Davis Inlet of Ontario.
- He said, and I quote, "I've been to about 200 First Nations communities. This is one of the worst I've seen."

- For years, Pikangikum has had one of the highest suicide rates in the country because of poverty and despair. But just two weeks ago, Deputy Chief Paddy Peters told my office, and I quote, “We have to look at the bright side. We cannot dwell upon the tragedies of the past.”
- Yes, Pikangikum is still one of the most difficult places to live in Ontario – there is no water and sewer, and no power grid for a growing community of 3,000 people. One-third of the residents are under the age of nine.
- Over 800 children are crammed into temporary portable classrooms, and the Deputy Chief says there is a waiting list for more students to get into school.
- But there is hope in the very near future as a result of economic development, and skills training.
- Pikangikum has been involved in the Whitefeather Sustainable Forest project for the past 13 years.
- In a very short while, the community will take possession of an area of boreal forest the size of Prince Edward Island. They will once again be responsible for protecting the forest for future generations, as well as harvesting selected timber.
- This past summer, the federal government approved a seven million dollar training program for Pikangikum that will allow their young people to learn both forestry and mining skills. Deputy Chief Peters says Whitefeather this will create at least 350 local jobs.
- Pikangikum and two other local First Nations – Wabigoon Lake and Eagle Lake – along with the municipalities of Dryden and Red Lake – are also involved in the Two Feather Project. They plan to build a laminated lumber plant that will manufacture high quality wood beams for export to the Asian market. They have secured investors from Finland. The Province of Ontario has also shown interest in funding the project.
- Deputy Chief Peters pointed out there are a number of opportunities for his people from conservation to recreation to tourism. “Most of all we want to keep and protect our Treaty Rights and our rights within our territory,” he said. “That’s a key factor to what we’re doing here.”
- There are so many First Nations communities, and leaders, who are ready and willing to participate in Ontario’s economy. We just need the investment and partnership from people like you.
- Another opportunity that I want to mention and hope you will support is the Quetico Centre. The building, a former conference centre that now stands empty, is located on Highway 11, less than 200 kilometers west of Thunder Bay. It would be perfect as a training centre for our young people who want to enter the mining or forestry industries, or who want to become hydro linesmen, or water and sewer technicians.
- Chief Glenn Nolan, of the Missanabie **Cree** First Nation, is trying to make this centre a reality. He has already found potential partners with companies such as Vale Inco and X-Strata. Chief Nolan is with us here today and I encourage you to speak to him. The Quetico Centre would be the first of its kind in Canada and could potentially be replicated across the country.
- As a national leader, I have a vision for sustainability. It is a vision of Nation-to-Nation, Nation to business solutions for the future. We call this vision the AFN’s Creating Opportunity Strategy.

- Our First Nation plan will fundamentally result in shift of current policy orientations: from injustice to respect, from dependence to recognition and partnership; and, ultimately, from poverty to prosperity.
- It is a plan that focuses on reconciliation, on moving from the damaging practices of the past to a new relationship between our Nations and the governments and peoples of Canada.
- A first step in this new relationship is the historic apology to survivors of the Indian Residential Schools, delivered by the Prime Minister of Canada in the House of Commons on June 11, 2008.
- The apology was important not only because the government was at long-last taking responsibility for the terrible harm that resulted from their actions. The apology was also important because it was founded on the recognition that we – First Nations peoples – own our lives and our destinies.
- As I said on that day, the apology marks the beginning of reconciliation, a new start to the relationship between First Nations and Canada.
- It is a beginning. Now we need to go further, and take steps to action.
- The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development concluded after a decade of research that ... there was not a single case of sustained development that did not involve the recognition and effective exercise of tribal sovereignty.
- In order to move forward, Canada's federal law and policy must recognize First Nation jurisdiction and First Nations must be masters of our own destinies.
- As part of our **First Nations Plan**, we have carefully mapped out roles for all sectors of Canadian society.
- First and foremost, our own governments must come forward to exercise our rights and responsibilities to protect our children, our environment, our heritage and our languages.
- But right now, we do not have all the tools to do so. The Federal Government must commit to fairness, to justice and to reconciliation that is the law of the land as set out in the Constitution of Canada. Programs and services for First Nations must be funded at fair rates based on real costs, just as they are for all other Canadians. There is no reason, for example, why our children – the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population – should receive \$2000 less on average than other Canadian children for education.
- As I already said, First Nations are a young and growing population. We are coming of age as the rest of Canada is aging and retiring. More than half our people are under the age of 25. They are key to ensuring Canada stays a competitive and productive nation in this changing world. We should be investing in them so that we realize the full potential of our people and our country.
- We must also deal with the outstanding land issues. First Nations are people of the land. Our future and our well-being are directly connected to the land. Lawful obligations and land claims must be resolved fairly and swiftly.
- We must make strategic partnerships. We must reach out to link with national and international coalitions such as the Make Poverty History campaign, the Canadian Auto Workers, ONEXONE, and others – to expose the deplorable state of First Nations people in Canada, and to join forces to demand action.

- We are taking the message in the First Nations Blue Print directly to the board rooms of Canada through our Corporate Challenge.
- The private sector can be an important ally for us. Working with the private sector can be a win-win. Open communication and strategic alliances are the hallmarks of this approach. And we see after only one year some real and practical results.
- I think we all know what's at stake here: dealing with the greatest social injustice in Canada – First Nations poverty.
- The scope of First Nations poverty is deep and wide. It permeates all aspects of our peoples' lives – from health and housing, to child welfare and family life, to education and employment. For example:
 - First Nations life expectancy is 5 to 7 years lower than that of other Canadians;
 - The rate of infant mortality is 50% higher;
 - 70% of First Nations students never complete high school, and even fewer go to university;
 - First Nations youth are committing suicide at a rate 8 to 10 times that of other Canadian youth;
 - 27,000 aboriginal children are in foster care – 1 in 10 compared to 1 in 200 of non-aboriginal children.
- Something is terribly wrong. And let's be clear: these are literally life and death issues.
- There are many overlapping and mutually reinforcing reasons for the poverty that exists and persists in First Nations communities.
- **Lack of education** causes poverty. Only 31% of our youth graduate from high school. Canada's Auditor General says this huge gap with the non-Aboriginal population is caused by **unequal and inadequate funding**.
- Research by the Canadian Centre for the Study of Living Standards, shows that investments in First Nations education would add an additional \$72 billion to Canada's economy over the next ten years. It makes no sense to under-fund our education.
- Related to education is employment. First Nations are the fastest growing population in Canada, yet far too many of our young people are unemployed.
- **Unemployment causes poverty** - We make up almost 4% of the Canadian population, but comprise less than 2% of the labor force.
- **Lack of political will perpetuates poverty**. For example, it's been 12 years since the release of the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. This was a groundbreaking report by the largest, most comprehensive Royal Commission in Canadian history.
- It provided a roadmap out of poverty. But it's been shelved, its recommendations ignored.

- **Deliberately missed opportunities for investment perpetuate poverty.** For example, the 2005 Kelowna Accord was an historic breakthrough – a decision to invest \$5 billion in Aboriginal children, healthcare, education, and sustainable development.
- The Assembly of First Nations and all other Aboriginal leaders, supported it; the former Prime Minister and all of the provincial premiers fully supported it.
- The Kelowna Accord was a remarkable, non-partisan achievement that would have set in motion a necessary and long overdue paradigm shift, from poverty toward self-sufficiency.
- What happened? Almost everyone still supports it. I met with the Premiers in Quebec City this July and they remain committed to the Accord, saying that the agreement belongs to all of us who worked so hard to make it happen, but Canada's current government chose to **shelve it**, offering nothing new in its place. They have no plan.
- **Inadequate, discriminatory funding for basic necessities causes and perpetuates poverty.** At the present time, the First Nations citizens receive **less than half** the amount that other Canadians receive for programs and services.
- Where child welfare is concerned, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada provides **22% less funding per child** to First Nations child welfare agencies than is received by provincial child welfare agencies. No wonder so many of our children are in care!
- **Lack of a land base causes poverty.** The implications of unsettled land claims for First Nations poverty are profound.
- As long ago as 1993, a study by the Conference Board of Canada found that unsettled land claims created a major barrier to investment on First Nations lands.
- In December 2006, a Senate Report found that at the rate that the federal government is negotiating land claims, it will take 90 years to settle our land claims. In some cases it was taking 28 years just to get the claims before a court!
- At the same time, that Senate Report tells us, *"In every case where they have been settled, it has meant an **immediate improvement** in the lives of First Nations people."* This echoes what the Harvard study found – that only when First Nations have control over their affairs can real gains be made.
- And, again, in March 2007, in another Senate report on economic development, there is support for institutional development and increased access to lands and resources.
- Two months ago, the World Health Organization released a report that examined the health impacts of inequality – of poverty and discrimination.
- The report said: *"(The) toxic combination of bad policies, economics, and politics is, in large measure, responsible for the fact that a majority of people in the world do not enjoy the good health that is biologically possible."*
- It further stated that: *"Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale."*
- We need to stop this. We need to create new relationships and ways of doing business to address these inequalities that have such real and negative impacts on the lives of First Nations.

- In 2007, I launched the Corporate Challenge to bring industry to the table with us, and forge new partnerships.
- We see these partnerships primarily rooted in ventures that will provide **procurement, investment, and employment opportunities** for First Nations people.
- We know there are tremendous opportunities in the area of **procurement**, and of finding ways for large companies to get their mainstream suppliers to work with First Nations. Participation with us will go a long way in creating those much needed jobs.
- In **resource development**, First Nations and the business community can work together to create advantages for each other.
- **Natural resources** are the mainstay of the Canadian economy, and have made Canada one of the wealthiest countries in the world.
- But First Nations have not received **our fair share** of that wealth from resource development on our lands and in our territories. If we had our fair share, we would not be so poor. Here, I am not simply talking about a piece of the profits. We want to participate in the workforce and create jobs. We must have input on decisions that affect our traditional territories.
- We are attempting to redress the **fiscal imbalance between First Nations and the rest of Canada**.
- A discussion paper put out by the **Prospectors & Developers Association of Canada** addressed the benefits of resource sharing with First Nations. They say: *“sharing of the public revenues would increase the political stability and economic predictability that support long-term investment.”*
- That sounds like a win-win to me...and it comes from the corporate community.
- Another way Canada’s corporate community can work with us for mutual benefit is by adding their voices to ours in urging the federal government to **settle our land claims**.
- It is time government **stopped** talking about settling land claims, and **started settling** land claims. Settled land claims will create **more** certainty for investors, enabling **more** development to take place.
- The Senate Report I referred to earlier, recommends that the federal government allocate \$250 million a year to speed up this process. This recommendation should be implemented **now**.
- Another mutually beneficial way to work together is to **close the knowledge gap**. We have asked corporate Canada to join with us in insisting that government invest for equality in First Nations education and training.
- The First Nations population is a huge untapped resource right now, but in the years to come, as our population continues to grow faster than any other group in the country, it will be a major part of Canada’s work force.
- Canada has an aging labor force and is already facing labor shortages. First Nations can meet those needs.
- There are already many examples of successful partnerships between First Nations and corporate Canada that are working very well.

- The **Membertou First Nation** is one example. That community now has a world-class trade and convention centre. They achieved the much-coveted ISO business certification. They have business relationships with Lockheed Martin Canada, SNC Lavalin and more.
- The interest expressed so far in our Corporate Challenge is impressive. Siemens Canada, Bell Canada, the Royal Bank of Canada, The Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada, and the Forest Products Association of Canada have already signed-on.
- One other area of potential partnership I want to mention today is the **environment**.
- Everybody is finally accepting that global warming and serious environmental degradation must be addressed.
- First Nations people are among the first to feel the effects of global warming and environmental degradation. They have been sounding warning bells for years.
- Fish stocks and caribou herds are shrinking in the North, and with them, the culture and way of life of the First People
- We need to re-examine at the most fundamental level our approach to development. We need to consider responsible development, anti-pollution measures, tax incentives, and the cultural impacts of our activities. We must work together as stakeholders in our most precious and over-arching natural resource: the environment.
- First Nations and Canada's business community can only benefit from working together to address these issues.
- We have expertise. We have managed to survive in the Canadian environment, in all sorts of conditions in all sorts of territories, for thousands of years.
- We have a deep respect for nature, the land, the water, and all the creatures that dwell within. We maintain an unbroken traditional, intimate relationship with the environment.
- Moreover, we have a **huge vested interest** in protecting the environment. It is **our** people who occupy the Boreal Forest. It is **our** people who have survived in the far north and who protect Canadian sovereignty on the northern borders.
- The bottom line is that all development is **human** development – it has to work **for** people – it has to respect **human rights** – it has to be **responsible to** the environment and nature itself.
- We can help with that if we work together. We are not anti-development, but we can ensure development is responsible and sustainable.
- The return on this investment will benefit all of us, but most importantly, it will ensure the survival of our children and our children's children.
- The costs of doing nothing are far too great.
- If we eliminate poverty through co-operative, sustainable development, not only will these costs be saved, the ripple effects will continue and multiply for generations.
- Our people will be able to live their lives in dignity as all Canadians should. They will enjoy the fruits of their labors with their families. Their children will have all the hopes and dreams other children take for granted. And they will have the opportunity to realize their full potential.

- But all of this takes **courage** and **imagination** – the courage to discard the old colonial approaches that have never worked, and the imagination to embark on a bold, new approach.
- We can create change in our lifetime. But we have to act now.
- One way we can act is to influence the federal election. According to some research we have done, First Nations can turn the tide in 63 ridings. We can change the composition of the House of Commons.
- We have over 120, 000 youth aged 18-30 who can make a difference by casting their vote for the future. They are the leaders of today and tomorrow.
- This is why yesterday, we launched, in conjunction with our National Youth Council, launched a National Day of Political Action which is an initiative of our “Vote '08, Change Can't Wait!” campaign.
- What ‘change’ are we seeking? We are seeking a change in the relationship between First Nations and Canada so that it moves from delegation to one based on respect and recognition of our inherent authority.
- We are seeking change in the quality of life and life circumstances many of us face each and every day.
- So on September 29 and each day leading up to the October 14 election, First Nation communities are encouraged to participate in a variety of political activities such as engaging with their citizens and local candidates, hosting community meetings and town halls, discuss platforms with each other, and other political events so that First Nation citizens can make an informed choice in the federal election.
- This campaign aims to increase First Nations political participation, to encourage voting among First Nations voters and to increase the profile of Aboriginal issues in this election.
- This initiative is also aimed at soliciting a clear and robust First Nations platform from each political party. We mailed questionnaires to each of the five parties to solicit clear and specific answers on what they would do put reconciliation into action.]
- During the June 11th Apology to residential school survivors, every federal party leader expressed a desire for collective reconciliation, fundamental change and a future based on respect and recognition of who we are as First Peoples. It is time to fulfill this promise. So we called on all federal parties to put their words into action by laying out clear platforms aimed at effective and meaningful change.
- Yesterday as part of the National Day of Action, I participated in an all day media-blitz to bring to the public debate a much needed infusion of the issues that First Nations face such as poverty and the need for government investment in our future and our well-being. To jump-start the discussion of our issues in the public debate.
- We have had events over the last couple of days to increase voter awareness and public education so that voters can make an informed choice on Election Day. In the NWT, we endorsed the Federal Candidates Forum in the Western Arctic riding. In the Atlantic region, the Atlantic Policy Congress has been going to community to community to raise awareness about the election, issues that are important to First Nations and to initiate dialogue among First Nations.

- To this end, the AFN is and will remain non-partisan. Instead, we will look at party platforms and their responses to the questionnaire we created and we will provide our best analysis of where the party's stand on the issues that matter to us.
- First Nations are fully engaged in this election, we can make a difference and we will make a difference.
- I encourage all of you who share an interest in working with us to build a brighter future and a stronger economy to act and to make a difference in this election campaign.
- We can create a Canada where success is contagious.
- A Canada where the federal government is investing in education, health care, and housing to help support a viable First Nations economy.
- A Canada where First Nations youth are fully employed across all sectors of the economy - artists and entrepreneurs, politicians and policy-makers, office workers, and engineers.
- This will be a Canada that has fully realized its highest ideals of fairness and justice for all, a Canada where the First Peoples truly own their own lives and their destinies.
- Before closing, I am happy to let you know that Pikangikum is building a community centre that will open before Christmas. The centre will include a gym because those 800 plus children don't have one with their portable classrooms. This is a positive step for a community that has experienced so much grief.
- Unfortunately, there are thousands of First Nations children here in Ontario who are without proper schools. Governments at all levels have a role in changing this situation. Literally, poverty is a root cause that breeds symptoms that can lead to tragedy.
- Conversely, prosperity is a catalyst that will spread across the country.
- I invite you to join me in communicating our message to all governments. A new era must begin today.
- We need your support to tell the provincial and federal government that our children are your future employees.
- It is our obligation, our duty, to ensure that our young people are able to access proper education, skills, and training. In doing so, we will re-invent and renew our Nations, and re-invigorate Ontario's economy.
- I also want to invite you to attend or participate in our Inter-Nation Trade and Economic Summit, which will be held this March 9-11 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. I am pleased to announce that the Province of Ontario will be a major sponsor of what will be the largest-ever Indigenous economic development conference in Canada.
- Our First Nations plan is **bold**. It is **ambitious**. It is solution-orientated, and forward-looking.
- Working together, we can be world leaders.
- Thank you, *Meegwetch!*