



A native economic blueprint: part one

Leaders of Canada's First Nations, along with provincial and territorial governments, are sounding increasingly optimistic about new levels of co-operation aimed at bringing economic prosperity and jobs to the country's aboriginal population. And Canadian premiers say they're anxious to take a more aggressive new role to help make that happen.

Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), says he believes that future meetings involving premiers and First Nations leaders will prove to be major steps toward easing poverty and chronic unemployment among the country's aboriginal people.

Fontaine's comments followed last month's annual conference in Moncton, N.B., of the Council of the Federation, made up of six national organizations representing more than one million aboriginal people. Although the present federal government has backed away from the Kelowna Accord and its planned \$5 billion in funding for native education, employment and anti-poverty programs, Fontaine said he recognizes the provinces and territories still support its goals.

"There's a provincial responsibility to the accord and we expect that each jurisdiction will now proceed to give effect to the accord," he told reporters after the Moncton conference. "That's important to us."

Sixty percent of the First Nations population is under age 24, representing a skilled and highly mobile potential labour force. The premiers, Fontaine said, recognize that high unemployment on reserves, especially among younger people, represents a huge untapped labour resource for Canada.

A major report from the C.D. Howe Institute, he added, identified two major sources to ease the labour shortage in this country: immigrants and the aboriginal community.

"We have a very young population," Fontaine said. "Our birthrate is twice the national average...there's a ready source there. The premiers are on side. It's clear we need to focus on labour participation to deal with high unemployment rates in First Nation communities."

Detailed proposals on initiatives discussed with the premiers, he said, will be presented as part of upcoming federal pre-budget submissions.

Canada's premiers have a responsibility "and can't be hung up on the jurisdictional divide," said New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham after a meeting between premiers and aboriginal leaders. Graham's reference was to the principal role the federal government has traditionally played in aboriginal affairs.

"We should be actively at the table advancing education, social change and other social causes in our First Nation communities," he said. "That's why we need to take a proactive role."

Graham, who hosted the 13 premiers in three days of meetings coinciding with the First Nations conference, said the provinces and territories want to get past the Kelowna Accord and the federal Conservative government's opposition to the agreement signed by the previous Liberal government in 2005.

"We're not hung up on how the federal government wants to brand it," he said. "We just want to see action and we're willing to work with the federal government on moving these issues forward."

Federal Conservatives have said they are committed to goals of the accord, but prefer a more "targeted approach" to land claims, residential schools and human rights protection on reserves.

"We'll continue pushing the federal government to join us in closing the gaps," BC Premier Gordon Campbell said, adding the provinces can take action on their own. "I think we have to focus on what we can do."

Patrick Brazeau, national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, said he believes a consensus exists among the premiers. "We all have to tear down those barriers in order to achieve some progress. We all have a moral obligation—federal, provincial, aboriginal organizations—to provide some tangible, positive results."

Brazeau and Graham agreed that future meetings between aboriginal leaders and the provinces have to be "more than just gestures." What Canadians and First Nations are expecting is action, Graham said. "We're not going to solve these problems overnight, but I have to tell you that progress was made today."

For Judy Whiteduck, director of economic partnerships for the AFN, the positive comments from aboriginal and provincial leaders in Moncton was more than just talk.



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Co-operation between First Nations organizations, the provinces and the private sector will now make the responsibilities of her job even more critical.

“I think there’s a lot of different levels where the Assembly of First Nations and First Nations overall could work with the provinces and territories,” she said in an interview. “But it will be important to have the federal government included in some aspects of those discussions.”

A First Nations chief’s committee on economic development is a national body that has recently produced a First Nations Economic Blueprint, including five critical elements, one of them labour force development.

“Certainly one of the areas that they want to look toward is economic development and labour force development,” she said. “So that’s going to be critical as far as the work that I have.”

It’s important, however, that the federal government helps build on human resources development in First Nation communities without undermining local initiatives by creating competing federally-managed programs, Whiteduck said. Working closely with local First Nation human resources specialists on federal initiatives in supporting local employment and training is also essential.

“The federal government must also examine proper support to elementary and secondary schools,” she said. “Otherwise, there are too many First Nation students leaving school early and without a graduating diploma or graduating without the critical literacy and numeracy skills.”

A result of that will be that community employment and training programs will have limited resources to upgrade students so they can begin training for an employable skill, she explained. **DI**

