



Mr. Unstoppable

Last month's appointment of Chuck Strahl as new minister of Indian affairs is being seen by leaders of Canada's First Nations as a renewed opportunity for a co-operative relationship with the federal government.

Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, says he's looking forward to working with the new federal cabinet, announced August 14, that includes Strahl, who replaces Jim Prentice. While acknowledging the positive working relationship aboriginal leaders maintained with Prentice, Fontaine says he views appointment of Strahl, a BC MP, as "an opportunity to embark on new initiatives aimed at a better future for all Canadians."

"The success of the minister of Indian affairs is very much dependent on a positive relationship with First Nations and we are ready to work on a positive agenda aimed at lifting First Nations out of poverty," he said. "This requires a focus on two key elements: our people and our lands. We must invest in education and training for First Nations as the key to improving the lives of our people, and ensuring Canada has a skilled workforce to meet the coming labour shortage."

Land settlement issues are also central to the ability of First Nations to build their economies, Fontaine added. "We must ensure our people achieve a fair share in the benefits and riches of their traditional lands, and we can do so through win-win approaches like resource revenue sharing."

Other aboriginal leaders made similar positive comments in welcoming the new minister, who was familiar to many in his previous portfolio as agriculture minister and through his constituency work as MP for Chilliwack-Fraser Canyon. Since 2005, the 50-year-old Strahl has also been respected for continuing to maintain a heavy workload after being diagnosed with a rare form of malignant cancer, which resulted from breathing asbestos fibres while working in a logging yard as a young man.

Following his first appointment to cabinet, the Vancouver Sun labelled him "the unstoppable Chuck Strahl." **DI**

