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Notes for an address

by the Honourable Chuck Strahl

on the

Woodstock First Nation Specific Claim Settlement

Woodstock First Nation, New Brunswick
April 22, 2008

Check against delivery

Thank you for that kind introduction and for the warm welcome to Woodstock First Nation. Let me say it's a real pleasure and an honour for me to be a part of today's celebration.

Chiefs, Elders, ladies and gentlemen, I am very happy to be here with you today, participating in this important event.

Since we came to office, our government has consistently encouraged negotiation and partnership. We recognize that only when we all pull together can we move forward. This morning's celebration is a great example of our commitment to working together with First Nations, like yourselves, to bring change and new opportunities to First Nation communities.

I'm sure many of you know the history of this claim. About six months ago, a fresh round of negotiations produced an agreement-in-principle, which was ratified by an overwhelming majority of voters in February of this year.

This agreement gives you a mechanism to replace the lands that have been lost; you can purchase and add up to 10 acres to reserves over the next decade, and our government has paid \$2.5 million in compensation. From what I'm told, a large part of these funds will be invested in economic development projects. I think this is a great idea. I have seen what First Nations can accomplish through these types of efforts, and I really think you are making a wise decision - these will be long term investments for your entire community. I truly believe economic development is vitally important, not only for your community, but for surrounding communities and all of Canada.

The delays associated with resolving specific claims such as this one demonstrate clearly why a new approach is needed. Settled claims provide justice for First Nations, fairness and certainty for all Canadians, and are the means to promote economic and social progress.

Here in New Brunswick you're making real progress on settling specific claims. Four were settled in the last year alone, which is an unprecedented achievement in the Atlantic Region. But we need to do more.

Last year, Prime Minister Harper announced the Specific Claims Action Plan, an approach that will ensure impartiality and fairness, greater transparency, faster processing, and better access to mediation.

Currently before Parliament is the first part of this Plan - Bill C-30, legislation to establish an

independent specific claims tribunal. I am very proud of this bill - it reflects a spirit of genuine, productive collaboration between the Government of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations. This is an important piece of legislation that was co-drafted by the AFN... and I echo the sentiments of National Chief Phil Fontaine on this... he says that this bill "represents a tremendous collaborative effort" and we need to "seize this important opportunity."

We are showing the rest of the country the benefits of working in partnership towards a common goal - a new and forward-looking way of addressing historic grievances.

And our Conservative government is committed to doing lots more for Aboriginal peoples in other important areas too.

- Just last week we introduced a new clean drinking water action plan. When we took office there were 193 high risk water systems on reserves... that number is down to 85;
- We are moving forward with Matrimonial Real Property rights legislation to protect women and children when relationships go bad;
- and we are working hard to deliver full access to the Canadian Human Rights Act to all people living on-reserve.

Let me conclude by saying how much I appreciate your patience, your persistence and your ongoing collaboration. I also want to extend my sincere congratulations to the negotiators and their teams: Rick Hatchette for the Woodstock First Nation, and Luc Beaudry for Canada. This agreement is a real tribute to your hard work and commitment.

Patience. Hard work. Persistence. Collaboration. These must be our mottos as we work towards a better future for First Nations in Canada.

For you, moving forward means planning a brighter future for your community. It means investing in economic, social and cultural development, so your children and your children's children can benefit from what you have achieved today.

I wish you the best of luck and look forward to following your progress.

Thank you.

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