



News Release

January 18, 2006

BC First Nations Leadership Council urges Stephen Harper to clarify party's position on First Nations issues

Coast Salish Traditional Territory/ Vancouver, B.C. – First Nations Leaders in BC are deeply concerned about the Conservative party's position on First Nations issues and in a letter sent to Stephen Harper is calling on him to clarify his support for BC's First Nations people prior to the upcoming federal election.

The Leadership Council identified five primary issues of concern to be addressed by Mr. Harper. These are:

1. Clarification on if a Conservative government would respect and implement the groundbreaking *Transformative Change Accord*, which was signed by the federal and provincial governments and the BC First Nations Leadership Council in November, 2005;
2. The lack of assurance that Mr. Harper will follow through on the \$5.1 billion commitment to enhance the lives of Canada's First Nations, agreed to at the First Ministers' Meeting in Kelowna;
3. An explanation of how Mr. Harper intends to address the resolution of the land question, with those First Nations both outside, and involved in the BC treaty negotiations process;
4. Clarification that a Conservative government would commit to undertake a thorough treaty mandate review and renewal process; and
5. An expansion of Mr. Harper's approach to working with First Nations in the future to address aboriginal issues.

"Before BC's First Nations people go to the polls on January 23, we will be looking to Mr. Harper to address these issues of fundamental importance to our people and we strongly encourage Mr. Harper to put his commitment to First Nations people on the record," said Chief Stewart Phillip, President of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs.

"The Conservative Party and Stephen Harper need to remember that agreements between First Nations and the Crown are government-to-government agreements," said Grand Chief Doug Kelly of the First Nations Summit Political Executive. "Regardless of the outcome of the election, the federal government of the day must follow through on the commitments previously made by the Government of Canada."

"Should Mr. Harper form government, it is not enough for him to merely consider the commitments made in late 2005. As a leader we encourage him rise to the challenge of forging a new and more positive relationships with First Nations, as we have seen in recent months with the British Columbia government," added Shawn Atleo, BC Regional Chief for the Assembly of First Nations.

ATTACHMENT

The First Nations Leadership Council is comprised of the political executives of the First Nations Summit, Union of BC Indian Chiefs and the BC Assembly of First Nations. The Council works together to politically represent the interests of First Nations in British Columbia and develop strategies and actions to bring about significant and substantive changes to government policy that will benefit all First Nations in British Columbia.

For more information:

Chief Stewart Phillip, UBCIC, (250) 490-5314

Grand Chief Doug Kelly, FNS, (778) 772-8153

BC Regional Chief Shawn Atleo, BC AFN (604) 220-5822



January 17, 2005

Hon. Stephen Harper
Leader, Conservative Party of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6
Via Facsimile: (613) 947-0310; (613) 755-2001

Dear Mr. Harper,

The First Nations Leadership Council has reviewed the Conservative Party of Canada's 2006 federal election platform, titled "Stand up for Canada" as well as the media coverage of the public comments of some of your Party's members. Our purposes in writing this letter are twofold: we would like to echo the concerns raised by Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine in the open letter addressed to you on January 14, 2006; and we would like to raise some British Columbia-specific issues that require your immediate attention and a timely response. As the following issues directly affect First Nations and Aboriginal people in BC, the First Nations Leadership Council will be releasing this letter publicly.

The Conservative Party's election platform section on "opportunity and respect for aboriginals" states that a Conservative government will "accept the targets agreed upon at the recent Meeting of First Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders and work with first ministers and national aboriginal leaders on achieving these targets". **We would appreciate clarification as to whether this includes the Conservative Party of Canada's commitment to the implementation of the *Transformative Change Accord* signed by the federal Crown, BC Premier Gordon Campbell, and the First Nations Leadership Council.** The *Transformative Change Accord* represents years of efforts in cultivating relationships with federal and provincial governments, and represents the best path forward in reconciling Aboriginal rights and title, improving the lives of First Nations peoples, and developing a meaningful government-to-government relationship. The First Nations Leadership Council and the Province of BC are anxious to begin the work required to implement this historic agreement.

We also note that, while the Conservative Party will "accept the targets" of the First Ministers' Meeting, there is no mention of the related spending commitment of \$5.1 billion. In fact, unlike both the Liberal and NDP platforms, the Conservative Party election platform contains no spending commitments on First Nations or aboriginal issues at all. **We would appreciate clarification on our understanding that not only is the Conservative Party not going to honour the \$5.1 billion commitment, but**

that they will be forced to run a deficit in order to spend any new funds on aboriginal issues, including the political commitments made in its own platform.

As they relate to First Nations issues in British Columbia, the following three elements of the Conservative Party platform are also require clarification:

- *Support the development of individual property ownership on reserves, to encourage lending for private housing and businesses.*
- *Replace the Indian Act (and related legislation) with a modern legislative framework which provides for the devolution of full legal and democratic responsibility to aboriginal Canadians for their own affairs within the Constitution, including the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.*
- *Pursue settlement of all outstanding “comprehensive claims” within a clear framework that balances the rights of aboriginal claimants with those of Canada.*

For the majority of First Nations in BC, the land question has never been settled. This is unlike most First Nations in Canada, who signed historic treaties with the Crown; the three points of the Conservative Party platform as set out above would have a decidedly different impact for First Nations in BC, whose title to the land has not been reconciled.

The First Nations Leadership Council would appreciate clarification on how the Conservative Party plans to work with BC First Nations to seek a just resolution of the land question, including both First Nations outside of the unique BC treaty process, as well as those in negotiations. In addition, the *Transformative Change Accord* commits Canada, BC, and the First Nations Leadership Council to jointly reviewing and renewing treaty negotiation mandates. **The First Nations Leadership Council would like the Conservative Party of Canada’s position on a thorough treaty mandate evaluation, including an evaluation of the treaty negotiation loans issue (BC First Nations’ loans are now standing at more than \$250 million), on a priority basis, between the federal Crown, the Province of BC, and BC First Nations.**

The First Nations Leadership Council would also appreciate a briefing on the extent of policy development that has been completed by your Party in relation to the above commitments. We strongly feel that solutions for First Nations people must be driven by our people, and that implementing federal commitments to joint policy development and renewal is the best means to achieve reconciliation and close the gap in living conditions between First Nations and Canadians. The policy directions highlighted in the Conservative Party election platform, however, are all new to the First Nations Leadership Council. **We look forward to hearing about the extent of joint policy work undertaken to date in developing the Conservative Party’s platform on aboriginal issues, and its plan for a cooperative approach in implementing these commitments.**

Finally, we strongly agree with the National Chief Phil Fontaine’s concerns with respect to the residential schools agreement. We are extremely concerned that the Conservative Party’s platform refers to the recommendations of the fourth report on Resolving Indian Residential School Claims, and does not make mention of the Agreement-in-Principle on residential schools announced on November 23, 2005, after months of intensive negotiations. The First Nations Leadership Council will stand in solidarity with First Nations and other Canadians who are expecting a just resolution to the residential schools tragedy, in opposing any attempt of the Conservative Party to renege on the terms of the agreement. **We urge you to clarify the Conservative**

Party's platform on this matter and to ease the concerns of First Nations in BC and across Canada.

We look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,
FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Signed on behalf of the FIRST NATIONS SUMMIT



Grand Chief Edward John



Grand Chief Doug Kelly



Dave Porter

Signed on behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS



Chief Stewart Phillip



Chief Robert Shintah



Chief Mike Retasket

Signed on behalf of the BC ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS



A-in-chut (Shawn Atleo)