

Assembly of First Nations



Federal Election Campaign 2006 ANALYSIS



Liberal



Conservative



New
Democratic



Bloc
Québécois



Green



First Peoples
Party

As the election campaign heads into the final days, the platforms of the parties are being revealed. In addition, all parties have now responded to the specific questions posed by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). By looking both at the responses provided along with the platform information made available by the various parties, we can assess their positions as they relate to First Nation issues.

Overview

At this point in the campaign, the Conservative Party appears to be gaining momentum. Typically, previously undecided voters begin to firm up their position about ten days before an election. In other words, the polls that emerge in the coming days will likely predict the election outcome. As such, this analysis will pay particular attention to the platform and responses of the Conservative Party.

It should also be noted that while the presence of the Bloc Québécois makes attaining a majority government difficult, we should be prepared for both a majority or minority government situation. As a result, it will be important to appreciate the platforms of all parties as opposition parties may well continue to play a critical role in Parliament after the election.

Campaign Summary

The election campaign has provided very limited attention to First Nation issues. At the Special Chiefs Assembly of the AFN in December 2005, critics of the various parties were invited to address the Chiefs and entertained questions. In addition, while the AFN attempted to have specific questions raised during the televised leadership debates, these efforts did not succeed as other issues relating to ethics, health care, crime and tax cuts have shaped the campaign discourse. Efforts continue on these fronts in the final weeks of the campaign.

Both the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party have made clear, public statements supporting the First Ministers Meeting commitments. The other parties have, to this point, not made significant attempts to bring forward First Nation issues (with the exception of the First Peoples Party) and have only referenced the First Ministers Meeting in a limited or negative way.

Conservative Party of Canada

Political Accord: The Conservatives express their “general” support for the Accord, but limit explicit endorsement to the “discussion” of various provisions. Their reply, it should be noted, de-emphasizes the role of the AFN as a national organization representing First Nation citizens in Canada, focusing rather on “First Nations in general and the many different organizations that represent them.”

First Ministers Meeting (FMM): The Conservatives have committed to a follow-up FMM in 2-3 years, but their vision of what the last FMM achieved differs from our own. Their reply makes no reference to the First Nations Implementation Plan. Rather, they emphasize the “targets” that were announced by the Prime Minister at the same time as highlighting other discrete issues including legislative measures to enforce standards on reserve that do not appear directly relevant to the FMM discussion. Furthermore, the Conservative reply states that “new jurisdictional arrangements are required between aboriginal communities, provincial governments and the federal government.” This statement, which omits First Nation governments in favour of the ill-defined notion of ‘aboriginal communities’, also raises concern about a potential interest in shifting jurisdiction to the provinces.

Residential Schools: The Conservatives appear to stand behind this settlement. This may provide an important opportunity to build relations and work on the fulfillment of commitments in other areas.

Other Issues: While the Conservative Party is “committed” to consultation, and is prepared to address issues of accommodation as directed by the courts, they offer little more of substance on this issue, or others raised in the questionnaire, including bilateral engagement, citizenship, or greater First Nations involvement in government decision-making.

With respect to other public information regarding the Conservative’s approach to First Nations, there are additional troubling signs. There is a focus on legislation to replace the Indian Act and “provide devolution of full legal and democratic responsibility to First Nations” and “transfer Reserve land title from the Crown to willing First Nations”. Rather than recognizing and implementing First Nation governments (pursuant to Aboriginal and Treaty rights), these statements appear to indicate an approach to transfer and, essentially, off-load Federal responsibility.

Analysis

While the tone and content of the Conservative Party's reply is outwardly positive, clarification needs to be sought on issues that they fail to address and details that remain scant. It is the lack of detail that has the greatest potential to lead to the renegeing and/or reinterpretation of commitments in a post-election environment.

A further concern relates to their intentional relegation of the AFN to one of the "many different organizations that represent" First Nations. There is a clear attempt on at least two occasions in their reply to refrain from making commitments to the AFN directly, but rather, reframing these commitments as ones to a broad (and undefined) constituency.

In the coming days, First Nations' strategy needs to focus on getting Stephen Harper on record - with respect to the details of the Conservative Party's platform on First Nation issues, including his view of the role of the AFN as a national organization representing First Nation citizens in Canada.

Finally, First Nations across Canada need to use every opportunity available to compare, flesh-out and challenge Conservative Party candidates to clarify their platform on First Nations (and "Aboriginal") issues. Where inconsistencies appear (e.g., Monte Solberg), these need to be made public in an effort to get Harper to go on record with a clarification.

Liberal Party of Canada

Political Accord: The Liberal party continues to support the Accord which it signed in May 2005. In addition, they reference the process established pursuant to the Accord, the Joint Steering Committee, and the focus being "to act on legal and constitutional developments as a means of ensuring progressive policy". While we certainly welcome these statements, it may have also been helpful to see an explicit statement acknowledging the need to recognize and implement First Nation governments through a nation-to-nation process. However, as we see the Accord as the vehicle to accomplish this effort, their strong support of the Accord and its requirements is important.

FMM: Here again, the Liberal Party remains a solid supporter of the work that has been done to date. Unfortunately, we do not have additional information which speaks to the need to fast-track financial commitments in critical areas such as housing and other implementation considerations including expanding current commitments to include other determinants of health.

Other Issues: The Liberal Party appears to embrace the new ideas of full engagement of First Nations in matters affecting First Nations. Indeed, in their response they credit the efforts of all parties through the Roundtable and other processes with the success achieved at the FMM. Still, there are no explicit commitments regarding future engagement or machinery of government changes needed to accomplish the 'full seat at the table'.

Analysis

Implementation of the commitments made through the Political Accord and the FMM is the primary consideration and concern for First Nations in regards to the Liberal Party. The commitments appear solid, however, further work is needed to secure implementation plans and full resources to achieve the desired change.

New Democratic Party of Canada

Political Accord: While not specifically referencing the Political Accord, the NDP have made solid commitments to recognizing First Nation governments indicating that all governments of Canada have a moral and political responsibility to implement agreements with First Nations.

FMM: The NDP make an explicit commitment to the “full implementation of the Kelowna agreements as an essential next step in repairing Canada’s relationship with First Nations...”. In addition, the NDP commit to future FMM sessions even prior to the 2-3 year timeframe.

Other Issues: On all critical issues, including the Residential Schools settlement package, the NDP provide their full endorsement and support for resolving First Nation issues with respect to First Nation interests and rights. Indeed, the NDP would go further than simply to ‘review’ key policies, but would move to implement more far-reaching changes including an Independent Claims Commission.

Analysis: The NDP continue to represent one of the strongest allies of First Nations in Parliament. Their support on all key issues appears very strong. There will be an ongoing need and benefit to continue working closely with the NDP and ensuring that their support translates into specific benefits for First Nations. In the last Parliament, the budget negotiated by Layton included dedicated funds for Aboriginal housing and education. We have yet to see how these monies will actually be delivered to First Nations - as they may fall within the FMM allocations - but, nevertheless, this reveals the importance of ongoing dialogue with the NDP to advance First Nation interests. In the event of a possible coalition government, early discussions with the NDP will be critical, providing potentially significant benefit to First Nations.

Bloc Québécois

Political Accord: While not specifically referencing the Political Accord, the Bloc provides significant support for First Nations self-government and demonstrates an understanding that this is the only route to achieving justice for First Nations. In addition, they commit to working with us to hold the Government to commitments that have already been made.

FMM: The Bloc Québécois considers the FMM commitments to be “a good first step towards bridging the gap that exists between the quality of life of First Nations and that of Quebecers and Canadians”. They also indicate that fulfilling the commitments should be part of an overall approach which meets the aspirations of First Nations - something that the AFN has advanced as part of its overall health determinants approach.

Other Issues: The Bloc Québécois provides solid support for the Residential Schools settlement package and commits to work with the Assembly of First Nations to ensure that commitments are kept and that former students receive both an apology and proper compensation. On other issues, including bi-lateral engagement, the Bloc commits to extensive engagement and dialogue with First Nations.

Analysis: The Bloc has expressed clear support for nation-to-nation dialogue and respect for the distinct interests of First Nations. Furthermore, the Bloc can be counted on to support a socially progressive agenda and this has included First Nation issues especially as they relate to health, socio-economic, cultural and environmental interests. The Bloc has committed to recognizing First Nation rights and culture, as well as developing a 'social contract' with First Nations in Quebec to ensure sustainable development respective of First Nation and environmental interests.

Given the expectation of strong results for the Bloc in this election, they too will be critical allies for First Nations in Parliament. Dialogue throughout the transition period and beyond will be important to ensure they are well positioned to continue to support First Nation rights and interests.

The Green Party of Canada

The Green Party of Canada has affirmed their support for the FMM Commitments, the Political Accord and the Residential Schools Agreement. In addition, they have provided thoughtful responses to our questions regarding implementation of agreements, suggesting that genuine nation-to-nation dialogue is required. In addition, the Green Party stresses the importance of the recognition of First Nations inherent right to self-government.

The extent of the commitments expressed by the Green Party, which go far beyond their strong environmental platform, demonstrate that AFN needs to begin a dialogue with them to determine further points of strategic joint effort and advocacy. In the event that there is a Green member elected, he/she could be of significant strategic interest to First Nations. There are two or three ridings where there is a possibility of a Green member being elected. In addition, in the event that the Green Party significantly increase their share of the popular vote, their funding will increase which could lead to the possibility of collaborative research and other coordinated efforts.

The First Peoples National Party of Canada (FPNP)

The FPNP is a party only recently certified by Elections Canada. They indicate that they have fielded five candidates in various regions across Canada. While their influence on the national scene is undoubtedly low (for the time being at least), AFN support of this party could help to build interest among eligible First Nation voters and some pockets of the wider electorate.

The FPNP's reply to our questionnaire was generally supportive, but included more information, and more detailed information about their platform, than is useful at this point. While they do not explicitly oppose any AFN initiatives, it is clear that their objectives include a more radical approach to working with (or indeed forming) a new national government.