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December 8, 2006

Politicians Primed for an Early Election Take the Stage at Chief's Forum

Canadian Press Newswire

By : Sue Bailey

OTTAWA (CP) _ More than a hint of election fever was in the air Thursday as federal politicians made duelling pitches to a national meeting of native chiefs.

It was the latest sign that official Ottawa is ready if not roaring to hit the hustings again as early as this spring.

It would be the second campaign in less than two years and the third since 2004 as the Tories and Liberals take turns leading precarious minority governments.

Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice received tepid applause or stony silence as he defended his efforts, while new Liberal Leader Stephane Dion was applauded just for stepping to the podium.

"I hope they're not just using this forum as a platform to launch their campaigns," said Margaret Kenequanash, executive director of the Shibogama First Nations Council, representing several communities near Sioux Lookout, Ont.

Prentice faced the tough crowd of 700 delegates, including about 400 people who'd booed him Tuesday during a rally on Parliament Hill.

He said he was there to set the record straight and outline his top achievements. They include: new treaties signed in British Columbia, approval of a compensation deal for former students of native residential schools, and efforts to clean up polluted water on reserves.

"We deliver on what we say," Prentice said. "We say what we do and we do what we say. And I would submit to you that that is a major difference between this government and some others."

That said, the Tories have a major hill to climb in any fight for native support. It's called Kelowna.

The \$5-billion accord reached by the former Liberal government, native leaders and the premiers last year was swiftly axed by the Conservatives. It committed the cash over five years to lift desolate housing, health and education standards.

Dion promised Thursday that a new Liberal government would restore Kelowna and do more.

"It was a great agreement," he said to cheers. "We can't succeed if part of our society is left behind."

The Liberals would ensure every native student who qualifies for higher education _ there are long waiting lists _ would get funding, Dion said. They would increase economic opportunities and create an independent land-claims body to compensate bands, he added.

That last pledge may have sounded a bit hollow to some observers, especially those who helped write the 1993 Liberal Red Book of election goodies. A truly independent claims body was just one promise to aboriginal people that was never kept in 13 years of Liberal rule.

A New Tack in Native Education

National Post

By : John Ivison

As befits the son of an NHL player, Jim Prentice can take a body check. Two days after the Indian Affairs Minister's bullhorn was drowned out by a crowd of native protesters on the steps of Parliament Hill, he took to the stage at the annual gathering of the Assembly of First Nations. The crowd had been warned to be on best behaviour by national chief Phil Fontaine, and the jeers and boos were replaced by a stony silence. Prentice left 15 minutes later to grudging applause, having stated bluntly that the status quo isn't working.

By contrast, when Stephane Dion, the new Liberal leader, took to the same stage half an hour later, he was greeted with warm applause by the First Nations chiefs. He gave a speech that might have been delivered by former prime minister Paul Martin, replete with obligatory references to "closing the gap" on the quality of life between aboriginals and other Canadians, and ensuring no one is "left behind." There was little sense of how aboriginals might get on this yellow brick road to a brighter future. Still, people don't get paid to come to these things to hear bad news and Dion left with loud cheers ringing in his ears.

If the Liberals do win the next election, it will be because a collective political amnesia has swept the nation, similar to the wave of forgetfulness that afflicted the AFN yesterday. Not only did the Liberals not close the gap during 13 years in government, it widened dramatically. Two years ago, the Auditor-General revealed that it would take 28 years before First Nations children living on reserves catch up with the Canadian average in terms of high school graduation rates.

Of course, the AFN's enthusiasm for the Liberals is not unrelated to the \$5-billion promised by the Liberals at Kelowna last year, most of which would have found its way to the band chiefs in the room.

But while some Liberals such as Tom Axworthy, the chair of party's renewal commission, have identified Liberalism's "dirty little secret" -- the "implementation gap" between what Liberals promise and deliver -- it appears Dion is quite happy to follow in Martin's footsteps by scattering feel-good promises like confetti.

He called Kelowna a "great agreement" that would solve problems with housing, infrastructure, health and education. In fact, on education Kelowna talked vaguely about "supporting innovative educational initiatives" but it was a funding agreement, not a plan of action. First Nations, provinces and territories signed on because they were being given no-strings-attached cash by Ottawa, but no one had the slightest idea what they were going to spend it on.

Prentice's approach has been low-key and focused. Rather than making grandiose promises about transforming the fortunes of aboriginal Canadians by handing over billions more dollars to spend on policies that are patently not working, he has introduced a number of structural reforms he hopes are the baby steps toward lasting improvement.

In his speech, Prentice denied accusations he'd broken promises, pointing out that he had delivered on every commitment he'd made to Fontaine on **resolution of the Indian Residential Schools** dispute; on cleaner drinking water for native reserves; on speeding up the specific land claims process; and on matrimonial property rights for native women.

He was most hopeful about a milestone educational reform that passed through the House of Commons earlier this week -- a bill to introduce native-run school boards in British Columbia.

At the moment, the Department of Indian Affairs acts as a funding agent without setting educational standards -- the money simply flows through to 615 First Nations with no financial accountability or measure of educational outcome. Prentice's new act will set similar standards on quality of education, curriculum, classroom sizes and teacher certificate requirements that exist in provincial school acts. The system would bring together a number of band schools under a regional, native-run school authority.

"I say to you that this is the way forward," said Prentice yesterday. "Education has to be properly funded but... the system has to work and the system isn't working. At this point, we are achieving the lowest educational outcomes in Canada."

He said that studies show that if First Nations children make it through high school, they succeed at the same rates as other Canadians. "The challenge is we have to get our kids through high school."

Even the brightest ideas in the realm of Indian Affairs tend to founder on the rocks of intransigence and incompetence. But it is richly ironic that the Conservatives have emerged as the party of reform on this file, while the

Liberals, the self-proclaimed champions of innovation, fall back on the argument that nothing should be tried for the first time.

New FSIN Vice-Chief's Job Needs Running Start

The StarPhoenix

By : Doug Cuthand

We saw two new vice-chiefs, Lyle Whitefish and Glen Pratt, elected in October to the executive of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations.

This week, I'll introduce you to Whitefish, who is a relative unknown to people in the south and central part of province but has been active with his First Nation and the Agency Chiefs Tribal Council. He comes from Big River First Nation in north-central Saskatchewan. Big River First Nation is also home to FSIN Chief Lawrence Joseph.

The band recently held a round dance to honour its two leaders. A round dance is a community event to honour someone's achievement, deal with a tragic event or mourn for a close friend or relative. It is an important part of our culture.

As a young man, Whitefish travelled with his grandfather, Chief George Whitefish. Chief Whitefish was a well-respected leader and, while he was elected to office, was in many ways the last of the traditional chiefs. He only spoke Cree and all the band's dealings were conducted in Cree.

He made no compromises with government officials and conducted business through an interpreter. Usually that interpreter was Lyle Whitefish.

"I used to add my two cents worth, and the officials would say they were sorry and it wouldn't happen again," he told me.

This was the best kind of education for a young man with political ambitions.

Chief Whitefish was one of a kind; he didn't draw a salary, left the provision of services to the government and saw his people's relationship with government in terms of Treaty 6. He was one of the last of his generation and Lyle was fortunate to have the experience of working with him.

Political experience runs in the family, and Lyle's father is a long-time member of the Big River band council.

"When we were growing up, my father worked for farmers off the reserve," he said. "We travelled around and I was able to learn to speak English at an early age." Children on the reserve went to school only speaking Cree.

From 1990 to 1994, Whitefish lived in Saskatoon and attended the University of Saskatchewan. We were both hockey dads on the same minor hockey team. Lyle and his wife Doris have four children.

In 1994, he graduated with his bachelor's of education and returned to his reserve. In 1995 he was elected to band council and served one term.

After that term in office he taught in school in Spiritwood. He went on to become the principal of the school on the reserve.

The Big River First Nation today is a reserve that retains its population.

Many reserves further south have half to three-quarters of the band members living off-reserve. Of Big River's population of around 3,000 about 2,200 live on the reserve.

The impact of the First Nations population explosion is obvious.

"We had 750 students in the school," he told me, "Over 320 were in kindergarten to Grade 5." The kindergarten class alone had 90 students. This was a school that was bigger than many city high schools.

When a new school was being built, the plans were for additional rooms such as a library, cultural room and a multipurpose room. Of course, by the time it was built, these had to be converted to classrooms. In this manner they were able to deal with the lack of foresight and planning by the Indian Affairs Department.

In 2001, Whitefish was elected as a representative for the Agency Chiefs Tribal Council. In the 1970s, the four reserves in the area formed the Shellbrook Agency to provide services and access to the Department of Indian Affairs. The agency still exists, but in a much evolved form. Whitefish kept his position until he was elected to the FSIN executive.

As an executive member, he receives portfolio responsibilities similar to those of a cabinet minister. Whitefish is responsible for education, human resource development, culture, youth and sports and recreation. His portfolio includes the First Nations University of Canada, the Saskatchewan

Indian Institute of Technologies and the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College.

He is also responsible for the residential school file. This persistent issue is in the final stages of settlement and hopefully it will be completed under his watch.

The FNUC portfolio is another minefield, but since he has university experience he should have a better understanding about the principles and operation of a university. Following up the task force report will need his attention.

The near future will be very busy for Whitefish. He has a complicated and active portfolio and little time for orientation.