

AFN leader looks to premiers for support

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QUEBEC CITY — The Assembly of First Nations may have secured the support of provincial and territorial premiers in pressuring Ottawa to address the serious poverty conditions and shortage of educational resources in native communities.

AFN National Chief Phil Fontaine, who is presiding over the native leaders' annual assembly in Quebec City, says the question will be raised Wednesday with the premiers, who are also gathering here for a meeting of the Council of the Federation.

“I’m pretty certain that one of the results will be a joint call from the Council of the Federation and aboriginal leaders on the Prime Minister to convene a meeting . . . on the process of funding, on socio-economic conditions . . . and the severe under-funding for schools and education,” Mr. Fontaine told reporters Tuesday.

He said native children receive \$2,000 per capita less than other Canadians for education and that the disparity has become a major concern in most communities.

“Poor schools, inadequate resources for welfare services, drug abuse, gangs and poor school performance statistics are but some of the serious problems we face. There are far too many communities with no schools...or in serious state of disrepair,” Mr. Fontaine said in his opening remarks Tuesday morning to the delegates.

Mr. Fontaine warned that more aggressive actions will be taken to pressure Ottawa, accusing the federal government of “gross negligence” towards native communities.

The AFN is calling on Ottawa for a meeting to initiate a process that would eventually lead to an agreement similar to the \$5-billion Kelowna Accord that addressed social issues, which was signed by the previous Liberal government but rejected by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives.

Turning to Quebec Premier Jean Charest, who was present at the AFN's opening ceremony, Mr. Fontaine said the First Nations cannot succeed without the help of the Council of Federation.

“If (the premiers) are absent from this process, we will fall short,” Mr. Fontaine said.

“I don't want to say anything here that will pre-empt your discussions other than to say that we see you as important allies.”

Last month, Parliament expressed an official apology for the residential school policy which Mr. Fontaine called a “watershed event” that amounted to Ottawa's recognition of the wrong committed by a “racist policy...a policy of assimilation.”

Now begins the “post-apology era,” he said, where reconciliation must result in concrete measures that will eventually lead to repealing the Indian Act and pave the way for meaningful native self-government in building a new relationship with the Canadian government.

“We need now to embark on a national discussion about what this relationship will be, what will reconciliation look like and how it can be achieved,” Mr. Fontaine said.

“A shared goal is investing in our children to right the wrong of residential schools.”

As host of the Council of the Federation, Mr. Charest agreed that the premiers must examine the educational and social concerns expressed by native leaders in light of the June 11 residential schools apology.

“It brings us back to the one fundamental question in my eyes: ‘Where do we go from here?’ The gesture by the Prime Minister of Canada and Parliament was a seminal event that marks the beginning of reconciliation and a healing process,” Mr. Charest said, adding that education and economic disparities are two unavoidable issues that the premiers must tackle.

Ghislain Picard, regional chief of Quebec and Labrador, also challenged the premiers to support the United Nations Declaration on Indigenous People, which the federal government has refused to sign.

“Mr. Charest, as the hosting premier, certainly has a good opportunity to lead the way and challenge his fellow premiers in recognizing the UN Declaration on the rights of indigenous people,” Mr. Picard said.

The AFN plans to appoint the former premier of the Northwest Territories, Steve Kakfwi, as special envoy who will travel to the provincial capitals to convince the premiers to support the UN declaration.

The Northwest Territories is the only jurisdiction in the country to officially endorse the UN Declaration.

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