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Speaking Notes for an Address by the Honourable Chuck Strahl, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-status Indians, to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development on the Supplementary Estimates of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development

House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
November 29, 2007

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Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before this Committee to discuss, not only the Supplementary Estimates of my department, but this government's larger view of the challenges that face Aboriginal people and the initiatives we are undertaking to address those challenges.

Although this is my first appearance as Minister before this Committee, I have been a member of various committees for many years. I am very conscious of the important role that committees play in the parliamentary process and I appreciate the work that you are doing.

My remarks today reference the Supplementary Estimates of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. My predecessor, the Honourable Jim Prentice, appeared before you several months ago to discuss the Main Estimates for the current fiscal year. We are now at the next phase of the budgetary cycle.

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As you may recall, this government's inaugural budget in 2006 adopted a new strategy to address Aboriginal issues: targeted investments to resolve quality-of-life issues. This commitment was reaffirmed in Budget 2007.

This government's larger Aboriginal agenda was articulated by the Prime Minister in an address in Halifax earlier this month. It focuses on five areas:

- economic development,
- education,
- empowering First Nations and protecting the vulnerable,
- land claims, and
- reconciliation, governance and self-government.

To effect real change in these areas, our approach is to build a record of results through concrete, tangible actions undertaken with willing and able partners. The Supplementary Estimates help us to achieve these results. In total these Estimates commit, through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, \$209 million in additional investments that aim to improve the lives of Aboriginal people and Northerners. Another \$25 million are committed through Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada.

Mr. Chairman, since my appointment as Minister I have crossed the country, meeting with provincial and territorial ministers, Aboriginal leaders, and private sector stakeholders. I have visited Northern communities and First Nation reserves.

I'm proud to note that, with our partners, this government is making real progress -- and that Aboriginal people and Northerners are beginning to reap the benefits.

Let me address reconciliation first. One of my first actions as Minister was to meet with the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations and a group of former Residential School students in Winnipeg. I realize that addressing the legacy of Indian Residential Schools is personally wrenching and extremely complex. But it is the right thing to do, and we will do it right.

Let me be perfectly clear on this point -- contrary to a recent and incorrect media report, the full \$1.9 billion in support of the Common Experience Payment for the Settlement Agreement is available for former Indian Residential School students. The \$1.9 billion in funding is managed through a Trust Account, minus the advance payments of \$82.6 million that have already been made to 10,326 former students, which this Government provided in advance of the implementation of the Agreement to former students who were 65 or older on May 30, 2005.

This government is also moving to fulfill its lawful obligations to First Nations through a significant retooling of the specific claims resolution process. On Tuesday I had the honour of introducing Bill C-30, the Specific Claims Tribunal Act, into the House.

This progressive legislation will establish an independent Tribunal to make binding decisions on specific claims that have been rejected for negotiation or when negotiations fail. It is the critical element in the implementation of the broader Specific Claims Action Plan, announced by Prime Minister Harper on June 12th.

This government recognizes the importance to First Nations of the timely resolution of both comprehensive and specific land claims. For instance, the single biggest amount in these Supplementary Estimates involves nearly \$31 million to support implementation of the Nunavik Inuit Land Claims Agreement. Bill C-11, a bill to enact the agreement, is now before the Senate.

In addition to this legislation, we are working in partnership with Inuit and Quebec leaders in other areas of interest. In August I met with Inuit and government leaders at a conference in Kuujuaq with a view to opening new horizons in the development of Nunavik. We agreed to set up a tripartite working group to ensure that the spirit of working in partnership established at that meeting continues to guide the future development of Nunavik.

I am also pleased to highlight that we are making great strides in Treaty Land Entitlement settlement. When I met with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs in August, I was pleased to note that more than twice the amount of land in that province was converted last year, than was converted since the TLE agreements were signed in the 1990's. The addition of these lands will help foster stronger First Nation economies, and bring economic benefits to surrounding areas as well.

The funding provided by these Supplementary Estimates will assist my department in delivering on another of our priorities – protecting the vulnerable. Earlier this year, a tripartite agreement was signed in Alberta that will allow for the use of a prevention-based service model to deliver child and family services on Alberta First Nations. The Supplementary Estimates allot \$15.3 million toward the delivery of these services.

Let me also note that just under \$9 million will go toward enhanced funding for shelters for victims of family violence and prevention-related community-based programs.

Economic development is one of the keystones of prosperity. And so we are working to create a more coherent and practical approach to increasing Aboriginal participation in the economy. The National Aboriginal Economic Development Board will be assisting us with implementing this approach, and in fact in April our government has named new members and a new chairperson, Chief Clarence Louie, to the Board. They will provide valuable advice in such areas as investment strategies, business creation, and access to business capital. Since my appointment as Minister I have had the opportunity to speak with the Board, and I met recently with Chief Louie in Vancouver to discuss these and other important issues.

Of course, the North is an extremely important part of my mandate as well. I have made a number of trips North of 60 in the past months, talking to territorial and Inuit leaders about their plans and aspirations. Every time I visit I am awestruck by the immense potential of this region and its people.

Our government is working to achieve real progress in the North in four priority areas:

- Strengthening Arctic sovereignty;
- Promoting social and economic development
- Protecting our environmental heritage; and
- Improving and devolving Northern governance.

The actions that we take in support of these priorities will benefit not only Northerners, but all Canadians. Establishing a Canadian Forces training centre in Resolute Bay and a deep-water docking and refueling facility in Nanisivik, for instance, provide some of the infrastructure needed to exercise sovereignty.

We have taken other significant action. For example, further investments in International Polar Year are included in these Supplementary Estimates. We will get the job done on seabed mapping; and a world class Arctic research station will yield the knowledge we need to make sound decisions on environmental, social and economic policies.

The final point I would like to raise is the Food Mail Program, in support of which the Supplementary Estimates call for an investment of \$20 million. I discussed Food Mail with Northern officials when I was in Kuujuaq – I want to emphasize that, although there are cost and delivery issues concerning this Program and we are working to address those and make the program more cost effective, the Food Mail Program should play a vital role in ensuring that people living in Northern communities have access to healthy, nutritious food.

Mr. Chairman, I have outlined what I believe are some impressive accomplishments, but this government does not plan to stop here. Our parliamentary agenda is also a full one. For instance, I am looking forward to working with this Committee on Bill C-21, currently before you, and on the Specific Claims Tribunal Act, which I have already mentioned. Also, the BC legislature recently passed legislation to implement the Tsawwassen Agreement, and I will be introducing federal legislation in the near future to bring this Agreement into full force and effect.

The investments outlined in the Supplementary Estimates, and the initiatives I have talked about this morning, demonstrate this government's determination to address the full range of Aboriginal and Northern issues. Assisted by the addition of \$209 million to my department's total budget from the Supplementary Estimates, we will help strengthen Aboriginal and Northern communities in this country, and work with our partners towards a rich and rewarding future for all Canadians.

I will do my best to answer any questions committee members may have.

Thank you.

All times are reflected in Atlantic time

Date

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