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Say goodbye to 'Ottawa knows best'

Phil Fontaine, National Post

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The recent National Post series, "Rethinking the Reserve," has renewed public debate and interest about the place of First Nations in Canada and our relationship to the state and the rest of Canadian society. This public spotlight allows us to focus on a key message: Investing in First Nations today pays dividends for Canada's future. Our well-being is tied to Canada's well-being as a nation.

First Nations represent Canada's youngest and fast-growing population. Our growth is changing Canadian demographics. The failure to invest in First Nations youth will not only condemn another generation to poverty and despair, but will severely compromise Canada's ability to be a competitive, productive nation. We need to invest in a new approach.

For too long, the federal government's approach to First Nations has been "Ottawa knows best." We have witnessed the devastating effects of the Indian Residential School policy and the Indian Act; the federal government does not always know or do what is best for First Nations. The success of a new approach is very much dependent on the consent of First Nations and their direct involvement in identification, development and implementation of priorities and programmes.

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The Political Accord signed between Canada and First Nations in May, 2005, was the direct result of a consensus approach by First Nations to address the problems of the Indian Act. The failed 2002 First Nations Governance Act had been yet another example of a unilateral government attempt to address the structural deficit "for" us. By contrast, the Political Accord set a framework for strengthening First Nation governments. That agreement was followed by the Kelowna Accord, which committed all first peoples and all First Ministers to a detailed plan for achieving concrete targets and real outcomes in the quality of life of First Nations.

This government, however, has set aside these Liberal-era agreements and stalled momentum for meaningful change. It has done this even though during the last election, when seeking the votes of Canadians, the Conservatives promised to "put the wheels on Kelowna." Whatever happened to that commitment from the party that talked "accountability"?

Moreover, in his recent interview with the National Post, Minister of Indian Affairs Chuck Strahl seems to put the cart before the horse. Tackling the Indian Act before dealing with the crisis conditions in many of our communities only downloads the problem to poverty-stricken First Nations. The federal government, it seems, is shirking its responsibilities and obligations, and chucking the "Indian" liability onto provinces and First Nations.

First Nations people face increasing poverty and social problems. Funding for basic programs and services such as housing, education and health, which is insufficient to begin with, has been capped at 2% during a period when our populations have increased by over 22%. Funding for these same services for other Canadians, by contrast, has risen by as much as 10% above inflation and population growth. Despite flawed federal policies, many of our people are succeeding and are productive citizens. But these exceptional individuals have succeeded in spite of federal policies, not because of them.

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