

**Remarks by Ted Arnott, MPP
All Ontario Chiefs Conference
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

It is truly an honour to be here today at the All Ontario Chiefs Conference 2011 here in Toronto in the traditional territory of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee communities. This is the first time I've been asked to attend the Ontario First Nations Chiefs Assembly, and I want to tell you that I consider it an honour and a privilege.

Thank you elders, Chiefs and other participants for the opportunity to speak to you, and more importantly, to hear from you.

I view it as an opportunity for dialogue; I want to listen to you, to learn from you, and to take back your concerns to Queen's Park.

We know that the questions we discuss today defy easy answers. I readily acknowledge at the outset – I do not have all the answers, but I believe with all my heart that through co-operation and dialogue, we can move closer to the truths we all seek.

I also want to thank Andrea Horwath for speaking here today on behalf of her party. Throughout our shared experience in the Legislature, I've always found her to be a strong advocate, bringing forward her ideas very effectively in the Legislature. While we don't agree on overall philosophy, I don't question her sincerity in pursuit of her vision of a better Ontario.

And I also want to acknowledge the Honourable Chris Bentley, Attorney General and Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, for being here today.

I'm privileged to serve as the PC caucus critic to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. In this capacity, I have learned about the accomplishments and successes, as well as the challenges, faced by First Nations communities in Ontario.

Recently I picked up a book entitled "Loyal She Remains," published in 1984. It chronicles the history of Ontario, including native history. Chapter 2 discusses native peoples in the year 1600; it was authored by former Liberal leader Robert Nixon, who is a former colleague of mine in the Legislature. I'm proud to say that I served with him in my first term in office in the early 1990s.

The chapter begins with a compelling quotation from Pauline Johnson's "A Cry from an Indian Wife":

*They but forget we Indians owned the land
From ocean unto ocean; that they stand
Upon a soil that centuries ago
Was our sole kingdom and our right alone.*

Bob Nixon reminds us that, and I quote: "Much has been made of the heroism of white men who travelled great distances, laying the foundations of European knowledge of the vastness of the continent. In every case they were accompanied by native guides.

It is important to recognize that First Nation people agreed to Treaties to share the richness and bounty with the newcomers from Europe—in that sense we are all people who are bound by Treaty. The question that remains is how to fairly implement the promises made by the Crown in those Treaties which are still alive today.

And being here today is a good reminder that your purpose, to provide a unified voice on issues affecting First Nation people in Ontario, is vitally important.

The Government of Ontario, like any other order of government, needs to hear from you.

They need to hear from you because Ontario cannot be truly successful unless all of its residents, which must include First Nation people, have the opportunity to share in that success; this would be the essence of Treaty of which all Ontarians can benefit.

They also need to hear from you because we have, throughout our history, depended on one another. I want to speak about just one example, Tom Longboat. Last year I had the occasion to speak in response to a motion in the Ontario Legislature proclaiming June 4th of each year Tom Longboat Day in the province of Ontario.

Tom Longboat was one of Canada's, and indeed the world's, most renowned runners of his day. Having won many races here in Ontario, he went on to win arguably the most important distance race outside of the Olympics, the Boston Marathon, in 1907.

History also records the heroism of men like Tom Longboat, who later served on the Western Front during the First World War. He was assigned the dangerous job of dispatch runner, running orders between units. Although wounded twice and once feared dead, he survived the Great War to return home to Canada in 1919.

It's just one fine example of someone who proudly represented his own people, his own heritage and community, while at the same time representing the best of Canada. There are so many others, in so many areas of Canadian life, of which we can all be proud.

Too often, however, circumstances have intervened to prevent First Nations communities from reaching their potential. This is true of our history, as it is up to and including the present day.

Opportunities for young people, for those living on and off reserve, must be prioritized. They need to know their future will be a future of hope. They need to know that their opportunities will be brighter than those of previous generations. This is the Canadian dream, this is the First Nation dream—one that we all share.

Of the more than 242,000 aboriginal Canadians who live in Ontario, the largest First Nations population in the country, we know that a great many of those are young. Over 26 percent are 15 years of age or younger.

It's also a growing population. Between 2001 and 2006, it has grown by 20 percent for the First Nation population. First Nations population growth far outpaces the growth of other communities in Ontario.

While growth can bring challenges, we also know that aboriginal Canadians have so much to contribute; Ontario needs their talent, skill and culture, and in that way we can make Ontario an even better place to live, work and raise a family.

A young and growing population will require the best possible education and economic development to sustain jobs, which in far too many aboriginal communities remain far too few.

Education must be our priority when we're told that three out of four native teens drop out of high school, and when we're told that native teens living in poor, remote communities have one of the highest suicide rates in Canada. This can't continue.

Tragically, we learned of the seven Nishnawbe Aski Nation high school students who died since 2000. Six of those deaths were by drowning. We need the provincial government to show the same concern, the same sense of urgency, that it would bring to such a tragedy had it occurred anywhere else in Ontario. We need an inquest and we need it now; we need to know what happened, and how we can prevent it from happening again.

Health care must also be our priority when we're told that aboriginal people have shorter life expectancies, experience more violent and accidental deaths, have higher infant mortality rates and suffer from more chronic health conditions than do other Canadians.

At my riding office in Fergus, I had a meeting last Friday with a representative of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario. We talked about a number of health issues facing Ontario, including the fact that on-reserve First Nations people have far worse overall cardiovascular health than the general Canadian population—a situation they describe as a “cardiovascular crisis.”

To help alleviate some of these problems, First Nations communities have heard a great many promises from governments at all levels. Promises in themselves, however, do not lead to tangible results. Promises in themselves do not lead to an improved quality of life. A promise unkept leads to disappointment, and can at some point be viewed as betrayal.

Too often, politicians are quick to make grandiose promises, but slow to go about the work, pursue the follow-up required, or to make the hard choices necessary to fulfill them. Half-filled promises sometimes cause the most disappointment.

As you know, there is a provincial election campaign on the horizon. On October 6th, just a few months from now, the people of Ontario will make a decision as to who will lead their next government.

The choice is between the status quo and more of the same... or change.

From now until the election, we can certainly expect to hear a great many more promises. I ask you, therefore, to consider which party and which platform offers the most credible plan to improve the lives of those who lack the health care, education, and good jobs they seek.

To that end, I want to make a few comments about *changebook*, Tim Hudak's plan to bring change to Ontario.

On health care, he is committing to a series of patient-centre reforms that make the patient – not bureaucracies, not administrators – the focus of our health care system.

He's committing to establish wait-time guarantees for emergency room visits, supporting seniors with 5,000 additional long-term care beds, and bringing more doctors to the communities that need them.

We want to encourage health care providers to work collaboratively to better meet patients' needs in underserved areas, like northern Ontario.

And we need to reduce waste and duplication in bureaucracy to ensure that every dollar goes where it's needed most.

On education, changebook recognizes that Ontario's education system is not one-size-fits-all. Government must recognize that schools in different parts of Ontario have their own unique needs. That's why Tim Hudak wants to ensure the funding formula meets the needs of single school communities and effectively supports special education for families who need it.

On a side note, I understand that it has been determined First Nation students have a higher degree of success when they experience their own culture built into the curriculum. This makes sense, and they deserve no less.

Energy policy is another key area addressed in changebook. Through mismanagement and expensive energy experiments, hydro bills have, in far too many cases, skyrocketed far beyond families' ability to pay.

While I'm hearing that from my own constituents, I'm sure it's a problem felt most acutely in the north, where it's coldest, and especially in First Nations communities, where some people can least afford their energy costs to begin with.

Changebook offers several forms of relief from rising energy costs: removing the HST from home hydro bills, removing the HST from home heating, removing the Debt Retirement Charge from hydro bills, and making time-of-use pricing optional, not mandatory.

We know that First Nations people are generally not subject to these added fees and taxes, but I point out this issue nonetheless because we believe these reforms are critical to our province's future success as a whole.

I also want to recognize the projects that many First Nations communities are already pursuing—usually with considerable success—as a form of economic development.

When it comes to jobs, especially in the north, changebook offers hope. It recognizes that too often, decisions made at Queen's Park are out-of-touch with the reality in northern communities. It recognizes that families in northern Ontario deserve to be heard and to plan their own future.

That's why it indicates that a Tim Hudak government is committed to repealing Bill 191, the Far North Act. Despite strong opposition from Grand Chief Stan Beardy, from other First Nations and beyond, the government pushed through this legislation with minimal consultation.

I am proud to have been part of a caucus that stood with you on this issue, and voted against this legislation.

We believe the government failed to adequately consult the people most affected by Bill 191. We believe it will hold back job creation—jobs that would otherwise have provided opportunities for First Nations people.

Repealing Bill 191 is just one positive step we could take to create jobs and improve the quality of life for everyone in the north.

Changebook also proposes allowing local municipalities and First Nations to keep the revenue from the Mining Tax for any new mines that are developed.

When it comes to our policy for the north, you can expect to see even more detail in the weeks to come about how we can bring positive change to that important region of our province and all the people who call the north their home.

We have more reason for optimism – cautious optimism, but optimism nevertheless – when it comes to the future.

In what's been called a "historic shift from confrontation to co-operation," the federal government and First Nations leaders have come together with the intention of transforming the schools, economies and quality of life on reserves across Canada.

Reading about the new Canada First Nation Joint Action Plan, I was encouraged by the remarks of Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo, who made the case that co-operation with Ottawa on improving standards on reserves did not have to be at the expense of native jurisdiction:

The National Chief is quoted as saying this: "We can stand firmly in our rights, but we can also accomplish success in education that will light the fire of potential in our young people." He said: "First Nations can do both."

That's exactly what we need to do.

The Government of Canada's outgoing Auditor General Sheila Fraser recently condemned the lack of progress in closing the gap between reserves and other communities. She noted that it wasn't just a lack of progress, but also an actual deterioration in living conditions.

With your help, however, I believe we can—and we will—make progress. If we are to accept the responsibility implied in our respective leadership roles, we *must* make progress.

If there is a change in government, and if I'm still in the Legislature after October 6th, and that depends on the people of Wellington-Halton Hills, you can be assured I would want to do what I can to see that we make meaningful, measurable progress every year.

And in doing so, it's crucial for the government to build relationships of dialogue and respect with First Nations.

That's been my approach as critic to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, as it will continue to be. My door is open.

As you know, many of issues I've described are the responsibility of the federal government. We need to hold their feet to the fire, but that should not excuse the provincial government from its failure to do all that it can, or from its tendency to play the jurisdictional blame game.

And so we in the PC Caucus see the need for significant and lasting opportunities in which you and your communities are—to the greatest possible extent—full partners in those opportunities. More jobs, better health care services, improved educational opportunities must be our priorities.

We need leadership to achieve them, doing all that we can do together as a province. We hear you, and we want to work in partnership with you to bring about meaningful change for the better.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity to address you today, and I wish you all the best in this assembly and in the future.