
**Speaking Notes for
National Chief Betty Ann Lavallée
Congress of Aboriginal Peoples**

**House of Commons Standing Committee on
Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development**

**October 6, 2009
Ottawa, Ontario**

Good Afternoon Chairperson Stanton, members of the Standing Committee and fellow NAO leaders. It's an honour to be here today on the traditional and unceded land of the Algonquin people, to present to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

I am a Status Mi'kmaq who has lived all of my life off reserve. I'm from Geary, New Brunswick and the former Chief and President of the New Brunswick Aboriginal Peoples Council. On September 12th, I was elected National Chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. We represent the rights and interests of Status, non-Status Indians living off reserve and Métis peoples.

Today is a historic occasion, when three of the five national Aboriginal leaders appearing before you are women. I think that this fact is sending you an important message about how things get done in Aboriginal communities. Traditionally speaking, Mi'kmaq culture was matrilineal and women were the leaders. Emma Laroque, a noted Aboriginal scholar, has said that colonization has taken a toll on all Aboriginal peoples, but perhaps it has taken its greatest toll on women.

Women continue to be discriminated against through the *Indian Act*, but through the brave work of people like Sharon McIvor and Barbara Lovelace, we are taking this legislation apart piece by piece. We have never bought into the *Indian Act* ...we have stood our ground... and lived on our traditional territories. Through this odious legislation, we are denied our birthrights and treated as second-class citizens.

I'm a registered Indian and classified as a 6(2) Indian. Under the law, my son is not entitled to be registered as an Indian. We are graded like cattle or grades of beef. It is unadulterated discrimination. Fighting to end this inhuman treatment and this colonial era of thinking is a central priority of CAP.

The core problem we face is the denial of the federal government that it has jurisdiction over Métis and non-Status Indians under section 91(24) of the *Constitution Act*, 1867.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples stated that this denial was the core of federal government discrimination. We say that this denial is wrong in law and we are seeking a judicial declaration to resolve the issue. The declaration will remove a major obstacle to negotiating a range of matters pertaining to the rights and interests of Métis and non-Status Indians.

The federal government has refused or failed to negotiate with us in good faith. As a result of their legal position, Métis and non-Status Indians have suffered discrimination in health care, education and other benefits, as well as an opportunity to negotiate or enter treaties with respect to unextinguished Aboriginal Rights or agreements.

Our priorities include Health, Education, Economic Development and Housing and Homelessness. It is difficult in ten minutes to cover an entire range of issues. There are many more agenda items which could be included – some are Aboriginal-specific and others are of interest to all Canadians: Aboriginal veterans, matrimonial property rights, the UN Declaration

on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and environmental issues – all of these are of great importance to CAP.

Everyone in this House of Commons Standing Committee is aware of the health status of Aboriginal Peoples - it is much lower than the Canadian population.

If you name any health issue, it is likely that the prevalence in our communities is much higher. From type 2 diabetes to heart disease, substance abuse, and fetal alcohol syndrome – these are all major health problems for our people. The key priority of CAP is to work with federal and provincial governments to resolve the complex jurisdictional issues that impact on the provision of good health care. We want to ensure that our people obtain the same level of access and support that is taken for granted by other Canadians.

The pandemic of the H1N1 Flu Virus is of grave concern to us. It is one of the most urgent health challenges we face, and it highlights the vulnerability of our communities.

Let us be clear about health. There needs to be a policy change in the way the federal and provincial governments are dealing with health, including pandemic viruses. Governments need to coordinate with **all** national Aboriginal organizations, to increase readiness against this pandemic strain of influenza and any future strains.

Our first and central consideration is the fact that the health status of our people is well below the national average. We need intelligent health policies to overcome these disparities.

We need to be involved...we need the capacity to be involved... and we need an integrated and transparent process to find solutions.

I have recently written Minister Aglukkaq concerning the importance of renewing the Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative. Type 2 diabetes is an epidemic in our communities. Dr. Stewart Harris, one of Canada's leading authorities on this disease, has reported that the prevalence has skyrocketed. If the Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative for off-reserve and Métis is not renewed in a timely fashion, we will lose our network of frontline prevention and education coordinators. All the gains that we have made in the last 10 years will be lost and the epidemic will continue to grow in our communities.

The education of our children and youth is a public policy priority of the first order. Aboriginal youth have the highest drop out rates...the lowest levels of literacy...and the lowest levels of skills development. It is education that will improve our lives. It is education that is integral to reducing poverty in our communities.

We view the needs of Aboriginal children and youth from the prenatal period to university as a priority. Federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions need to make a clear commitment to improving the school experiences of Aboriginal students and making Aboriginal education a priority focus. This will require fundamental changes in the way that education systems operate to ensure that there is consultation with us in development of policies, tools, rules and implementation structures.

Back in 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommended that federal, provincial and territorial governments cooperate to support early childhood education for all Aboriginal children, regardless of residence. We view ECD as an essential program to ensure that our children have the very best start in life by receiving the best possible stimulation and nourishment.

The goal of kindergarten to Grade 12 should be to produce graduates with a sound education that is relevant to Aboriginal culture, values and history. At the February Aboriginal Summit on Education, we were encouraged by the discussions concerning strengthening Aboriginal successes in education. The provincial and territorial Ministers of Education have recognized that in the next 15 years, Aboriginal students will represent over 25% of the elementary student population in some provinces and territories.

Urban Aboriginal families are in a particularly difficult situation because in the urban setting they lose the cultural influences and supports. The most urbanized Aboriginal people are non-Status Indians and Métis.

Métis and non-Status Indians do not have access to the post-secondary education support services that are provided to reserves and the Inuit. This is a major barrier to increasing the numbers of Aboriginal people who have post-secondary education. CAP recommends expansion of the federal post-secondary education programs to include Status and non-Status Indians and Métis. We are also seeking resources to provide bursaries for our students in order to assist them in pursuing higher education and skills development.

Our third priority is economic development. CAP is committed to working with federal, provincial and territorial governments to secure programs and services that support our full engagement in the Canadian economy. We are seeking an opportunity to engage in economic development programs, which have been historically denied to our constituency. We need to have access to these programs including regional economic development initiatives and the implementation of a network of community Aboriginal economic development officers.

The core of CAP's economic development relies on the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy, which is a basic building block. This is in jeopardy because the program sunsets at the end of March 2010. The CAP AHRDA program needs to be maintained, because without this organizational platform new initiatives will be uncoordinated.

In economic development initiatives, there must be a focus on the needs of Aboriginal women. Their capacity to support themselves and their families is limited by a lack of education, skills and training. In any labour market agreements, childcare costs must be included.

CAP has been a long time advocate for Aboriginal people with disabilities and there is a need for employment and training programs for this sector that represents the most marginalized and poorest of the poor in our communities.

Our final priority is housing and homelessness. The housing crisis being faced in our communities requires a national Aboriginal housing strategy and action plan. For those of you

who may not know, it was our organization that was the driving force behind establishment of the Rural and Native Housing program. This program resulted in action on the long-neglected housing and shelter needs of our constituency. It produced thousands of housing units across Canada, but today many of these units need to be replaced or repaired.

CAP has just renewed a Protocol Agreement with the National Aboriginal Housing Association. NAHA has been working since 1994 to advocate for the interests of off-reserve and Métis housing. We are fully supportive of the NAHA's call for a national off-reserve housing strategy. It's remarkable that no such strategy exists in Canada.

There have been numerous reports and studies on the Aboriginal housing crisis and there is increasing evidence that urban Aboriginal people are facing a worsening housing situation. In 1998, the big city mayors' caucus declared homelessness a national disaster. Homelessness should not exist in a country as wealthy as Canada. It is an embarrassment to all Canadians.

It is an outrage that British Columbia intends to forcibly move homeless people off the streets during the Olympic games. Homelessness is an urban epidemic of poverty and our people comprise the largest sector. The over-representation of Aboriginal people represents a powerful image of the move by our people to urban centres.

The Canadian public continues to associate Aboriginal issues with Indians living on reserves, but the reality is that 80% of the ancestry Aboriginal population live off-reserve and 60% live in urban areas. This is the most significant demographic factor for policy makers, yet it is the one where the least action takes place.

Wela'lin !
Thank you