



Nishnawbe Aski Nation

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NEWS RELEASE

Monday September 17, 2007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NAN GRAND CHIEF ISSUES OPEN LETTER TO ONTARIO PARTY LEADERS

THUNDER BAY, ON: Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Grand Chief Stan Beardy released the following open letter to Ontario party leaders Dalton McGuinty, John Tory, Howard Hampton, and Frank de Jong today:

As party leaders campaign to form the next Government of Ontario, it is imperative they address the many issues affecting the people and communities of Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) – an area covering two-thirds of the province, spanning west to the Manitoba border, east to Quebec, north to the coasts of James and Hudson bays, home to 49 First Nation communities represented by NAN, and approximately 45,000 First Nation members on and off reserve.

The people and communities of Nishnawbe Aski require a strong commitment to an action-oriented agenda that respects First Nation priorities: **resource revenue sharing, impact and benefit agreement legislation, consultation, accommodation, and consent, respect for community moratoriums, and far north land use planning.**

As a signatory of James Bay Treaty 9, it is necessary the Government of Ontario work together with the people and leadership of Nishnawbe Aski to improve the quality of life not only for our people, but all Ontarians.

NAN territory, rich with forests, minerals, and rivers, has contributed to the wealth of all Ontarians, however our people continue to live in what's often been compared to as Third World conditions. Our people face sickness and disease due to contaminated water. We're restricted from taking advantage of economic opportunities. Substandard housing and overcrowding of homes underlie the societal destruction causing our young people to take their own lives at a rate almost double the national average. Lack of access to adequate education resources and skills training contribute to unemployment levels ten times higher than experienced by the rest of Ontarians.

Media have brought to the fore front the tragic reality of some of NAN's First Nation communities, such as the water crisis in Kashechewan and the housing and suicide crisis in Pikangikum. National and international media attention indicates the continuing wide spread threats to the health, safety, and well being of Ontario's First Nation people. These are not simply brush fires to be doused and forgotten, but signals of a fundamental problem in the historic status quo. The consequences of not dealing with these issues will not be limited to the affected First Nation communities, but will be of enormous importance for the province as a whole. It is our lands and our resources (gold, diamonds, lumber, pulp, paper, and water power) which are and will continue to be the heart of Ontario's industrial base.

It's time the Government of Ontario stands up to become a true treaty partner to forge a "new relationship" by working together with First Nation communities to develop and support a clear vision for the future of our relationship and our place in this province.

As we approach the October election the people and leadership of Nishnawbe Aski want to know just how deeply the next provincial government will be committed to our issues.

NAN challenges all politicians standing in the provincial election to address the following key issues:

1. Resource Revenue Sharing

Every year almost \$200 million in water royalties, \$ 200 million in stumpage, and up to \$90 million in mining royalties are generated from our lands. Yet our First Nations are unable to meet the basic needs of their people in areas of housing, clean water, education, and basic infrastructure. The average income of our people is less than \$10, 000 and unemployment on reserve typically exceeds 80%.

How will the government of Ontario ensure First Nations share equitably in fees, taxes, and royalties as well as the \$20 billion dollars in resources and services generated by our territory annually?

How will the Crown compensate the southern communities of NAN for the billions of dollars worth of natural resources that have been extracted from our territories over the past 100 years without consultation or compensation?

2. Impact and Benefit Agreement Legislation

The enlightened members of the resource sector are now negotiating Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs), which create opportunities for affected First Nation communities to control our own role in resource development.

These voluntary IBAs are still far too modest, with companies devoting only a tiny portion of their profits toward First Nation development in a region. Such agreements in the southern areas of NAN territory for ongoing mineral, forestry, and related activities, in First Nations territory, are slow in coming.

Will your government make a public commitment to create legislation that makes impact and benefit agreements with First Nations mandatory?

3. Consultation, Accommodation, and Consent

The mining and forest companies say government inaction in the face of recent court decisions on First Nation consultation is creating uncertainty for them and for their investors.

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has recommended governments adopt the principle of "free, prior and informed consent" of indigenous peoples regarding potential development projects or other activities carried out on their lands. The rulings of the Supreme Court of Canada in various cases support these principles.

Will your government set aside the internally developed consultation policy and commit to develop a common understanding with NAN First Nations regarding the legal requirement to consult and accommodate and seek the consent of First Nations when resource development occurs on the homelands of our First Nations?

4. Respect Community Moratoriums

Out of respect to your treaty partner, will your government take immediate action to respect individual community moratoriums on resource development? An enlightened government would see that NAN community moratoriums are not saying no to development. Rather, these communities are saying they want a pause on development until they are confident your government will take action on issues such as revenue sharing, impact and benefit agreements and consultation, accommodation and consent.

5. Far North Land Use Planning

For the sake of our communities and for all the people of Ontario it is important that land use planning and resource management for the Far North recognize that it is the homeland of approximately 45,000 NAN First Nation members. Such planning must be based on a government-to-government relationship and must respect and implement the treaty rights of our First Nations. Land Use Planning should focus on maintaining, conserving, and protecting the special characteristics of the region important to the Nishnawbe Aski way of life, while promoting environmentally compatible and sustainable economic development.

The government must recognize the need for First Nations to undertake their own land use planning processes and provide the fiscal and technical resources to ensure that the regional plan incorporates community plans in a manner that is culturally appropriate and technically sound.

There is currently an uncertainty regarding the rules of engagement for industry to work with First Nations on developing the North. Ontario's indifference to and lack of clear implementation of Supreme Court decisions continues to breed conflict between industry and First Nations.

The next Government of Ontario must enter into a "new relationship" with the people and leadership of Nishnawbe Ask. For the benefit of not only the people and communities of Nishnawbe Aski, but all Ontarians, there really is no time to waste.

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