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PRESS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AFNQL CHIEF GHISLAIN PICARD REACTS TO THE HELIN- SNOW STATEMENTS ON ABORIGINAL POST-SECONDARY STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Wendake, Thursday, March 19 - The Calvin Helin-Dave Snow proposal to the current problems with the delivery of post-secondary assistance to First Nation students along with its statements is degrading to all Chiefs and Councils, many of which have endeavored to provide the best service possible in very difficult circumstances. Saying the program is not making a difference is a statement which needs to be put into proper context. "It is a statement that simply is not true if we care to go back 10 and 30 years ago. Prior to the government freeze of 2% in 1996, numbers in post-secondary continued to increase making it a major contribution to First Nations education" declared Ghislain Picard, the Chief of the AFNQL.

Indeed, the numbers began to drop since the implementation of the freeze by the Canadian government and waiting lists have continued to increase. Many students as a result have given up. This is well recognized in the report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development composed of all federal parties representatives which recommends to put an end to the freeze of 2%, but certainly not to the actual program.

"Messrs. Helin and Snow totally ignore this reality and have decided to put the entire blame on First Nation Chiefs and Councils as a result of a few bad apples, if you will" says Mr. Picard who also deplors that Messrs. Helin and Snow, for some reasons, seem to ignore the fact that the majority of First Nations have well established education directorates that manage these programs and have clearly established policies that have to respect the guidelines of the Indian Affairs E-12 circular which sets out the priorities for students to be selected. "Instead, Messrs. Helin and Snow have chosen to paint all Chiefs and Councils in this country as being dishonest and self-serving. It is certain that for some people at the actual federal government who wish to get rid of that program for political reasons this is a delight to hear a First Nation member speak in this manner".

AFNQL agrees that the Canadian Government has done a lousy job at managing not only the post-secondary student assistance program but many programs. The fact is the Canadian Government has refused to resource First Nations education appropriately. Messrs. Helin and Snow's solution to the problem is simply to give the money directly to students and money being the motivation to students. Motivating students does not solely depend on money. Employment in their community comes to mind. Whether the money is in the student's account, the band's account or the government's account is not the issue. Access to post-secondary education and follow-up on students is the issue when it comes to increasing our numbers in school. Proper encouragement and human support throughout a young person's life are very important factors for First Nations students and well recognized through the literature. Helin and Snow automatically assume that all students are guaranteed funding and that this can be done with the current budget allocated.

According to Messrs. Helin and Snow, corruption and nepotism is the norm amongst the Chiefs and Councils in this country. Many statements are made to discredit all First Nations Chiefs and Councils and it may be easy enough to find students that, maybe, rightfully so decry their situation for not being funded. "Such generalization in today's society is certainly not in line with human rights and shows a total lack of decency" affirms Ghislain Picard who also asks "Where is the statistical data to support the kinds of statements being made by Messrs. Helin and Snow?" AFNQL completely question numbers such as 70% of First Nations population being resident off reserve. The First Nations' numbers say that 50% of its membership resides off reserve. As for the Quebec region, the majority of their communities have very well managed education programs, which includes the post-secondary education student assistance programs.

While the debate is welcome, AFNQL also understands that this government has made it clear that it wants to get rid of this program, and this was made very clear by its deputy Minister. Messrs. Helin and Snow's statements are certainly in line with the conservative governments intentions. "We know that major improvements are required, and we –the AFNQL and the national Chiefs Committee on Education– would welcome a joint review of the program with the government and discuss what the best solutions would be in order to improve and assure access to "every" First Nation student from our communities" offers Mr. Picard.

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