

**NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS OF REGIONAL CHIEF GHISLAIN PICARD
AT THE FIRST NATIONS SOCIOECONOMIC FORUM**

OCTOBER 25 2006

(The delivered version shall be deemed authentic)

CUSTOMARY GREETINGS

BRIEF MESSAGE IN INNU

This gathering is unprecedented. But it's not historical...at least, not yet.

In order for this Forum to be described as historical, the commitments taken here today should be imbued with a true meaning and the outcome of our proceedings should take on a true historical SENSE. The challenge rests with each one of us gathered here today. We each have a responsibility: the First Nations, the Quebec government, the Canadian government and the civil societies (aboriginal and Quebec), and these responsibilities must be assumed.

It is with great honor, and at the same time with much humility that I address these few words tonight. The 10 nations, duly represented by their Grand Chiefs, Chiefs, Vice-Chiefs, and elected Councillors are here to make a difference and contribute to what we have all been hoping for, for a very long time: *change things, this time for real.*

Some might say that a certain revolution is required for our communities. One thing is certain: *a status quo is no longer acceptable.* This Forum must help us initiate, together, these enormous tasks which will allow us to change tack and help in the radical transformation of the socioeconomic conditions of aboriginal peoples.

I don't want to be an alarmist, but time is of the essence. In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in a 4000 pages and 58 millions dollars report disclosed the whole extent of problems: poverty, suicide, drug and alcohol dependency, unemployment and violence. In an effort to change things, 400 recommendations were proposed. Ten years later, I find that things did not really change.

And yet, at the time, the urgency to act had been raised. In 1999, after an inquiry on aboriginal peoples living in Canada, the United Nations Human Rights Committee affirmed, and I quote: *"the situation of Aboriginal peoples remains the most pressing problem which Canadians are confronted with"*. That's 7 years ago.

We've seen very little progress since then...

While the socioeconomic conditions of the First Nations continued to deteriorate. I think of the level of diabetes which went from 10 to 15% over the past five years. I think also of the employment rate which is 30% lower than that of the average in Quebec. Add to this an increasing demographic rate of 2,5%, and you can easily imagine the scale of pressure which is intensifying in our communities.

Our challenge is a major one, I agree. And faced with this challenge, we have an obligation for results. We can't fail and deceive a growing youth, which, in many cases, does not even have the means to live out of hope.

I am sure that each First Nation leader present here today has dreams about his First Nation being all fulfilled, without violence, without drug, without school drop-outs, without social assistance, a First Nations responsible for its development, autonomous in its choices and proud of its distinct culture. This dream, this vision must really take shape within this Forum and find expression in a concrete mission that I will call the "Mission 10 000 possibilities". This means, 10 000 new houses within the next five years, 10 000 new jobs within the next 10 years and 10 000 youths who will avoid school drop-out or return to school for completion of their secondary V; these are all new opportunities for the members of the First Nations.

If we commit ourselves immediately to reach these objectives, perhaps we could avoid the predictable crisis. May I remind you that a quarter of our populations are currently under 15 years of age. Our challenge is similar to Quebec's in the fact that it's a challenge of a generation, but the opposite. We must make room for these youths, whom, within 10 to 15 years from now, will be in need of jobs, housing and services. It is most urgent to act immediately.

To help us, we have a whole range of concrete proposals on the table which will provide food for thought during our proceedings.

A New Alliance

In order to really change things, a political will is required, which unfortunately was not always visible. The Forum deals with social and economic issues, but in reality we will never be able to deal with these issues without a New Alliance between our respective governments. It will be essential that together, we find a new equilibrium of political powers and economic resources. Only a New Alliance will help really change things and truly restore the social and economic conditions of individuals, families, communities and nations.

We have never relinquished our status of Nations, we have been recognized as such in the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and when we signed treaties to share our lands and our resources. More recently, they were recognized as nations by a resolution of the National Assembly. This happened in 1985, under the initiative of René Lévesque, and following a meeting similar to the one which gathers us in Mashteuiatsh this week. Through this resolution, the Quebec National Assembly recognizes to the First Nations among others, the right to autonomy within Quebec; the

right to their culture, their language, their traditions; the right to own and control their lands; the right to participate in the economic development of Quebec and benefit from it.

At the time, our representatives found that this resolution was not going far enough. Consequently, today, we realize that it went much further than any other government had since agreed to go.

No matter what we say, what we do, the aboriginal cultures, values and philosophies of our peoples were and remain fundamentally different from everything that characterizes the dominant society of Quebec. Let's be clear and let's be honest: I am not Canadian, I am not a Quebecer, I am Innu. Our nations have their own identify, have distinctive rights and will never be assimilated to the dominant society.

And yet, our aboriginal peoples continue, still today, to be denied from the right to shape their societies and institutions on their own and in line with these values.

Therefore, a nation whose development is planned by others, whose territory is developed and expropriated by others, whose rights are established and interpreted by others and for the benefit of others, is reduced to insignificance and dependency. The issues affecting the territory and the resources are undeniably on our path.

There are not many ways to put an end to the state of dependency: the First Nations themselves must control the resources which will empower them to become responsible for their own destiny and build institutions in line with their values. To pick up on the words of the late Dédé, from the group "Les Colocs" I would say: pass us the puck and will score goals!

We wish to bequeath to the youths who will follow, answers rather than questions, solutions instead of problems. We wish to pass them on a new relation which will contribute to the economic and political stability of Quebec and which necessarily, goes through the recognition of our rights, including the ancestral title on the territory and its resources.

Some greeted with skepticism my wish of seeing the *Indian Act* disappear within the next 5 years. It could seem unrealistic, idealistic, but if we do not aim at this objective, what will be our vision? This law is the ultimate colonial tool and will always act as a brake on our development. The prosperity of our people is based inevitably on a new legislative framework.

One other thing which the First Nations can no longer accept is to be the victims of ping-pong games between the federal government and the Quebec government. How can we accept that issues affecting us be discussed between governments, without our presence, without our being involved? From now on, I would like all issues which concern the First Nations, to be discussed with the First Nations and the sharing of skills to no longer be used as a pretext for not acting.

On the level of relations between aboriginals and non-aboriginals, there is in fact much work to do. As you know, the lack of knowledge about our realities generates indifference, biased opinions, and at times, racism.

Time has come to demystify a certain number of deep-rooted prejudices such as the one where Aboriginal peoples are costing money to the government, more than for the other citizens. The reality is a whole different thing.

I was not born yesterday. I know very well that a change of perception will not be easy. As Albert Einstein was saying, it is harder to break up a biased opinion than an atom.

But the recent efforts, I am referring to the work of the Quebec Human Rights Commission, show that popular education is necessary and that everyone gains by better knowing the First Nations, their history, their contribution, their culture...

This week's proceedings are as important for our populations in our communities who are observing at a distance and wondering about the utility of such an exercise. I want to tell them that their representatives worked hard in preparation to this forum and that they are here today with the firm conviction to make a difference. We do not want to return to our communities without anything concrete, without instilling a new feeling of hope to our respective populations.

We do not have much opportunity to give hope to our youths. This week's forum can be an opportunity.

In closing, I wish to express my gratitude to all those who came here today. Your presence testifies to a genuine goodwill of contribution to the socioeconomic development of the First Nations. This Forum can already be described as a success in light of the significant participation. Thank you for your presence, thank you for your ideas.

May the Creator inspire our works and make them fruitful so that our people are blessed with feelings of hope.

Enjoy the Forum.