



BRITISH COLUMBIA ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS

Keynote Address to the
Rotary District 7640 – "The Promise of Rotary"

*"The Promise of Aboriginal Rights: Self-Government, Partnership
and Building a Stronger Canada"*

JODY WILSON-RAYBOULD (PUGLAAS)

REGIONAL CHIEF

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good afternoon Rotarians – Gilakas'la – Thank you, Peggy Hebden for the kind introduction. It is my great pleasure to be here.

There is no question that one of the most troubling social issues facing North America – and consequently one of our biggest public policy challenges – is the plight of Aboriginal peoples – the plight of the 566 Tribes as they are called here in the US or the 630+ First Nations as we are called in Canada.

In Canada, 1.4 million people identify as being Aboriginal representing 4.3% of the total Canadian population. In America, we are 2.9 million or 0.9% of the total population. We are spread out and live in all parts of the continent and our cultures are rich and diverse. In Canada alone we have 60 Aboriginal languages groups.

Myself, I come from the Musgamagw-Tsawateineuk/Laich-Kwil-Tach people of Northern Vancouver Island where I serve on the governing council of our Nation. We are a 'potlatching' peoples. I am also, as was stated in the introduction, serving a second term as the elected Regional Chief of the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations – elected by the 203 Chiefs in BC – themselves some elected, some hereditary. The AFN is the principal political organization in Canada that represents all First Nations. As the Regional Chief of BC, I sit on a national executive of the AFN – there are 10 Regional Chiefs and one National Chief – Shawn A-in-Chut Atleo. Our national organization works with our sister organization here in the United States, the National Congress of American Indians.

Many of our Nations, in fact, straddle what for us is an arbitrary border between our two countries – these Nations to the extent they can, continue

to work together – particularly when it comes to economic alliances or environmental issues.

This spring, former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin approached me and asked how I would feel about speaking to a group of Rotarians on First Nations' issues and to talk about some of the work we are doing to help our Nations rebuild. I said I would be very honoured to do so – what Mr. Martin did not say at the time was that it would be in Philadelphia and as a kick off to a conversation about how Rotary can play an even greater role with respect to community service projects within Aboriginal communities. And for this and the invitation to be here, I want to thank you.

Clearly, the solutions to our challenges as First Nations are not going to be met solely by the actions of government or the bureaucracy that has been set up to administer our lives. Something I have learned from Mr. Martin...someone who knows a thing or two about government.

The role that service organizations – such as yours play – can help make a significant difference in improving the lives of our people. For me, true progress and community development can only really occur when we build lasting relationships and partnerships – cutting across cultural, economic and social boundaries.

Mr. Martin, as I am sure many of you are aware, has, since leaving federal politics – if you can ever really leave politics – been dedicating much of his energy and time to supporting First Nations' initiatives and in particular the *Martin Education Initiative*. He is not alone – there are increasing numbers

of influential Canadians and community-minded people that are stepping up to do something to help.

I find myself as a Regional Chief during what truly is a time of significant change and opportunity for First Nations. There is no doubt great progress has been made in advancing human rights, including Aboriginal rights, and there is now a promise of a better tomorrow for our peoples. Our past leaders helped to transform Canada by ensuring Aboriginal rights were protected in Canada's highest law – section 35 of our Constitution – and by challenging all Nations of the world in ensuring minimum standards for dealing with our peoples were adopted in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, it is quite one thing to secure our rights are protected at law, but quite another to find ways to actually implement them on the ground and to facilitate social change.

There remains a huge amount of work – a great deal of basic community development work – that needs to take place to translate the promise of Aboriginal rights into meaningful and transformative change on the ground – to strengthen and empower our people – to address the colonial legacy.

While just a blip on our time-line as Aboriginal peoples, the colonial period has been devastating. Our peoples may have experienced different histories and been subject to different legal systems since American independence and the creation of the two Nation States; however, there still remain very similar social problems and issues for our peoples on either side of the border – the result of economic and social marginalization and failed government policies – conditions that give rise to what some call our "Fourth World" reality – that is Third World conditions on what we call reserves in

Canada and what are called reservations in the United States – existing within a First World economy.

Today, one in four children in First Nations' communities in Canada lives in poverty. Many of our communities do not have safe or clean drinking water and housing conditions can be deplorable. About 70% of First Nations students on-reserve will never complete high school. In fact a First Nation's youth is more likely to end up in jail than to graduate. Suicide is now among the leading causes of death among First Nations between the ages of 10 and 24, with the rate estimated to be five to six times higher than that of non-Aboriginal youth. The list of negative social indicators goes on...

All this was confirmed by a government study – the "Community Well-being Index" – that assessed quality of life in 4,685 Canadian communities based on education, labour force activity, income and housing. Only one First Nation community was in the top 100. There were 92 First Nations in the bottom 100. Half of all First Nations scored in the lower range of the index compared with 3% of other Canadian communities. Pretty telling.

Of course it was not always this way and does not have to be in the future. Both here and in Canada, our relationships with the settler societies have evolved and changed with the passage of time and will continue to do so. And we need to understand how and why they have changed if we are going to discover solutions to the complex issues we now face.

Let us consider this for a moment...

When the British first settled what is now Canada, the Crown did not dismiss our presence on the land through the use of theological or other arguments as was done elsewhere during the so called "Age of Discovery" – but rather recognized our existence as peoples. In fact, the British Crown required that before its subjects could settle on our lands, the lands would need to be acquired lawfully from the various "Nations or Tribes of Indians" by an official representative of the Crown – this process for treaty-making was set out in a Royal Proclamation issued by King George III in 1763 – 250 years old next month. In truth, the British needed our help in both fighting the French and then, subsequently, dare I say, our now American friends. Through the process of treaty-making, tracts of lands were reserved for us with other rights being recognized on the balance of our respective territories – the right to hunt, trap, fish and so on. In Canada, while we have had conflict, we did not have Indian Wars nor were we forced to sign treaty under duress.

It is the principles of the enduring treaty relationship that to this day continues to underpin how many of our peoples view their current relationship with Canada – where our ancestors entered into relations based upon what they understood to be mutual respect and understanding. In some cases the symbolic expression of treaty making is reflected in something called the wampum belt.

Although not a part of my culture, wampum, is made of white and purple seashells from the Atlantic that is woven into belts. Particular patterns symbolize events, alliances and people. Wampum was used to form relationships, propose marriage, atone for murder or even ransom captives.

Before Canadian Confederation in 1867, some of our Nations indicated their assent to treaty by presenting wampum to officials of the Crown. For example the Two Row Wampum Belt of the Iroquois symbolizes an agreement of mutual respect and peace between the Iroquois and European newcomers. The principles embodied in the belt are a set of rules governing the behaviour of the two groups. The wampum belt tells us that neither group will force their laws, traditions, customs or language on each other, but will coexist peacefully.

In the intervening years between the time the wampum belt was first given to the Crown and today much has changed. The original spirit and intent of the treaties has been over shadowed and diminished by the failed public policy of the federal government that was designed to remove us from our culture and assimilate us – the very antithesis of the treaty relationship.

The most insidious tool used to propagate this policy of assimilation was Canada's 1876 *Indian Act*. Incredibly, for most Aboriginal peoples, the federal *Indian Act* still applies to this very day.

Rather than being full citizens of a First Nation or Tribe of Indians recognized in the treaty relationship as symbolized by the wampum belt, under the *Indian Act* all persons legally defined as Indians were made wards of the state with the government being our trustee. As *Indian Act* Indians, we were considered legally incompetent until such time as we enfranchised and became full citizens of Canada – at which point we were no longer recognized as Aboriginal and, consequently, lost our political voice within our First Nations, lost access to, or ownership of, any lands we held and so on.

To facilitate the process we were forced into residential schools where the stated policy was simply "to remove the Indian from the child".

So, under the *Indian Act* system, our peoples, our lands and our economies have been and remain governed separate and apart from non-Aboriginal Canadians. The federal bureaucrats charged with our responsibility have incredible discretion over our lives from birth to death – and exercise that discretion for the most part in the absence of any true accountability. Obviously the *Indian Act* is not good governance and neither an appropriate framework of governance for First Nation's people – nor for any people for that matter.

The *Indian Act* is certainly not an expression of self-determination or self-government. There is no question that societies that govern well simply do better socially and economically than those that do not. Ours are no exception. The *Indian Act* has to go. But getting rid of it has been a challenge, begging the question, "what will replace it?" and this has not been easy to answer and for us to make the transition as a subjugated people living day-to-day in a colonial reality and to walk through, what I like to call, the 'post-colonial door' – to a place where we are self-governing within confederation and in the spirit of the wampum belt.

But today and I am here to tell you that the good news is – and it was with great hope and optimism that I ran for Regional Chief – that despite our Fourth World reality – we are having success and we are moving away from dysfunction and dependency through empowerment. And the pace of this change is increasing. We need to continue to foster and build on this

success. This is my challenge to our leaders, our citizens and, indeed, to all Canadians.

There is, in fact, a quiet but significant revolution occurring on-reserves across Canada – often overshadowed by the sensationalist headlines that are usually associated with First Nations' news stories. A new generation of progressive First Nation leaders are advocating change and leading their communities in many different ways to move beyond the *Indian Act* and to move past the dark period of our history.

This is also matched by a ground-swell of consciousness in our communities as witnessed by the "Idle no More" movement that emerged late last year – an awareness that something needs to be done – both with respect to how Canada governs over us, and, indeed, how our own impoverished system of band government under the *Indian Act* is holding us back – the criticism from our citizens being not just levelled against Canada but also against ourselves to do more.

In truth, our citizens truly must be "Idle No More" – not simply to protest for change but to be the agents of the change they so desire.

For me, the hope I feel emanates from the deep sense of community I know our people share. In my role as Regional Chief, I have the great privilege to visit many of our communities across the country and to see firsthand the work our citizens are doing to rebuild their communities. I have travelled to most of the 203 communities in BC and can say that despite our challenges – it is this sense of community that above all else is so compelling.

My husband Tim, who is here with me today, and I live in our community – a small fishing village on Quadra Island on the west coast of British Columbia. Where our home is located on our reserve, there have been our people living on the same spot for thousands of years. We have challenges. But it is a wonderful place and a place I am proud to call home.

The importance of community, I know, is shared with those involved in the Rotarian movement – a strong belief in community that is matched with a commitment to service – the belief that community is important and worth preserving and promoting and that there is a responsibility to give back.

In the Kwakwaka'wakw, my peoples traditionally – and still to this day – build and maintain community through something called the "potlatch" – our system of government – where those with rank – we have a hereditary system – are required to redistribute wealth and provide service to others. It was through the Potlatch that I was given by traditional name, Puglaas, which means 'a woman born to noble people'. With that name came responsibility and implies a sense of duty to community. Despite the *Indian Act* system and the attack on our institutions – the *Indian Act* for many years actually made it illegal to hold a Potlatch – our institutions and our fundamental values and principles regarding community, service and belonging remain imbedded within our psyche. It is why we have been able to survive to this day and the basis of our strength moving forward.

When I was elected Regional Chief, I ran on a platform of empowerment and community development. Our plan continues to focus on four key and interrelated pillars: 1) strong and appropriate governance; 2) fair access to lands and resources; 3) improved education; and, 4) individual health.

What I can say with confidence is that communities that have kicked down the post-colonial door are now doing far better than those who have not. Sure they have struggles but they are different struggles – struggles that are fought with the confidence of empowerment and the ability to make decisions and take responsibility for one's own actions.

With respect to the first two pillars of our plan, there remain systemic problems that require reorganization and political solutions – solutions that governments have to agree to. Land claims need to be settled and resource revenue sharing needs to be finalized and we need strong Aboriginal governments. When we met with Prime Minister Harper in January in the wake of the "Idle No More" protests he challenged First Nation leaders for solutions.

We have solutions. For example, in the last Parliament, the BCAFN worked with our friends in the senate and introduced self-government recognition legislation that would have provided an option – a legal mechanism – for First Nations or groups of First Nations to move out from under the *Indian Act*.

For the BCAFN, our governance work remains a priority. An Assembly of First Nations is only as strong as the First Nation governments that comprise it and I look forward to the day when the AFN is not just an assembly of 'Bands' as defined under the *Indian Act* but an Assembly of reconstituted self-governing First Nations. Of the 630 First Nations in Canada, there are now 40 that can claim the status of being self-governing – although there are many

that are on their way and involved in sectoral governance reform in areas such as land management, property taxation, education or health.

To help this process of transition, we developed at the BCAFN a *Governance Toolkit: a Guide to Nation Building* – setting out comprehensively what our Nations are actively doing with respect to governance reform – sharing best practices and discussing options and further work that is required. As part of the toolkit we also developed a *Guide to Community Engagement* which is basically a community development manifesto to assist community workers to engage our citizens in conversations about change and to create a vision for their future and to strategically plan accordingly. I would suggest there are parallels here to work that some of you might be familiar with in the developing world where community leaders and villagers are brought together through a classic community development approach to decolonization. This work is being supported by many individual who have donated their time and energy – all outside of the federal bureaucracy which at this point remains primarily tasked with administering Indians, but in itself cannot, and will not, be the agent of change.

But governance reform is, of course, only part of the solution and we have to address the social pathology – it is really a “catch-22” – you cannot reform unless you are healthy, but you cannot be healthy unless you have reformed. This is why we have the last two pillars of our plan – improved education and individual health and where we need more partners in our transformation.

In what was a timely article in the *Vancouver Sun* last week for this presentation, Michael McCarthy wrote about how the public in Canada is also “Idle No More” and highlighted in particular the important work that

Rotary is doing to support First Nations rebuilding individual lives and communities – simple and meaningful activity and particularly for communities in remote areas, and where the initiatives do not rely on, or add too, what the author called the existing “bloated bureaucracy”.

McCarthy wrote about a good friend of mine, Steven Point – a Grand Chief, an elder, a former colleague and a former and first Aboriginal Lieutenant Governor of BC, also now a Rotarian – who a few years back founded a partnership called “Write to Read” – a literacy project. It is an informal partnership of concerned citizens working with two dozen First Nations in remote parts of BC. He partnered with a former police officer named Bob Blacker – also a Rotarian – in fact a district governor for almost 100 rotary clubs in BC. With Blacker’s help, Rotary clubs all over BC put out a call to their members to donate books to First Nations. The response was overwhelming.

The story goes on. Blacker learned that Britco Structures had some mobile buildings left over from the 2010 Olympics. Britco’s president was also a Rotarian and they donated a building to be used as a library in a pilot. To date they have now donated ten. But, of course, what are libraries without computers? So calls were made and Hewlett Packard and London Drugs came through. Computers were secured. Many of our communities are road. So it can be expensive and not easy to get things delivered – so up steps BC Ferries who were very supportive with the transportation. So, too, were the Coast Guard, the Navy and the RCMP.

This summer, as some of you may be aware, in the remote community of Bella Bella in BC, the only general store burned to the ground. ‘Write to

Read' was there immediately and Britco is donating a building. In kind donations have reached nearly \$1 million today.

In the same way as literacy and education tools are important, so too is recreation with regard to individual health. Many Aboriginal communities have limited resources for sports and recreation although within our communities we find ways to participate in team sports such as softball, basketball, soccer, hockey and our national sport Lacrosse. Sport is a way to teach values and bring communities together. We are seeing the broader communities support in this as well.

There are many other examples of service, the University of BC School of Dentistry now hold dental clinics on-reserve. Forest and construction companies donate materials. Bookstores offer new books and there are more. And to a large degree these good works that have such meaningful impact is all taking place without a lot of fanfare or acknowledgement.

What is so important about these examples and others is that it shows how Canadians are looking to support their fellow citizens, in this case Aboriginal Canadians.

So to finish up I would like to leave you with a few thoughts about how through Rotary, or elsewhere, you can help further assist our peoples in our efforts to rebuild.

Firstly – and I know many districts/clubs are already doing this – raise awareness of these issues I have been talking about today in your clubs and beyond. Perhaps as a regular feature, have representatives from the local

First Nation community come as guest speakers at your meetings? An opportunity to hear success stories and talk about the work communities are doing to rebuild and their vision.

Secondly – chose a First Nation project or projects and support them – to identify and support good works. Projects like the literacy projects I have talked about. Perhaps even projects such as clean drinking water or housing – or focussing on individual health and disease prevention and awareness? The types of projects as Rotarians you are probably more familiar with in your international work but where, truth be told, we have similar needs to be met closer to home. I know there will be more talk about this later. A discussion I look forward to in the breakout groups and I hope to continue to have with you beyond here today.

Thirdly – spend time to develop relationships – both within and outside of Rotary. These relationships can be enduring. In fact, there are a whole range of relationships and partnerships that can develop – political, business and professional, social and so on.

Fourthly – continue to reach out to Aboriginal Canadians to become a part of Rotary – many of our people particularly many who may not live in their communities – want to give back to their own communities as well a share their sense of community with other Canadians. Rotary and other service groups can provide a way to get involved. I myself got involved in something called the Minerva Foundation in BC, to mentor and work with Aboriginal women and to encourage leadership development. So please keep encouraging community leaders – not just politicians – but local people making a difference – to participate.

Fifth and finally – although perhaps maybe a bit too political – but then again I am a politician and it is important – challenge governments to act where they need to – to reconcile and assist our Peoples in facilitating our post-colonial transition. Not simply because of economic or legal imperatives or simply because there are Aboriginal rights, but because it is the moral and right thing to do – a question of fundamental human rights and a question of our National reputations. I say this because part of the reason why our issues of decolonization have been on-going and so elusive to resolve in any broad way is, quite frankly, because there has not been much political upside for main stream politicians to advocate on Aboriginal issues. Because our peoples represent less than 5 percent of the population and our political voice is consequently not as strong as it could be. Non-Aboriginal governments tend to manage the so called 'Indian problem', without putting their neck too far out. We need to turn this around.

So in closing, let me say this – our vision for our future as Aboriginal peoples within Canada is not complicated. It is a future in which each of our communities makes the transition through the post-colonial door and finds their place within Confederation – where our peoples are healthy and proud to be Aboriginal and equally proud to be Canadian. Where our vibrant cultures and our traditions – our way of life – survives and flourishes in a modern world – where our political voice within Canada is heard – and, in being so, we actually transform not only our Nations and put our colonial history behind us, but also create a stronger and more vibrant Canada – ultimately to make the lives of our people/all people better. For me this is the promise of Aboriginal rights and a vision wholly consistent with the Promise of Rotary. *Gilakas'la*.