

## **Feminists Deliver**

### **"Standing in Your Power, Using Your Voice"**

**Speaking Notes – The Hon Jody Wilson-Raybould, MP**

**Vancouver Granville**

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***CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY***

## Gilakas'la / Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory...

It is a great honour and a privilege to have been asked to speak here today. Thank you to *Feminists Deliver* for your leadership and for hosting this important collaboration during the same week as the *Women Deliver* Conference.

I really love the *Feminist Deliver* mission which uses such fundamental language as: "transformative change", "build connections", "re-envision" the agenda.... This language is dear to my heart. It is the same language I carry with me in all my work, because it speaks to the lived experience of women in BC, Canada, and around the globe.

We need to transform the foundations of how we live together – not just be satisfied with incremental or small steps however important

they are along the way. We need to do it by standing each other up – upholding one other, our connections, our interdependence, drawing on the strength of all. And we need bold, new thinking to re-envision a world where women and girls, and all humanity are living together in new ways – in new patterns of behaviour.

...Those who know me may be familiar with some of my favourite phrases that could be added to your list: "Building on our success" and "We have the solutions". I love these terms because they speak to the achievements and progress we are making, and the reality that we know what needs to still be done to transform the world in ways in which women and girls are ever more leader, shapers, and influencers.

In thinking about what I would say to you today — I was asked to speak about the theme 'Standing in Your Power, Using Your Voice' — I know

something about power, the power each of us can and does have and about using ones voice — I suspect we all do.

I want to reflect on our power, and our voices, from four different, but intimately connected perspectives:

1. My own personal journey;
2. The colonial experience with respect to Indigenous peoples and changing power structures;
3. My on-going experience as an MP and being the first Indigenous, and only third female, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada – particularly around the work of 'Reconciliation', and,
4. Some final reflections on our country today – creating balance and a vision for our collective future.

## **My Own Personal Journey...**

As some of you know, I come from the Musgamagw-Tsawateineuk / Laich-Kwil-Tach people of Northern Vancouver Island which are part of the Kwakwaka'wakw, also known as the Kwak'wala speaking peoples. We are a matrilineal society – which means that descent is traced and property is inherited through the female line. We have hereditary Chiefs – always men – who are groomed for leadership. My father is the hereditary Chief of our clan, the Eagle Clan. His name is Hemas Kla-Lee-Lee-Kla, which means “Number one amongst the Eagles, the Chief that is always there to help.” He was given his name in a potlatch, which is our traditional institution of government – one which we still practice. It is here where our names are passed down or given from generation to generation. It is where laws are made; disputes settled;

people are married; and where wealth is redistributed. In our potlatch the highest-ranking male leaders are called Hamatsa.

Rank is reflected in positions and names – which bring with them considerable responsibilities and obligations. My grandmother's name was Pugladee – the highest-ranking name in our clan. Her name means "a good host" – a name that was given to my older sister, Kory, at the same time I was given my name. My name, Puglaas, means "a woman born to noble people". These names were given in a naming potlatch at Gilford Island when I was five and my sister six.

My grandmother – Pugladee – ensured that both my sister and I knew our culture, our values, the laws of our big house, and how to conduct oneself as a leader. We continue to learn. In our system I am a Hiligaxste' – a role always held by women. One of my jobs is to lead my

Hamatsa, the chief, into the Big House. This role can be translated as one that "corrects the chief's path". We show them the way; a metaphor for life and in the potlatch symbolized in our rituals where how symbolically the power of the Hamatsa is "tamed" and he is ready to be chief.

In our traditional system of governance, there are no political parties – rather, we seek to govern through the principles of consensus – and where the role of leaders is to seek that consensus. We meet and – while not everyone may agree on every aspect – we debate the issues and seek general agreement to help ensure that decisions are balanced, supported and will be enduring – standing the test of time. We are expected to tell the truth and to speak up. Everyone speaks. While all this may sound idealistic to some who have never lived it, I assure you it is very real.

My grandmother used to joke with us that when it came to the respective roles of woman and men that the women were too busy and too important to be the chiefs. But in all seriousness, we come from a communitarian culture. Everybody has a role to play in making our communities work well. The roles are very different but equally important in terms of ensuring the community functions the way it should. I call it balance. In fact our whole system was about balance – between men and woman – between clans and between tribes.

I am fortunate to come from a strong and loving family. My grandmother and parents certainly raised me to be proud of who I am, know where I came from, to believe in myself and to recognize my rights and responsibilities. I was raised to lead from a very young age. My family instilled in me a sense of community and duty – that I had



something to give back and to contribute – to use my skills and abilities, such as they are, to improve the quality of life for our people and others.

In many ways, my role as Hiligaxste' has carried over into all aspects of my life. My upbringing, my education, my professional and personal experiences have all helped shape my worldview and the way I try to conduct myself.

Given our history as Indigenous peoples, it is important to appreciate the context for how many of our leaders have felt compelled to comport themselves in their interactions within broader society. The colonial experience has not been easy for Indigenous peoples and this brings me to my second reflection on our power, our voices, the abuse

of power, and the power imbalance, that has been a destructive part of the history of this country.

**Some historical background – changing power structures**

When the fathers of Confederation came together in 1864 in Charlottetown and then again a year later in Quebec to lay out the foundation for Canada, Indigenous peoples were not present – they were left out – this despite the early treaty-making and the many political and military alliances made with Indigenous peoples under the auspices of the Royal Proclamation of 1763.

During the time the Royal Proclamation, the colonial authorities actually recognized the power of the “Nations or Tribes of Indians” and the need to make treaties with them.

Unfortunately after confederation Crown policy became one of assimilation – not mutual recognition – which, this week, the National Inquiry Report of the Missing and Murdered Women and Girls constituted ‘genocide’. One of the most insidious of tools used to propagate the policy of assimilation, as you are all aware, was the *Indian Act*.

The *Indian Act* is colonial legislation that the Government enacted to govern and define the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Canada. It imposed an alien system of governance that divided the 80 plus Tribes or Indigenous Nations into 630 plus administrative units called “bands”. It established reserves and set out how the bands would be governed, as well as who was, legally an “Indian” and how this Indian status was passed on. The system was

designed to ultimately enfranchise and assimilate "Indians". Among other racist policies of the government, it created residential schools to quote "remove the Indian from the child".

But for Indigenous women in Canada, the colonial experience was particularly harsh and still is – again as the findings of the Report of Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Woman and Girls clearly illustrate.

The *Indian Act* in turning Indigenous social and political systems on their head – often shifted the balance of power between men and women. For example, the *Indian Act* system does not acknowledge matrilineal heritage. By eradicating hereditary leadership structures, the Act abolished the central role of women in many of our Tribes, in raising, teaching, guiding and regulating chiefs – for example playing

the role of a *Hiligaxste'* I mentioned earlier. Under the *Indian Act* initially only men could run and vote for the chief and council. To make matters worse, if a woman married a man who was not registered as an Indian, she lost her status as an Indian, and her right to be a member of the "band." Legally, she was cast out – if not physically. Conversely, a non-Indian woman who married an Indian man became a legal "Indian".

So, in many ways, the *Indian Act* distinctly suppressed women, who had often been decision-makers as well as providers in Indigenous societies and sought to remove us from public life. Indigenous women did not get the right to run for chief or council and vote in band elections until 1951 – more than eighty years after Canada became a country.

There have, of course, been some changes to this system. The result of advocacy, litigation and shifts in public opinion. But the effects of marginalization, and overt and covert forms of specific discrimination against Indigenous women remain with us.

Yet despite this history – this tragedy – what is so powerful today – and so very encouraging – and gives me great optimism – is the demonstrated resilience of Indigenous peoples and, in particular, Indigenous women – reflected in the integral role they are playing in the process of decolonization and the transition during this period of governance reform and Indigenous nation rebuilding.

It is women who are often in the forefront of advancing the process of true reconciliation with Indigenous peoples – which means confronting and ending the legacy of colonialism in Canada and replacing it with a future built on Indigenous self-determination, including self-government, through a rights-based and principled approach, which must include legislation and major policy shifts across government.

I think of the hundreds of women either living in Indigenous communities – living and working on-reserve – or living and working in our cities and who are not living in their ancestral homelands – who are leading the fundamental community development work that needs to take place to move through what I have often called the post-colonial door. Women are truly driving the needed governance and program reform to get beyond the *Indian Act* and other colonial institutions – something that became very clear to me in my work as BC Regional Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

Women are involved in re-building the institutions of good governance. It is the women who typically show up at community meetings and then roll up their sleeves to develop solutions and inclusive policy moving forward. Without minimizing the role of men, I truly believe Indigenous women are the forces of real change – of de-colonization.



So while Indigenous women are making progress, politically and socially, we can and must do better – whether within the confines of the institutions we are transitioning away from or those that are evolving to replace them.

***Some reflections on my experience as an MP and as the Minister of Justice and Attorney...***

This brings me to my third reflection – on my experience over the past three and a half years as an Indigenous woman in national mainstream politics and as an MP and as the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada.

Of course I am very proud to continue to serve as the Member of Parliament for Vancouver Granville – just as serving as the Minister of

Justice and the Attorney General of Canada for over three and a half years and Minister of Veterans Affairs (particularly today as we remember D-Day and the Normandy landings 75 years ago) was truly an honour.

As MOJAG, I am proud of what my team and I were able to accomplish working with others – from Medical Assistance in Dying to the legalization of Cannabis to the issuance of a Directive on Indigenous Civil Litigation to justice reform and overhauling the judicial appointment process to name a few. And there are still two bills I introduced – criminal justice reform (C-75) and family law (C-78) – that are still in the Senate, both of which I dearly hope will become law before this parliamentary session ends.

With respect to Indigenous issues, as a proud Indigenous woman, with the great responsibility of being Canada's first ever Indigenous Minister of Justice and Attorney General, I must say I felt a moral imperative to carry on the work of generations of Indigenous leaders before me and to help advance the necessary shifts that need to take place to transform the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Crown. I often said that I saw my appointment to that role not so much as a personal accomplishment, but rather, as a symbol of how far Canada has come – but also, how much further we have to go. I still believe this – perhaps now more than ever.

On Indigenous issues, my message has always been consistent and considered – both internally and externally – that transformative change requires a coherent and comprehensive approach to the true

recognition of the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples. This work is incredibly hard but must be advanced.

Of course, when I was appointed MOJAG, I had no illusions about this reality. I was not naïve to the challenges but rather embraced them, and still do, despite all that may have transpired over the last number of months. This is the reality that I had fought to change and the reality I was committed to challenge in Ottawa. I believed then, and continue to believe now, that making the fundamental shift from relations based on denial to those based on recognition is urgent, imperative, and requires transformative, foundational changes to laws, policies, and operational practices.

We are not there yet. The truth be told is that the lifeblood of colonialism is still flowing through the laws and policies of this country

– including the *Indian Act* – and to this day still deny Indigenous title and rights. And until the laws and policies of Canada are actually changed, fundamental patterns that need to be altered will remain with us. While some important steps forward have been taken at the federal level – and we must acknowledge this – they are not happening as coherently, systemically, and as quickly as is needed to set us on the proper and necessary path of recognition-based relations.

My fear, and disappointment, is that despite sounding the alarm, providing advice, pushing and challenging, sharing perspective of lived Indigenous experience, providing a lens into the reality of being Indigenous, the federal government has fallen back, once again, into a pattern of trying to quote “manage the problem” with Indigenous peoples, and make incremental and limited shifts, rather than transforming the status quo. In my view, it is never appropriate or

proper to have as a goal managing the challenges and the by-products of colonialism because it is too hard to do what is really needed. The goal must be to address the wrongs, change the patterns, transform the foundations – and all that we do framed in how to achieve those goals.

This work must also be non-partisan. Something that I feel is also the case for other major policy areas that are too complicated to be solved in a hyper-partisan and divisive atmosphere. The other issue I am thinking about here is the issue of our generation – namely climate change.

I believe that Crown governments have much to learn from Indigenous peoples. We have experienced colonialism... we understand it... and we have the solutions. And despite the set backs, I am confident that the

work will not move away from our solutions if we remain vigilant. We have come so far.

We have seen real progress in patterns of thought, actions, and relations in last decade. And we cannot diminish this fact. This is the fruit of the work and advocacy by Indigenous peoples and many alongside. Even a decade ago the work of reconciliation and justice, and addressing colonialism, was out of sight and out of mind for most Canadians. We (you) have brought it out of the shadows. Much more has to be done of course...but we are driving it forward – again this week more and more Canadians are awakened or reminded of the lived experience of MMIWG, the entrenched and pernicious realities of colonialism.

I know we will carry on advocating for the necessary transformative actions that will create the space – the foundation – for self-determination and the rebuilding of Indigenous nations within Canada. We all need to be advocates in this work.

It is the work I was doing as BC Regional Chief and as a council member in my own community before becoming MOJAG – a role I took – of course – very seriously, although at times it was a challenge and incredibly frustrating.

As I have stated in a speech last year – when I was MOJAG, “in my own experience serving as a Minister, I unfortunately had it reinforced that when addressing Indigenous issues, no matter what table one sits around, or in what position, or with what title and appearance of influence and power, the experience of marginalization can still carry



with you. But this did not and does not deter me. It only makes my resolve stronger and more determined."

Apparently this statement was truer than I imagined. Within a few months I had made my very public, very proud, very liberating journey from the front bench of the governing party in the House of Commons to sitting in the furthest corner seat possible. This reality... for essentially doing my job as an out of context *Hiligaxste'*.

***The place of Women / Our country: creating balance and some of my vision for our collective future. Lessons learned – more to do...***

This brings me to my last reflection – on our country today – on creating balance and a vision for our collective future. If you like, some lessons learned and what more needs to be done.

The events of the last few months have brought some further illustrations to light regarding women in politics – and why we need more women in politics.

Some of it is obvious – the standards one is held to, and the double standards. How easy it is to label in racialized and gendered terms. That when a woman pushes back, stands up for principles, relies on their lived experience, or brings forward actual knowledge and experience, they are easily and reflexively labelled as 'difficult'. Well... what I will say on this is that if doing those things is being 'difficult' – I am proud to be difficult every day of my life.

And, of course, we see that a woman's lived experience is still often used against us, as a reason for marginalization, as a basis for blame.

We see experience ultimately being used as part of a rationale for

marginalization. Rather than upholding experience, using it as a lens to reconsider the norms of what one perceives or believes, or chooses to uphold, we see a lack of reflection – or as it is sometimes has been stated: that we ‘experience things differently’.

In politics, where one is deemed difficult for speaking the truth, or for doing your job, or acting on principles and then you are told you experienced it differently... it is time for the culture of politics to change. And to facilitate this change... the systems and the rules need to be changed. And people, patterns of thought, and ways of relating need to change as well.

To really make the change we need... women to infiltrate politics and transform our political culture more than ever before – including confronting the divisiveness of partisanship. We need more

independent voices to affect the transition. This is one of the major reasons I embrace being an Independent MP – one who will run in the next federal election in October 2019 as an Independent candidate with this objective in mind.

I think it is fair to say that the current parliamentary system is structured in a way which impedes transformative change and that it breeds conflict and divisions rather than supporting law-makers learning from each other. It favours and privileges norms and ways of doing business that makes limited space for the lived experience and solutions that women, Indigenous peoples, and other peoples in our society can bring forward. When I say this, I do so with respect and from the privilege of being in Canada – in a country where we are making progress.

So when we consider where we have come from and where we are going we need to consider context and where we are relative to others.

There is, in reality, a continuum of progress with respect to the issues women face both in our country and globally. This is why *Women Deliver* and *Feminists Deliver* is important and why it is important they are behind hosted here in Canada.

Internationally, Canada has a role to play and we must lead by example.

We can provide hope to so many. We must help to seek to eliminate barriers to equality everywhere – addressing the challenges that prevent women and girls from reaching their full potential. Women must be empowered to improve their own lives, and those of their families, communities and countries. Whether here at home or abroad — simply put, empowering women and girls empowers humanity.

The recent announcement by my former colleague Minister Monseff of the investment to the Woman's Equality Fund is very significant. These investments by Canada will be a game changer for many. But that said — it does not buy us a hall pass or absolve us for our own transgressions or the need to do better.

While Canada is a leader, this does not mean there is not room for improvement — or that we can think that just because someone is empathetic or an ally that there may not still be issues. Being supportive cannot be used as cover for bad behaviour or where systemic problems ensure old ways still govern.

On the contrary it makes us have to do more. Yes, we may be further along the continuum of empowerment than for many parts of the

world, but we are still not where we are ultimately going to end up if we keep on fighting.

Empowerment of women is, of course, one dimension of social diversity. Inclusiveness is a fundamental tenant or key value of democratic polities – so that all voices have a role in decision-making – whether defined by gender, ethnicity, religion, region, economic status, age or education.

For me it has always been a matter of common sense; not just morally but economically. Discrimination and inequality hurts economies.

Particularly in expanding knowledge based economies like ours where you need to maximize a Nations' collective human potential. A country will never compete if they are not driving on all cylinders of their population.

There are things we can do in terms of institutional design and democratic reform to support the participation of woman and other groups in public life – to effectively controlling the exercise of power and creating balance.

As a wise person once said, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Controlling power is critical. And re-defining power so that it is seen as valuing and upholding the strengths and capacities of each of us, is critical.

One thing I have come to appreciate in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous politics is far too often people are seeking power for the sake of power itself which is incredibly dangerous for society and, in particular, when governing in the complex world we live in. As in my



culture, we have to "tame" the Hamatsa. Modern democracies require that those that govern are elected to do so for the right reasons and must be held accountable.

At the end of the day it is the people that keep leaders and governments honest – which is, of course, much easier when the institutions for good governance are in place.

But if people do not participate we risk much. When the voice of the people is lost or truth is questioned, our governments are not held to account and as a result our individual opportunities as well as our collective prospects for a better future are severely diminished.

As both a woman and as an Indigenous person, where our rights to participate in our systems of government were denied for so many

years, I place great value, as I know you all do, on citizen engagement and ensuring broad participation in our political processes.

So, in closing let me leave you with this... please know and be confident that we all have a role to play in ultimately improving the quality of life in our communities – each role is equally important and is critical to ensuring that society functions as it should. Always speak the truth, be guided by principles and integrity – it will never steer you wrong. Be authentic and know that we all come from a long line of matriarchs that have helped to pave the way for each of us to reach our full potential – I know that they are cheering us on. Yes there will be challenges and set backs but we all have a voice, and we need to support each other in using our voices, and together we have the power to change the world.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to say a few words here today.

And thanks to each of you for the role you play... doing your part in your own spheres of influence, wherever they may be – in creating a more just, a more inclusive, and a more compassionate society.

Through strong women (and men) like you, we will strengthen our respective communities.

Each of us, in our own way, is a *Hiligaxste* – we each have an important role to play in guiding the path forward, and helping our societies find balance and flourish. Together, we can correct the imbalance we experience in society, and help amplify the voices and power of those who have been muted for too long.

It is time. *Gilakas'la*.