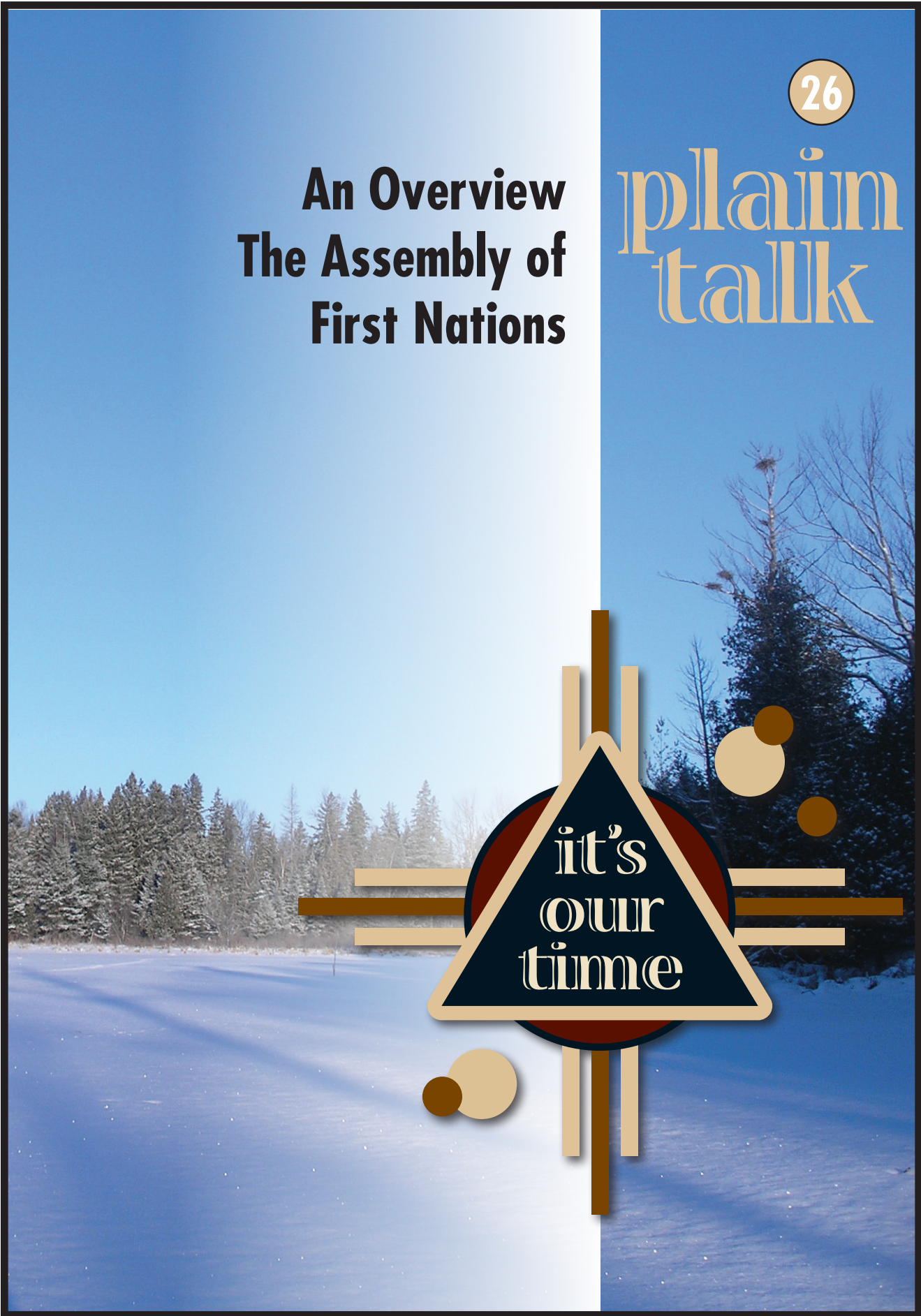


**An Overview  
The Assembly of  
First Nations**

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## **An Overview The Assembly of First Nations**

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### **National Chief Perry Bellegarde**

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Perry Bellegarde was named AFN National Chief on December 10, 2014. He has spent his entire adult life putting into practice his strong beliefs in the laws and traditions instilled in him by the many Chiefs and Elders he has known over the years. Passionate about making measureable progress on the issues that matter most to First Nations people, National Chief Bellegarde is a strong advocate for the implementation of Inherent Aboriginal and Treaty Rights. Widely known as a consensus builder with a track record of accomplishment, he brings community people, leaders, Chiefs and Elders together to focus on working cooperatively to move issues forward. National Chief Bellegarde's candidacy for National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations was based on a vision that includes establishing processes for self-determination; recognition of inherent Aboriginal and Treaty rights; the revitalization and retention of indigenous languages; and establishing a new relationship with the Crown – one that removes the long-standing 2% cap on federal funding.

National Chief Bellegarde is from the Little Black Bear First Nation, Treaty 4 Territory. He served as Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, Saskatchewan Regional Chief for the Assembly of First Nations, Tribal Chair of the Touchwood-File Hills-Qu'Appelle Tribal Council, Councillor for the Little Black Bear First Nation, and Chief of Little Black Bear First Nation.

In 1984, Bellegarde became the first Treaty Indian to graduate from the University of Regina with a Bachelor of Administration. In March 2012, he graduated from the Certified Corporate Board Training through The Directors College sponsored by the Conference Board of Canada and McMaster University's DeGroote School of Business.

Some of the projects that National Chief Bellegarde has facilitated or negotiated on behalf of First Nations include:

- The addition of 250 gaming machines to the Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority (SIGA) resulting in a pathway for the long-term financial stability of the FSIN
- Discussions between the FSIN and the Province of Saskatchewan that resulted in the 25-year Gaming Agreement
- Leading Little Black Bear (LBB) First Nation out of 3rd party management within 8 months of being elected Chief
- LBB's re-qualification for CMHC housing after a 13-year period of no new housing
- A national multi-million dollar compensation package for First Nations veterans and their spouses

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- The successful settlement of the specific claim resulting in the restoration of the Treaty lands in Fort Qu'Appelle to reserve status for Treaty Four First Nations
- The transfer of the Fort Qu'Appelle Indian Hospital to First Nations control, which resulted in the building of the multi-million dollar All Nations Healing Hospital

National Chief Bellegarde is the recipient of the Queen's Jubilee Medal (2012), Saskatchewan Medal (2005), Queen's Jubilee Medal (2002) and Confederation Medal (1992). He has been honoured by several Chiefs and Elders who have acknowledged him as their adopted son. He honours them by carrying their teachings forward as he works diligently toward the implementation of Inherent Aboriginal and Treaty rights, self-determination and a shared vision for the future.

National Chief Bellegarde believes in upholding Indigenous rights as human rights and does so in international forums. He spoke at the United Nations World Conference on Indigenous People in New York. He called on the Prime Minister to launch an inquiry and to develop a plan of action on Canada's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

### **Mandate**

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The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) is a national Aboriginal advocacy organization acting on the direction of First Nations governments and their citizens. It exists to fulfill the goal of correcting past and current injustices committed in the founding of Canada and in the ongoing exploitation of land and resources. As a Chiefs' organization, the AFN is committed to securing the rightful position of the First Nation Peoples in Canada's future, in partnership with provincial and federal governments, and advancing First Nations' self-determination. Historically, First Nations have a unique and special relationship with the Crown and the people of Canada, as manifested in treaties, case law, historical documents and in current Accords, Declarations, and in generations of co-existing on the same land. In essence, the special relationship is one of (negotiated agreement with a view toward) peaceful coexistence based on equitable sharing of lands and resources, and ultimately on respect, recognition, and enforcement of the right to self-determination. In addition to exercising self-determination under First Nations structures and mechanisms, the AFN exists to promote the "restoration and enhancement" of the Crown-First Nations relationship and to ensure that it is mutually beneficial to the First Nations people.

### **Structure**

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The AFN is the national representative organization of the First Nations in Canada. There are over 630 First Nations communities in Canada. The AFN Secretariat is designed to present the views of the various First Nations through their leaders in areas such as: Aboriginal and Treaty

Rights, Economic Development, Education, Languages and Literacy, Health, Housing, Social Development, Justice, Taxation, Land Claims, Environment, and a whole array of issues that are of common concern which arise from time to time.

The overall structure of the AFN is based on the Charter of the Assembly of First Nations, which was adopted in July 1985. The principal elements of the AFN are: the First Nations Chiefs-in-Assembly, the Executive Committee; the AFN Secretariat; the AFN National Youth Council, the AFN Women's Council, and the Council of Elders.

The Executive Committee is made up of the ten Regional Chiefs, the National Chief, and the Chairpersons of the Youth, Women, and Elder Councils. The First Nations Chiefs-in-Assembly are comprised of all Chiefs from across Canada. The AFN Secretariat is comprised of various administrative personnel and policy analysts that support the work of the Executive Committee, First Nations leaders, and communities. The AFN Youth, Women, and Elder Councils are comprised of representatives from each region throughout Canada.

The Chiefs meet biannually to set national policy and direction through resolution during the Annual General Assembly held in July, and during the Chiefs Special Assembly held in December. Chiefs also meet between assemblies at various forums and conferences hosted by specific policy sectors. The National Chief is elected every three years by the Chiefs-in-Assembly, and the Regional Chiefs are determined through regional processes.

## Our Story

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The story of the AFN is one that remains unknown to most Canadians. Many Canadians are unaware of the issues First Nations Peoples continue to face on the road to political recognition in this country. It is the story that is lived each day by the First Nations Peoples of Canada, a story of struggle for self-determination and human dignity. It is a story that must be told.

Colonial legislation, policy and practices in the early 20th century were utilized to, among other things, limit the development of First Nations political organizations. In fact, a pass system was introduced to limit the movement of First Nations people away from their home communities. First Nations people could not, in law, hire a lawyer to pursue claims. First Nations political organizations emerged out of a worldwide movement towards de-colonization and the recognition of basic human rights.

First Nations Peoples continue to live in conditions of extreme poverty and isolation from services that non-First Nations take for granted. First Nations are vastly different with respect to cultures, traditions and languages.

First Nations communities are geographically dispersed. The lack of and inconsistencies in communication technology and in public transportation (fly-in communities, ice roads) create challenging realities for First Nations communities at the best of times. The lack of adequate funding for education systems contributes to significant challenges and inequities with respect to employment, economic opportunity and political expertise.

Hundreds of years have passed, and still the lack of recognition of First Nations political processes (e.g., the Haudenosaunee Confederacy) and exclusion from Canada's political processes leave First Nations peoples and Canada with an incredible void and political conundrum.

Many Canadians are unaware of conditions that First Nations Peoples continue to experience in Canada—habitual discrimination, exploitation, violations against basic human rights. Furthermore, these infractions are either ignored or glossed over by standard Canadian history textbooks.

The past cannot be changed, but yesterday's injustices can be corrected by today's political leaders. The AFN exists to fulfill the goal of correcting these past injustices and to enhance the rightful position of the First Nations Peoples in Canada's future. Significant progress has already been made in the Canadian political arena, as witnessed by the First Ministers conferences and Constitutional exercises, though much work remains.

First Nations expect Nation-to-Nation relationships when it comes to political relations with Canada. Canada describes their relationship with First Nations as government-to-government, however, in reality, this is not the case. For instance, the 1927 Indian Act forbade First Nations people from forming political organizations, and many First Nation leaders were jailed by the RCMP for trying to organize any form of a political organization. Up until 1951, First Nations were not allowed to vote in federal processes.

Although some First Nations traditional governments continue to exist, Canada does not recognize their existence or authorities. Canada has replaced most traditional First Nations governance systems with the present day band council system. Canada continues to pass laws to control First Nations council systems (e.g., election rules, Financial Management Act, etc.).

In addition to suppressing the political activity of First Nations, the 1927 Indian Act also tried to deter First Nations from speaking their native language, or practicing their traditional ways. The creation of federally run residential schools resulted in severely punishing First Nations children for uttering even a single word of their native language.

The Potlatch ceremonies, a ritual common to some First Nations Peoples were declared illegal by the Canadian government. In fact, only recently has this been reversed. Federal government officials, clergy, and educators were of the opinion that all First Nations cultures and traditions were a complete regression from, and affront to, their superior English and French civilizations. It was because of such contempt that the First Nations of Canada realized the pressing need to form a national First Nations organization to lobby and fight for their rights in Ottawa.

One of the first attempts at forming a national presence for First Nations came soon after World War I. During this time, the international League of Nations was formed. The League of Indians in Canada was also formed, but like the League of Nations it failed to attract wide-spread support and often faced Canadian government actions that were suppressive and detrimental to their early goals and actions. The League of Indians in Canada soon faded from the national scene.

Following World War II, First Nations again attempted to form a national lobby group. The North American Indian Brotherhood (N.A.I.B.) was established in the late 1940's, but like its predecessor, the N.A.I.B.'s efforts were hindered by a lack of nation wide support and suppressive government actions, especially in Saskatchewan, where the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation government actively worked against all First Nations initiatives. Furthermore, internal administrative problems caused the organization to break into regional factions, causing the N.A.I.B. to be disbanded by the early 1950's.

During the next ten years, First Nations began to reorganize their efforts to form a new national lobby group. In 1961, the National Indian Council was formed to represent three of the four major groups of Indigenous people in Canada: Treaty and Status people; the Non-status people and; the Métis people (the Inuit were excluded). From this point on, the First Nations of Canada have always had a national lobby group to represent them in Ottawa. The stated purpose of the National Indian Council was to promote unity among all Indian people.

However, the National Indian Council found the task of uniting all of the various First Nations Peoples' interests into one national lobby to be quite challenging.

Also, as the various First Nations became more articulate in their demands, they found less and less in common with each other. This disunity led to the National Indian Council splitting up, by mutual agreement of the three Indigenous groups in 1968. The Status and Treaty groups formed the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB), while the non-status and the Métis groups remained united and formed the Native Council of Canada.

Thus, the NIB was born in the midst of controversy. Soon after the NIB came into existence, the Federal Liberal Government revealed its 1969 White Paper policy which called for the assimilation

of all First Nation Peoples into the mainstream of Canadian society, and the removal of First Nations from the Canadian Constitution. The NIB quickly organized itself and confronted the Liberal government. With the unity of its provincial and territorial members the NIB successfully lobbied parliament and the Canadian public to defeat the White Paper. For the next thirteen years the NIB's structure remained relatively unchanged with the provincial and territorial organizations forming its major pillars of strength.

The NIB became an ever present watchdog agency as well as a means for First Nations to press for changes in federal and provincial Indigenous policies. The solid research and careful application of political pressure has resulted in many changes in federal and provincial policy, and more memorably, the defeat of the Meech Lake Accord. During this time, the NIB was represented by a number of strong leaders and advocates for First Nations rights.

Walter Dieter, a Cree of the Peepeekisis Indian Band in Saskatchewan, was one of the founders of the NIB. He served as the first National Chief from 1968 to 1970. George Manuel, a member of the Shuswap Nation of the Neskonlith Indian Band in British Columbia, made it his lifelong mission to help his people reestablish their Aboriginal and treaty rights to self-government. He was National Chief from 1970 to 1976. Noel Starblanket, a Cree of the Starblanket Indian Reserve in Saskatchewan, was elected Chief of his community at the age of 24, in 1971. This made him the youngest Chief in Canada at the time. Mr. Starblanket served two terms as National Chief from 1976 to 1980. Delbert Riley, a member of the Chippewas of the Thames reserve in Ontario, served as Chief of his community and president of the Union of Ontario Indians before being elected as National Chief from 1980 to 1982.

In 1972, the NIB's Indian Control of Indian Education policy paper was a breakthrough in gaining support from then Indian Affairs Minister, Jean Chretien, to implement First Nations philosophy on self-governance. It was a clever way to promote Indian Government philosophy nationally as it brought an awareness of Indian Control to the Indian communities. Through issues such as housing, healthcare, and economic development, the NIB soon established itself as a powerful voice for status First Nations people in Canada.

Despite the success of the NIB, challenges were apparent. Organizing all the various status First Nation groups across Canada into a single, cohesive lobby group still presented the biggest difficulty. The NIB drew an increasing amount of criticism for not being truly representative of all status First Nations in the country. The issue slowly rose to the forefront in 1979 and culminated in the arrival of three hundred (300) status First Nations and Chiefs in London, England in an attempt to halt the repatriation of the Canadian Constitution. The Constitution repatriation battle, in England and Canada, was soon reflected internally at the NIB. The basic structure of the NIB was in flux and in need of change.

Just as the people of the First Nations across Canada were becoming familiar with the NIB and its role in serving the First Nations people, an important transition in the structure of the secretariat was being discussed. Chiefs wanted to develop an organization which was truly representative and accountable to their community members, thus the NIB made the transition to becoming the AFN in 1982.

During those years, the NIB underwent a drastic revision of its basic structure. With this revision came the name change to the AFN. From being an “organization of representatives from regions” the AFN became an “Organization of First Nations Government Leaders.”

The AFN became the secretariat, or administrative body, to the newly formed Assembly of First Nations. With the change in structure, First Nation government leaders were able to directly formulate and administer the policies of the AFN. Thus, the AFN became more directly responsible to the First Nations Chiefs-in-Assembly, who were themselves responsible to their First Nations communities. Hence, the AFN became a truly representative body of the Status & Treaty First Nations Peoples in Canada, and at the same time, a consensus driver.

At the 1982 Annual General Assembly in Penticton, BC, Dr. David Ahenakew was elected the first National Chief to the AFN. A Cree member of the Ahtahkakoop Indian Reserve in Saskatchewan, Dr. Ahenakew served in the Canadian Armed forces for 16 years prior to entering First Nations politics. He was leader of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations for 10 years and served as National Chief of the AFN from 1982 to 1985.

Dr. Ahenakew, along with the leaders of the other three Indigenous groups in Canada, attended the first three First Ministers Conferences (FMC) on Aboriginal rights in Ottawa in 1983, 1984, and 1985. These FMC's (which numbered four, with last one taking place in 1987), were historic developments in themselves, because they marked the first time that First Nations leaders were represented in Constitutional talks that directly affected them.

The four First Ministers Conferences between 1983 and 1987 were a series of constitutionally guaranteed meetings between the Prime Minister, the Premiers, and the leaders of the four Indigenous groups in order to identify, define and discuss Aboriginal and treaty rights. The initial intent of the FMCs were to address the fears that the federal and provincial governments had concerning the meaning of section 35(1) of the Canadian Constitution, which recognizes and affirms the existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Indigenous people in Canada.

The first FMC conference was marked by lack of solidarity among the four Indigenous groups in expressing their concerns for various Indigenous matters including land claims, natural resources



rights, self-determination rights, education rights, etc. Also prevalent was the position of some provincial governments, especially Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Newfoundland, who made it clear that they were unwilling to accept any concept of “inherent” Aboriginal rights, and that they would only agree to discuss “contingent” Aboriginal rights. Such a provincial position was unacceptable to the AFN and other Indigenous groups, and the conference ended with no consensus on Indigenous rights.

This conference did however, lead to one very important amendment to the Constitution—section 35(3), which provided for greater certainty that the rights in land claim agreements were to be given the same Constitutional protection as the rights in treaties. Furthermore, the First Ministers agreed to (in 1983) have a series of three more FMCs to discuss constitutional matters that directly affected the Indigenous people of Canada. The agenda at these conferences was narrowed by the dominant governments to consider the single issue of Aboriginal self-government. The discussion of Aboriginal self-government inevitably led to the impasse between the provinces notably Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Newfoundland, and the Indigenous groups. This impasse again prevented any constitutional consensus defining Aboriginal self-government.

In 1985, Dr. David Ahenakew was replaced as the AFN National Chief by Georges Erasmus. A member of the Dene Nation in the Northwest Territories, Mr. Erasmus made a lifelong contribution to the welfare and community of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. From 1976 to 1983, he served as the president of the Indian Brotherhood of Northwest Territories/Dene Nation. He subsequently served two terms as National Chief from 1985 to 1991. Like his predecessor, the new National Chief vowed to continue the fight for Aboriginal rights, including self-government.

At the fourth and last FMC in 1987, federal and provincial governments unanimously refused to recognize that Aboriginal people already had, through their history, an inherent right to self-government. This attitude eventually permeated all of the discussions and was the ultimate stumbling block upon which consensus failed.

This however, did not mean that the AFN had failed. By all accounts, Georges Erasmus and the AFN’s public profile had never been higher. A great deal was accomplished such as: a heightened awareness of issues affecting Indigenous peoples, including public education, public support, and the support of several eminent persons in this country and abroad, on Canadian native issues. At the negotiating table, AFN won support from some of the provinces (Ontario, Manitoba, New Brunswick), but not enough to make an amendment in favour of Indigenous people.

Nonetheless, AFN had clear, rational arguments and close unity with the other three Indigenous groups which helped to preserve the importance of the entrenched, though undefined, Aboriginal and treaty rights against tremendous pressure from several provinces and the federal

government. This, in itself, was a great success, for it demonstrated to the governments and to the people of Canada that First Nations are serious in their conviction of attaining an explicit Constitutional amendment that entrenches their rights and position in Canadian society forever.

Since this time, the AFN has been actively involved in several areas where Indigenous concerns are of great importance. The Meech Lake Accord of 1987, the Charlottetown Accord of 1992, the Free Trade deal with the United States, the Kelowna Accord, and other legislative business (e.g., Bill C-31). Additionally, numerous other areas have intensive ongoing study and lobbying efforts by various sections of the AFN and its regional organizations.

In the more recent years, a number of strong leaders have represented the AFN as National Chief.

Ovide Mercredi, a Cree from Grand Rapids, Manitoba, began his role as a political advocate for First Nations in the late 1960s. He was a negotiator, activist, lawyer and believer in the Gandhi approach to political activism and served two terms as National Chief from 1991 to 1997.

Phil Fontaine, Anishinabe from the Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba, dedicated most of his life to the advancement of First Nations people. Mr. Fontaine served as National Chief from 1997-2000, and again from 2003 until 2009. Mr. Fontaine successfully negotiated the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which included a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and laid the foundation for the Prime Minister's apology to former students of residential schools.

Matthew Coon Come, a member of the Mistissini Cree Nation in Northern Quebec, was first elected as Grand Chief and chairman of the Cree Regional Authority in 1987. Re-elected by the James Bay Cree people through four successive terms, he became known internationally for his efforts to defend the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples. Mr. Coon Come was National Chief from 2000 to 2003.

Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, a Hereditary Chief from the Ahousaht First Nation in B.C., was elected as National Chief from 2009 to 2015. In 2010 he issued a Call to Action on First Nations education that called for recognition and implementation of First Nations control of First Nations education based on:

- **Reconciliation**—that the federal government and provincial governments must reconcile our rights within education acts across the country to ensure consistency with constitutional provisions;
- **First Nations Education Guarantee**—that a secure, equitable, culturally responsive fiscal framework is needed for funding for education;
- **Sustainability**—that statutory funding arrangements are required, based on real costs, indexation and appropriate treatment for northern and remote

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- communities, including language and culture;
- **Systems**—that the First Nation vision for education must be supported through professional and accountable institutional supports delivering second and third level supports; and
- **Support and Partnership**—that creating a learning environment in our communities and linking with organizations, the public and private sector to invest in our schools and for our kids is critical to First Nations educational success.

Apart from the other three Indigenous organizations, the AFN also works in close association with other prominent lobby groups. Together, many support groups have helped the AFN to maintain a high profile on both the Canadian and world scene on such issues as native culture, history, and education, acid rain, air/water pollution, and endangered animal species. The AFN has approached the United Nations in an attempt to find ways to enforce the spirit and intent of treaties between Indigenous peoples and settler governments.

The First Nations Peoples of this land have governed their affairs for centuries. Their unique customs, languages, and way of life continue to be intrinsically tied to the lands they occupy. The AFN strives to present and preserve the authenticity of First Nations cultures, traditions and rights with the goal of enhancing justice for the First Nations Peoples of Canada. Fighting for long standing First Nations rights is not merely a fight for natural resources and self-determination, it is also a fight for human rights, human dignity, and cultural survival. It is a struggle for truths which are outstanding and self-evident that they render any challenge to them as being absurd and beyond all enlightened reason.

The AFN is still relatively young, yet it has accomplished a great deal for an entire population of unique people in Canada and around the world.

The efforts of dedicated people, such as every National Chief, the Chiefs-in-Assembly, and the Secretariat, and the grassroots educators, community members, youth, and Elders all help to make the AFN highly organized and representative of First Nations governance in Canada. From its fragmented beginnings, the Assembly of First Nations grew out of the need for First Nations Peoples to meet the past and present challenges that threaten their unique identities and rights as the first inhabitants of North America. The challenges still exist and the future still holds many battles for the AFN. But, with the growing acceptance of First Nations rights among the Canadian public and the growing capabilities of the AFN to meet new challenges, the future for the First Nations Peoples in Canada may change for the better.

Making our Nations strong and exerting the right to govern our own affairs is important work. Much remains to be accomplished at the local level, the regional level and the national level. First Nations and the citizens of Canada have a role to ensure the voice of First Nations is heard, respected and responded to appropriately.