

23B Marlborough Place,
Saskatoon, Sk., S7L 3T6
December 20, 2015

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau,
Office of the Prime Minister,
80 Wellington St., Ottawa, On. K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau,

Congratulations on your victory at the polls. You have a big job ahead of you but I have no hesitation in saying that I know that you will serve with honour and thoughtfulness. Your actions to date have shown your capacity for compassion and concern for people of all backgrounds and your ability to make decisions that reflect that compassion and concern.

May I begin my letter to you with a prayer of my grandfather, John King:

“N’dahwemahdik Giae N’wekanessadok Gidanamikonim—megwetch N’dikit. N’ge Bigossenmah Dush Wo Kina-gego Nehtahatod Wewedgeewid, Wee Mashkineshkawid Nebwakahwin Onje N’dahkodowin Djeminokagoyeg.”

“May the Creator of all Things make my mere words as medicine to those who hear them.”

I am Odawa, one of the Odawa people for whom the river and the city that stands on its shores was named. I am taking the liberty of writing to you as someone who was first given the right to vote in 1960 by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker. However, I did not use my franchise to vote Conservative, as might have been expected. My reserve happened to be in the riding of Algoma East, held by Lester B. Pearson. He was a good constituency man and made sure that he visited the reserves in his riding to inform us of our rights as Canadian citizens. He gathered many Liberals on these visits.

We were energized by his encouragement. We took our problems to him and he looked for answers. He convinced our Elders of our right to participate in Canadian democracy to such an extent that when he was to be replaced as MP when he retired, the Elders of my community chose me to run for nomination as Liberal candidate in the riding. For me, it was a scary experience entering a race for a job which had always been occupied by a “white” person. It goes without saying that I did not win. However, I did get to be a delegate to the convention that elected your father as Liberal leader and I have paid considerable attention to political issues ever since. In the recent election I had the privilege of voting for Lisa Abbott who would have been a terrific addition to your caucus.

These are exciting times to be a First Nations person in our country. My people have been building relationships with the newcomers to this land since Champlain wrote of meeting us in 1615. In his writings he acknowledged that we had come from a faraway territory and had come to the area of what came to be known as the Ottawa River to dry blueberries for our winter stock. Our meeting he reports was cordial and gifts were exchanged. For us, the meeting had economic ramifications as we saw the

opportunity to incorporate the goods that Champlain's men had with the extensive trading network which we were already part of. There was reciprocity in our exchange.

My people developed a strong alliance with the French or Wemtigoshiwuk as we called them. It has been said that our people more than any European power "controlled the fur trade." So, I write this letter as someone who knows the relationships that our people have had with others in our territory. We learned the ways of the Wemtigoshiwuk, then the Shoganashuk [English] then the Kitchimokomanuk [Americans], and finally the Bishkidahgoshnowjik [Canadians]. Throughout we held councils and negotiated the relationships. We came together in optimism but often our trust was broken and we were betrayed.

For our people, there was but one law, Enendagwad, the Law of the Orders, prescribed by the Maker of all Things. When we pray, we pray not only for our human relatives. We pray for the four directions and the space above us and below. We pray to the Creator, Kizhe Manito for the Physical World, Earth, the Plant World, the plants the nature children of the union between the Creator and Earth, the Animal World, those who swim, those who fly, those that crawl, the four legged and the two-legged. We pray in humility recognizing that Humankind is the most dependent and the least necessary of all the Orders. All the others can survive without us, but we cannot survive without them.

Our teachings reinforced the belief that we were last in the order of things and that we were dependent on all the others. Our survival depended on our recognition of our place in the universe. All the rest of Creation could exist without us but we could not survive without them! Our very existence depended on co-existence with the other orders. This has always been where we come in conflict with the newcomers. Christianity places humankind next to the Creator having "dominion" over the other Orders. To our ancestors, this view of the world was upside down. How could the weakest and least necessary have "dominion over" more necessary and more independent orders within Creation? We have watched as this view of the world has disrupted the natural order. How it threatens the very existence of all the orders.

It seems that this is another time for optimism. Forces are converging which are conspiring to bring our issues to the fore. Perhaps it is to seek a more sustainable way to approach the Earth when the forces driven by the Western Intellectual Tradition are destroying the very air we breathe and the water we drink. Perhaps it is to open more of the land to exploitation after consultation with our people who claim the land. Perhaps it is to gain redemption for the policies which created the residential schools and other efforts to destroy our cultural essence. Whatever the motivation of various elements of non-Aboriginal society, our long-standing concerns are receiving unprecedented attention. We believe that your compassion is your motivation but do not be discouraged by the caution of many of our people. We have been optimistic before.

I am writing because my friend, the late William Commanda knew the Creator's instructions to our people. He also understood the promises made by our ancestors and the newcomers. He was the keeper of the three sacred wampum belts which recorded and preserved the obligations of the founding of the Algonquin Nation, in the Seven Prophecy Belt and the agreements which formed the basis of the

relationships with the newcomers, the Jay Treaty Crossing Belt and the Three Figures Welcoming/Agreement Wampum Belt.

William Commanda was known as a spiritual man. He was a tireless campaigner for peace, indigenous rights and environmental consciousness. In 1969, he founded and held the first Circle of All Nations, a gathering to restore traditional culture and spirituality among indigenous peoples. He sought to bring people together and to promote good relations between nations, healing, peace and the protection of the Earth. This gathering continues.

In the National Capital area, Grandfather Commanda worked to preserve sacred spaces. The protection of Akikodjiwan, the Algonquin sacred waterfalls [the Chaudiere] area, in the heart of the capital was of particular concern. The Kitchi Zibi [Ottawa River], on which the capital is built has been the highway of the Algonquin people. The Akikodjiwan area was a sacred area for the Algonquin people. Champlain recorded for the Europeans that the Algonquin people made tobacco offerings to the Creator at this place. Champlain observed and respected what he saw.

Subsequent visitors have not respected this place as sacred. The newcomers saw only the power of the falls and thought of harnessing it for its power. The forests were admired for their commercial value. Soon, the river was transformed into a place to generate power to support the saw mills and pulp mills. The falls were obscured. The forests were decimated. The Algonquins were displaced.

William Commanda had a vision. His Vision for the Sacred Site of Akikodjiwan: Chaudière Falls, Chaudière, Albert and Victoria Islands was approved by all the Algonquin in Quebec and Ontario in 2001-2002. The fully inclusive site plan contains a sustainable economic plan creating a Central Public Park, Historic Interpretive Sites, a Conference Centre, Office and Activities Centre and a Cultural Aboriginal Centre. The core objective of the vision is to awaken and share the universal Indigenous Philosophy to advance the healing of Canada and all humanity. The vision will give all human beings an opportunity to reconnect with the land and its waters.

The vision is still being pursued by Algonquins. The four First Nations—Wolf Lake First Nation, Timiskaming First Nation, Eagle Village First Nation and the Algonquins of Barriere Lake are fighting to see the development of the vision. They envision a way of using the geography of the National Capital to symbolize a new relationship between the people indigenous to what is now Canada and those who came more recently.

Following a spiritual man's vision which lays out a way to meet environmental objectives, spiritual and cultural regeneration for our people and developing good relationships seems to be a wonderful symbol of the direction that the new government has signalled that it wants to go. This cultural symbol in the centre of a major capital city in the world could more than anything else demonstrate Canada's commitment to changing relationships and working towards a better, healthier world.

Meegwetch,

Cecil King (Odawa), Phd.