

New AFN leader to be elected in Winnipeg

By Lynda Powless
Editor

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA—Three men are all vying for the leadership of the Assembly of First Nations in a vote today that is as much about the AFN as it is about who will lead it.

The AFN began its three day special assembly here Tuesday under the theme "Our People, Our Land, Our Time." And runs to Friday Dec., 12th.

Faced with inner turmoil, a call for restructuring, a hostile federal government and funding cuts, the new national leader will face a host of hot spot issues all leading back to the question that continues to shadow the organization...is it needed anymore?

Alberta regional Chief Cameron Alexis says chiefs are to discuss restructuring the organization, including whether it should wean itself off federal financial support.

He says the AFN is still vital as a lobby group for First Nations interests.

But Niigaan (nih-GAHN) Sinclair, assistant native studies professor at the University of Manitoba, says many feel grassroots concerns aren't well represented.

He says the federal government needs the AFN more than First Nations people do.

"The AFN has already lost much of the support of the grassroots," Sinclair said. "It's continuing to lose the support of chiefs now. For

the most part, all of the young chiefs and aspiring leaders who are coming up ... they see no interest in working at that level."

That appears to be reflected in the number of people running for the AFN's top job.

Former national chief Shawn Atleo, one of the most highly educated national leaders the organization has seen, found himself frozen out and resigned after coming under fire for his support of a controversial First Nations education act. A paper, he has said since his resignation that all his regional chiefs were aware of.

With his resignation internal fighting saw a more hardline approach try to rear its head. And the new AFN leader will have to work with all internal AFN factions an divisions.

Perry Bellegarde, chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, considered the front runner, is vying for the top job, along with Ghislain Picard, regional chief for Quebec and Labrador. Picard became interim national chief following Atleo's resignation.

Leon Jourdain, chief of the Lac La Croix First Nation in northwestern Ontario and former Treaty 3 grand chief, is also running for a term that will last three and a half years due to "extraordinary circumstance," the AFN said in its statement in announcing the candidates last month.

The AFN is the lobby group of the 634 First Na-

tion communities scattered across Canada.

Agenda priorities for all three candidates are too similar to draw any election sparks.

They all include engaging in dialogue on AFN restructuring, maintaining First Nations control over education, and ending violence against indigenous women and girls. Land rights and claims, as always, is on the agenda.

Also high on the agenda is Harper's resource agenda that has been plagued by protests and stoppages.

But the historic hurdle facing the AFN itself is how to heal a fractured organization.

"I want to become National Chief so our indigenous people can re-organize from the ground up and we can begin that journey toward becoming fully functioning autonomous Nations," said Jourdain. He says reorganization is "critical."

Picard says the AFN still has a role to play, despite differences. "The future of our national organization is too important to stay idle," he says.

"Over the years, my region and its chiefs have always stood by the national organization independently of the circumstances, because they always believed that there is a purpose for a national political process, lobbying and advocating on behalf of First Nations."

For Bellegarde economic development and equalling the play field are paramount.

He wants to bring First Nations to par with mainstream Canada when it comes to quality of life as listed by the United Nations. Canada is sixth in the world but the First Nations are 63rd.

"We were always intended to share in the vast resources of our homeland, one of the richest countries in the world. Instead, we are too often perceived to be a burden on the taxpayers. This perception exists because Canada has failed to acknowledge the fact that the high quality of life enjoyed by Canadians has been, for the most part, derived from our natural resource wealth."

He said revenue sharing is imperative to First Nations self-determination. "And it is our right."

He said First Nations need to assume the role as environmental stewardship leaders.

"We have responsibilities that were passed down to us by our ancestors to take care of the earth. It is critical that we assume the leadership in environmental knowledge and partner with leaders in mitigating the environmental crisis before us," he told Turtle Island News in an interview.

The election runs from 9 a.m. to 12 noon on Wednesday December 10, with results to be reported to delegates at 1 p.m. Candidates need 60 per cent of the vote to win. More than one ballot is expected.

First Nations communities will have either their chief or a proxy vote on their behalf. It's a secret ballot. In the past some regions voted as a block to maintain influence over the national leader. B.C. is the area to watch, with over 200 of the chiefs voting from that province where Bellegarde is believed to be the front runner. He ran for the top job in 2009, conceding to Atleo after eight ballots. The two were nearly tied after the second and third ballots prompted hours of politicking before the final vote. Bellegarde has been quietly running and seeking support

from chiefs for some time. Picard, acting interim AFN national chief (he took a leave from the role five weeks prior to the vote to comply with AFN campaign rules), said it's time "to reset the process." He said the plan is to scrap Bill C-33 and, along with the chiefs, redefine what shape educational reform will take.

"Getting into the development of a new piece of legislation is not on our radar right now," he said. "We're done with studies and reports that essentially come to the same conclusions: there's underfunding in education."

In August, Mr. Picard sent a letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt, urging them to resume work on First Nations education after a unanimous AFN resolution in May calling on the government to withdraw Bill C-33 and "engage in an honourable process" with First Nations after Atleo's resignation.

At the time, the unofficial message from the government was to wait until the AFN had completed its leadership review to proceed, something Picard called a "poor excuse."

Bill C-33 was voted on and passed at second reading in the House. However, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has made it clear that without the support of the AFN, the bill will not move forward, nor will the \$1.9-billion set aside by the government in the bill be handed out.

Renewal and re-definition of AFN mandate must come first.

All candidates know that work needs to be done internally to review the AFN's mandate and define the role of the national chief to best represent not only the diverse regions and views of the chiefs, but the range of priorities from the grassroots.

The new national leader will find himself in the spotlight as the upcoming federal election comes closer on the question of First Nations' role in the future of Cana-

dian pipelines, energy and natural resources.

With the June Supreme Court decision in the Tsilhqot'in First Nation case granting land title, the federal government will have to seek consent for further pipeline development in the area and in other regions.

"This is a time where, across the country, there is a lot of unrest amongst First Nations with the resource agenda of the Harper government—pipelines, mining, hydro projects. ...Whoever gets in as national chief is going to be in a situation where he might see a lot of conflicts on the ground and he might be called to support them," said Russell Diabo.

The government has said it would have to review the complex Tsilhqot'in decision, and hasn't formally responded.

"I would hope that the legislative and executive branch of government really listens to their judicial branch of government. They can't deny we do not have aboriginal rights and title anymore, because their own Supreme Court of Canada has recognized that. We need to establish those processes to bring about the legislative changes that are based on recognition of title and not based on extinguishment," said Bellegarde.

Other issues that will be top of mind for the next leader are the next steps on pushing for a national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women, infrastructure on reserves, and the availability of food and water for many remote communities.

In order to see meaningful input or action on many of these files, the new AFN chief will have to work to establish connections with the federal government without succumbing to its agenda, clearing space to allow him to represent the chiefs.

It's all about getting things done. Not every work relationship is easy but you've got to make them work," said Bellegarde. (With CP and TIN files)