

National Chief Bellegarde finally meets with Prime Minister

By Lynda Powless
Editor

It took three months and a rushed meeting but Prime Minister Stephen Harper finally met with the Assembly of First Nations National leader last week.

It was a meeting that lasted less than an hour and no decisions were made but both Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Assembly of First Nations leader Perry Bellegarde are calling it positive.

The prime minister's chief spokesman, Jason MacDonald, said the meeting was "a very positive first meeting."

MacDonald confirmed the

an inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women and "pressed" Harper to withdraw the First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act.

"The prime minister stated that Bill C-33 will not move forward," Bellegarde said in his letter to the executive. "We agreed that there is much work to do to achieve the changes needed to substantively improve First Nations well-being."

Bellegarde said he also suggested to the prime minister the need for meetings between cabinet ministers and members of the AFN executive on issues includ-

noon. He invited the Prime Minister to meet with chiefs from across Canada when they gather next July in Montreal.

The Prime Minister did not immediately accept the invitation.

The meeting, that Chief Bellegarde had requested is the first meeting the Prime Minister has had with an AFN National Chief since the deal he struck on education with Shawn Atleo last winter that eventually led to Mr. Atleo's resignation.

"I wanted to make sure that he knew about our priorities going forward as



OTTAWA – Prime Minister Stephen Harper met with Perry Bellegarde, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, on Parliament Hill last Wednesday. (PMO photo by Jason Ransom)



Thomas Mulcair tweeted out his meeting with AFN leader Perry Bellegarde
Thomas Mulcair ✓ @ThomasMulcair. Follow Great dinner meeting tonight with Perry Bellegarde, National Chief of @AFN_updates #NDP #cdnpoli 10:11 PM - 15 Jan 2015

two leaders met following question period where they discussed "a wide range of topics."

Bellegarde sent a letter to the AFN executive last Wednesday saying he had met with the Prime Minister.

The meeting was unexpected said AFN officials. There was no advance notice and confirmation happened fairly quickly.

"The National Chief was actually in Quebec City for the AFN-QL meeting and returned to Ottawa in the afternoon for the meeting," said an AFN official.

National Chief Bellegarde said during the quick session he raised the need for

ing "comprehensive claims, treaty implementation and land rights."

He said he laid out the AFN priorities just as he has in recent meetings with NDP Leader Tom Mulcair and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau.

Mulcair said last Thursday he had "a great dinner meeting" with Bellegarde. In a post on Twitter, he is seen posing with the national chief and a handful of his NDP MPs

AFN leader Bellegarde, elected in November says an ongoing dialogue between the federal government and First Nations was started at the face-to-face talk on Wednesday after-

First Nations people," Mr. Bellegarde said in telephone interviews.

"We had a dialogue. We had an exchange. I can't say there is agreement on any file or issue," he said. "It was basically a meeting to open lines of communication and, at the end of the meeting, there was agreement that our officials will continue to meet, to discuss priorities and what can be achieved moving forward."

Topics discussed include treaty implementation and the resolution of comprehensive claims, especially in light of the Tsilhqot'in decision in which the Supreme Court of Canada

recognized aboriginal rights and title.

Chief Bellegarde called for an end to the 2-per-cent cap on annual increases to on-reserve education that has been in place for nearly two decades.

He discussed the need to revitalize indigenous languages and about the socioeconomic gap between indigenous people and the rest of Canada.

"I outlined, as well, the need to embrace and support new concepts like revenue sharing, which I am bringing up to the premiers as well, to make sure that

we are fully involved in the economy," Chief Bellegarde said.

The Prime Minister, he said, took a lot of notes.

Not all chiefs agree that the National Chief of the AFN, which is essentially a lobby group and not a level of native government, should meet privately with the Prime Minister. Former AFN leader Shawn Atleo was criticized by First Nations leaders for holding such meetings.

But Chief Bellegarde made it clear before and during his election bid that talking with the Prime Minister

was a goal of his first 100 days in office.

He has also met with NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau.

"That's the only way you are going to be able to influence policy and legislation which is unilaterally imposed that affects inherent and treaty rights and jurisdiction in a negative way," he said. "You have to have access to whoever is in leadership power, and I think the majority of chiefs understand that and know that and support that." (With CP files)



Justin Trudeau tweeted out his meeting with AFN leader Perry Bellegarde.
Justin Trudeau, MP ✓ @JustinTrudeau. Follow Important meeting with #AFN NC @perrybellegarde today to discuss issues incl. #MMIW and First Nations rights.