

National chief vents First Nations frustrations at PM

OTTAWA The scaffold Prime Minister Stephen Harper erected in January to help boost the independence and prosperity of Canada's First Nations is being corroded by inaction, and risks collapsing in a familiar cloud of inertia and distrust, newly obtained correspondence suggests.

Shawn Atleo, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, lays bare the frustrations of Canada's native leaders in a pair of scathing letters sent last month to Harper and Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan.

The letters, obtained by The Canadian Press, decry a total lack of progress on issues Harper promised in January to address — education, comprehensive claims, treaty implementation, economic development and fiscal arrangements.

"There has been a loss of momentum and sense of frustration (that) is being felt by the First Nation leadership," Atleo writes in the three-page letter to

Harper.

"This is exacerbated by the federal government's broader legislative agenda, which has the potential for harmful impacts on First Nations, including changes to environmental regulation, fisheries and criminal justice."

Atleo accuses Harper of continuing to push legislation and a fragmented agenda he knows First Nations communities will oppose, eroding what little trust existed between natives and the Crown.

In his five-page letter to Duncan, Atleo examines the issues Ottawa and chiefs had agree to tackle, and describes how bureaucratic inertia and lack of mandate have stymied each conversation.

"First Nations leadership have keenly engaged in good faith to begin a dialogue only to be met by AANDC (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada) officials indicating that they have no mandate to even enter into discus-

sions," he writes.

As a result, Atleo continues, the progress report due next year will have nothing in it, while the government presses on with legislation impacting First Nations lives as if the summit and declaration of last January never happened. "We have been patient and reserved judgment. Neither that patience nor that demonstrated goodwill is infinite," he writes.

Jason MacDonald, a spokesperson for Duncan, said neither the minister nor Harper has responded in writing. Duncan will do so "shortly," MacDonald said.

"We will be responding to the national chief's letter; until we have the opportunity to do so it would be inappropriate to comment."

But a government insider close to the talks expressed similar frustration with First Nations leaders. Progress is proving elusive because First Nations themselves don't have a coherent, unified idea of what they want,



National Chief Shawn Atleo

the source said.

"They don't really know what they're looking for or asking for," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "It's sort of like nailing Jell-O to the wall." As national chief, Atleo does not represent all First Nations. Rather, he communicates to governments and the public on behalf of more than 600 chiefs who have a wide range of demands and concerns, and come from a diverse range of communities.

In practice, Atleo has been the calm face of an increasingly angry population, urging the federal government to work with him before the anger boils over.

The letters suggest that boiling point may soon be at hand.

He wants Harper and Duncan to give bureaucrats a clear mandate and inject their political will into processes that are foundering. He also wants a neutral assessment of education funding, and a neutral body to decide on comprehensive land claims.

"There is a growing and deepening frustration across the country," Atleo writes.

"As people of good faith, we remain hopeful that momentum and commitment will be restored. However, the need for a change of direction, for a demonstration of meaningful good faith on the part of the Crown, is now urgent and essential."

The dysfunctional working groups stand in stark contrast to the spirit of co-operation that emerged last winter in advance of the Crown-First Nation Gathering in January.

Though the summit itself did not produce any mate-

rial gains for First Nations, Harper, his cabinet and chiefs agreed to several detailed processes on the underlying problems facing many reserves.

Now, talks on comprehensive land claims are going nowhere because federal bureaucrats don't have a mandate to negotiate new solutions, Atleo writes.

Duncan has taken comprehensive claims in a new direction, telling First Nations involved in protracted talks that Ottawa will walk away unless compromises are in the offing.

On treaty implementation, government representatives have not shown up at key events, Atleo writes in his letter to Duncan. On economic development, he complains that the government has caused delays.

And on education — the focus of much of Harper's and Atleo's attention for the past two years — the joint government-First Nation process collapsed a month ago.—Canadian Press-