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Statement of Apology for the Impacts of the 1923 Williams Treaties

On November 17, 2018, in Rama, Ontario, the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, apologized on behalf of the Government of Canada for the negative impacts of the 1923 Williams Treaties on the Williams Treaties First Nations.

Speaking notes for the Honourable Carolyn Bennett

Chiefs and former leaders, Elders, and members of the Alderville, Chippewas of Beausoleil, Chippewas of Georgina Island, Chippewas of Rama, Curve Lake, Hiawatha and Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nations, I am honoured to be here today on behalf of the Government of Canada, the Prime Minister, and all Canadians to apologize for the negative impacts of the 1923 Williams Treaties on your communities. Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge all of your ancestors, who knew that your rights were being denied and sought justice for your communities and the future generations.

To all Williams Treaties First Nations members, past and present, I would like to offer these sincere words: we are sorry. Mjinwesmin.

Ninety-five years ago, your ancestors signed treaties with the Crown that became known as the Williams Treaties. The Crown only entered into these treaties after decades of requests by First Nation leaders and community members to address the matter of settlers encroaching on your traditional lands. The Williams Treaties of 1923 were intended to resolve your longstanding claims. Instead, the conclusion of these treaties created continuing injustices — insufficient compensation, inadequate reserve lands, and the inability to freely exercise harvesting rights.

We are sorry that, even before the Williams Treaties were concluded, your ancestors were unable to fully enjoy the bounty of your traditional lands. We are sorry that these treaties did not resolve your grievances, and that the Crown's actions did not honour the longstanding treaty relationship that already existed, and continues to exist, with your communities. And we are sorry that the Crown failed to recognize and respect your treaty rights.

In the years following the signing of the Williams Treaties, First Nation members continued to hunt, fish, trap and gather, as they had done since time immemorial. However, the Crown's interpretation of the treaties made it increasingly difficult for community members to exercise their rights.

Instead of protecting harvesting rights in your pre-Confederation treaty areas, the Williams Treaties were viewed as extinguishing all harvesting rights outside of your reserves. This led to many challenges, injustices, and indignities for members of your communities. Unable to freely exercise their treaty harvesting rights, some mothers and fathers were unable to provide for their families as they had before. This, along with other colonial policies and practices, led to hardship and increased dependence on government.

Other members who continued to hunt, fish, trap and gather off reserve or out of season were prosecuted under the law for harvesting. In some cases, these members had their nets, traps, or fishing lines taken from them, while others were fined or imprisoned. Still others were compelled to pursue traditional activities secretly — trapping and catching frogs at night or ice fishing under white blankets — so as not to attract the attention of authorities.

Instead of harvesting being something that family members, both young and old, undertook together with pride, it became a risky activity. At times, only those who could outrun, outskate, or outmaneuver the authorities through the islands and shallows were able to escape prosecution.

We are sorry that, in not recognizing your rights to harvest in your pre-Confederation treaty areas, your communities faced hardship and hunger, with the bounties of the land being replaced by biscuits and tins of government meat. We are sorry that your people were not able to pursue traditional activities with pride and dignity, but instead were persecuted for exercising their rights. And we are sorry that your grandmothers and grandfathers, mothers and fathers, and aunts and uncles were constrained in their ability to do what their ancestors had always done — to teach younger generations about your communities' traditional lands and waters and pass along Anishinaabe culture and practices.

Despite everything that your communities have been through, the Alderville, Chippewas of Beausoleil, Chippewas of Georgina Island, Chippewas of Rama, Curve Lake, Hiawatha, and Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nations remain strong and vibrant. The determination that you have shown in fighting for your rights over more than a century is remarkable. Members of your communities advocated, privately and publicly, and in ways big and small, for justice and change. From

grandmothers who taught their grandchildren how to harvest and prepare wood for baskets, to those who participated in fishing protests, and to those, such as Wayne Taylor, Doug Williams, and George Howard, who pursued their rights through the courts, your people never gave up.

The persistence and resilience of the Williams Treaties First Nations serve as an example for all Canadians. In order to learn, in order to heal, in order to advance reconciliation, we must all acknowledge past wrongs and the multifaceted impacts of colonialism. It is our collective responsibility to continue to educate ourselves on the history of Canada so that we can move toward greater understanding and respect.

In 1923, the Crown could have, and should have, done better. In 2018, I pledge that we can, and will, do better. Today, the Government of Canada recognizes that the Crown did not adequately compensate or provide you with additional reserve lands under the Williams Treaties. The Crown's actions in negotiating and implementing these treaties did not respect your ancient and profound relationship with your traditional lands, and the Crown's interpretation of these treaties unfairly restricted your ability to harvest in your pre-Confederation treaty areas.

There is no way to undo the past, nor to fully atone for wrongs perpetuated over many decades. In concluding a negotiated settlement that includes compensation to address historic wrongs, the ability to expand your reserve land bases, and the recognition of your pre-Confederation treaty harvesting rights, I believe that we have the opportunity to open a new chapter. A chapter where trust can be rebuilt; Anishinaabe culture, language, and teachings are celebrated; treaty rights are respected; and our relationship is further strengthened for the benefit of the seven generations to come. We are committed to writing this next chapter together, in the spirit of reconciliation and partnership.

Thank you. Miigwetch.

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Date modified: 2018-11-16