



**BRITISH COLUMBIA
ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS**

***PRESENTATION TO 'CHANGING THE FACE OF FIRST NATIONS
COMMUNICATIONS' CONFERENCE***

**PUGLAAS (JODY WILSON-RAYBOULD)
REGIONAL CHIEF
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Gilakas'la, Greetings, Elders, Chiefs, ladies and gentlemen

- Elder Acknowledgement
- Thank you
- *'Changing The Face of First Nations' Communications'*
- *Acknowledge Traditional Territory*

I appreciate the opportunity to welcome you and to provide some opening comments at this event organized by my friend and colleague Tewanee Joseph in partnership with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

My traditional name is 'Puglaas' and I come from the Musgamagw-Tsawateineuk / Laich-Kwil-Tach people of Northern Vancouver Island where I live, with my husband Tim Raybould, in my village of Cape Mudge where I also serve as a member of the We Wai Kai Council.

First Nations are in an exciting period of change with new opportunities building on the efforts of the leaders that have come before us along with the work in our communities in advancing Aboriginal title and rights. Today it is virtually impossible for our interests not to be considered when resource extraction is taking place within our traditional territories or where our rights could be impacted. Witness just this Friday the government of Canada finally announcing it had endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; another indication of where we have come from and where we are heading as peoples. The challenge today is now translating these hard fought for rights into practical and tangible benefits on the ground in our communities so that no community is left out or behind.

To help accomplish this transformation the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations has developed and is implementing a plan with four (4) key and interrelated pillars based upon the fundamental principle of community empowerment and to assist during this exciting period of Nation building or re-building. These pillars are: (1) strong and appropriate governance; (2) fair lands and resource settlements; (3) improved Education; and, (4) individual health. To make this plan work we need to share our experiences and *Build on Our Success*.

So this is my message... one that I have been communicating both before and after being elected Regional Chief last year - *Building on Our Success* and working together to effect positive change in our communities. A message I have been communicating at every event I attend; including now this one.

As political leaders communicating a message is, of course, one of the most important aspects of what we do. In the world of First Nations' politics the need for good communication between and among us, as communication is always two-ways, is particularly critical during this time of unprecedented change – of Nation building. How we as First Nations develop our messages and how we communicate them is increasingly important as to whether or not we are going to be successful in having our message heard and acted upon and ultimately seeing movement beyond the colonial reality that still plagues many of our peoples today.

Having a clear message and one that you believe in, is also critical - particularly in today's world where methods of communication are

much easier and where information or in fact, misinformation, can spread like wildfire. In the world of politics, including our own political world, politicians often communicate messages for their own political purposes which unfortunately at times can actually be harmful to those whom we serve. To be sure then, as leaders what we communicate is as important as how we communicate it. There is a responsibility on those delivering the message to make sure the message is correct and appropriate. A wrong message or a factually incorrect message that is communicated well and consequently affects peoples' action, while maybe helping to get a politician elected, won't necessarily advance our collective interests. This is at its core a question of ethics – of social responsibility – an aspect of communication that cannot be overlooked. The tools of modern communication are very powerful and need to be used appropriately and not abused.

We as First Nations' peoples know this as well as any group of people based on how we have historically been represented. Throughout our history how others have communicated information about us is important to appreciate. The 'Indian' was often portrayed in stereotypes juxtaposed to the non-Aboriginal – where as some commentators have suggested 'the imaginary Indian' has been created - the cigar shop Indian, the Indian in old Hollywood movies. Today in mainstream media the story that is communicated most is one of us in conflict – the First Nation against the government or against the big multi-national company or the Indian versus the Indian - conflict sells. So the story is not, for instance, about a First Nation that has an innovative housing program but the story is about a band council evicting members for non-payment of rent or, that the provincial

government and First Nations are cooperating on land-use decision making but rather that there is a conflict over resource extraction.

Because our messages and our actions result in media coverage we also must be mindful of how others will communicate our message and how they will focus on certain aspects of the message.

But perceptions of us as Indigenous peoples are changing. Which is of course great? For instance, in a recent survey of Canadians when asked who they thought founded Canada, many younger people said First Nations and not the English or the French as other demographics did - perhaps a reflection that the communication of our history in the schools has changed and there are new perceptions about us (as Indians)?

When we communicate we, of course, can have multiple audiences. For myself, is my audience the Chiefs who elect me? Or is my audience the government officials who fund the Assembly of First Nations? Is my audience the individual living in one of our communities, my community or living away from home? Or is my audience the citizens of BC or even Canada? Or is my audience even bigger – International perhaps?

Over the next two days your conference will be looking at many different aspects of communication and how to develop your message and communicate it effectively depending upon your audience and purpose. For me what is important is that the message is consistent regardless of the audience. While the audiences may be different the

message delivered to one audience will inevitable become known by all the other audiences. Communication is just too easy. For example, as a leader I cannot proclaim that we need to end the *Indian Act* in one breath to one audience and then for political expediency, perhaps because of the fear that getting rid of the *Indian Act* raises in some peoples' minds say the opposite or detract from that message somewhere else. I think in the past it was probably easier for politicians to give different messages to different audiences than it is today given improved communication and the speed at which information travels.

While it is important to understand how we might communicate as elected representatives to each other or how we collectively communicate our message to the non-Aboriginal people whether through the media or other means, one of the most critical communication challenges we face is how we communicate in our communities with our citizens back home. How do we create community engagement during this period of change when we often face opposition to change because so many people living in our communities do not see the opportunity and may have limited hope and simply do not trust that there is in fact going to be a better future? In many cases our people do not trust their own leaders and at times see the *Indian Act* as protection and not the straight jacket that it is.

One thing I have come to appreciate in my short time in regional and national politics and working in my own community, is that before there can be any significant social change on the ground in moving beyond the *Indian Act* our people must support it; not just verbally and

politically through electing leaders that share the same vision, but they actually have to exercise their franchise and vote in favour of social change. The twisted reality of our post-colonial transition is that short of a court coming straight out and saying we have rights over our land and the right to govern ourselves, our people still have to negotiate with the Crown and then vote the colonizer out of our lives. This is because under the *Indian Act* we are wards and the colonizer, in our case Canada, has a fiduciary relationship to our people and cannot simply legislate the *Indian Act* away until our people tell them it is ok to do so.

No other segment of Canadian society has had to decolonize or go through this process to establish basic structures of governance or create the tools for economic and social development. The legal framework and institutional structure for good government and creating the legal framework to support social and economic development is in place for the rest of Canada, but not for us...unless our Citizens vote 'yes' to change. This is a challenge; a huge challenge, and a particularly significant communication challenge as anyone knows who has put together information for community votes, or held community meetings to discuss complex and often controversial issues, or simply tried to get the vote out on referendum day.

While community participation is often cited in non-Aboriginal politics as an objective in reality, with the exception of amending the Canadian Constitution, there is really very limited active public participation in non-Aboriginal government in Canada. The people are not required to make decisions. Decision-making is left to City Halls, Provincial

legislatures or Parliament or to the executive branches of government. In our First Nations' world, we actually need to re-establish our institutions of government and to do this our people have to be a part of that process and actively support it. And when they do they typically want more say in how their government runs than just electing leaders every two, three or four years.

As a younger leader and having watched the leaders that have come before me I cannot help but reflect on how difficult and unforgiving the work must have been in advancing our rights on the provincial and national scene only to have your own people attack the work back home often due to misinformation or bad communication. Let me explain. Often our leaders have had to travel away from their communities to engage in court cases or negotiations with government officials to try to create that space in which social change and decolonization can take place back home in our communities. For instance great progress was made at the constitutional tables in the 1990s with the Charlottetown Accord by our national and provincial Aboriginal leadership that would have created the space in Canada for the implementation of the inherent right of self-government.

At the end of the day while Canadians en mass voted against the Accord the truth was so did many from our communities. This must have been incredibly disheartening for those that had negotiated it. But the lesson was clear we have to focus on Nation building and community empowerment and effectively use all the communication tools available to us to advance our collective political aspirations starting with our communities. There is no point winning in Court on

our rights, or negotiating great deals, or in fact having the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples endorsed by Canada if we cannot translate those rights into positive change in our communities. This is the challenge. And it is a communication challenge. While Charlottetown may have failed today the space is now there for our communities to begin move away from the *Indian Act* should they choose.

Today it is now easier than ever to communicate – which is why – as I started out by saying – getting the message out and your facts right is so critical – so too is also using the tools available to us strategically.

With the use of the internet and social networking all of us are bombarded with information all the time. How do we sort out which information is important and which is not? Which is factual and which is misleading? How do we get people to take notice of the information we would like them to see? What is serious and what is just entertainment? Today everybody has an opinion on everything and can share that opinion readily. The very tools that are now available to us to communicate effectively are also available to those that want to miscommunicate just as effectively. This is really a minefield that we must all walk through carefully. As politicians I truly believe we have a responsibility to ensure accurate and timely information is available to those we serve but certainly should not abuse the ease at which communication is now possible.

In assisting our communities and our leadership in how they communicate directly with their own citizens is so important and it is

very worthwhile to have a communications' plan and an approach to communication that is understood throughout your organization or Nation. Of course few of our First Nations' communities have the resources for a dedicated communications officer or staff person. Some do, but not many. Even, for instance, in our political organizations we do not necessarily have dedicated communications staff. In my own organization we do not have a communications officer although the National AFN does. So developing a plan particularly where there is no full-time communications individual can help. At the BC Assembly of First Nations we have been focussing on our website to develop a communication tool that will assist our Nations to share information with each other and to continue the conversations that are taking place within and between communities as each looks to create its own exit strategy from the *Indian Act*.

As mentioned earlier the first key and arguably the most important area of the BCAFN plan is, not surprisingly, strong and appropriate governance. Each community, either individually or in groups depending upon cultural and social ties and issues of proper title holder will need to determine how they will govern themselves and build their contemporary institutions of governance. Strong and appropriate governance is truly necessary to be successful. All the academic work and experience shows that if our Nations are to reach our full potential and maximize our opportunities we need to govern ourselves appropriately. Without it there is too much political and legal uncertainty, leading to wasted energy and money. Energy and money we don't have for fights often fought locally. Basically the dysfunction that plagues *Indian Act* band offices across the country needs to end.

At the BCAFN, for our part as a political organization that supports our constituent members, we are developing what we are calling a “Governance Community Engagement and Self-assessment Tool” to assist communities in developing appropriate government as part of a social change movement and to stimulate discussion (communication); a discussion that needs to take place around our Council tables, in staff meetings and, most importantly, at band meetings and around the kitchen tables of the citizens in our communities.

I believe this is one of the first conferences of its kind so I congratulate you Tewanee and your team. I know you have helped a lot of communities and organizations in developing communication plans and getting the message out. I think I can speak for all the First Nations in BC that the work you, your team and the Four Host First Nations undertook leading up to and during the Olympics was fantastic and took the profile of our Nations to new international level.

Your agenda over the next couple of days is very full considering a multitude and various aspects of communication. Thank you for our Nations with this communications’ tool... I am sure this will be of tremendous assistance to our communities. As I started my presentation, we are in an exciting period of change and opportunity and it is through partnership and sharing our experiences, along with the development and delivery of effective tools aimed at assisting and empowering our communities that we will build on our success.

In closing I would like to leave you with this thought to keep in mind as you go through your various workshops and sessions and most importantly when you return to your respective communities...

“How can we effectively use communications tools available to us to support Nation building, to empower our communities with the ultimate objective of making the lives of our people better?”

Gilakas’la