

Remarks

The Honourable Barry Penner

Minister of Aboriginal Relations and

Reconciliation

Strategic Conversations Annual Forum

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Remarks may not be exactly as delivered

Good morning.

It's an honour to be here on the traditional territory of the Coast Salish people.

I'd like to thank Chief Keith Matthew for his kind introduction.

As many of you know, I'm the new kid on the block, having been in my new portfolio as Minister of

Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation for just over a month.

Even in a month, I'm amazed at how much I've learned, and it's also made me realize how much I still have to learn.

So it's a real pleasure to be invited to speak to you this morning.

Before I start, I'd like to acknowledge the work of the organizers of this Forum.

The Aboriginal Business Service Network Society (ABSN) is a wonderful example of a non-profit organization that makes a meaningful contribution to Aboriginal business, by strengthening and supporting the role of Aboriginal people. I'd like to congratulate everyone involved with ABSN for your amazing contribution both to this Forum and for your ongoing

efforts to expand the Aboriginal business community in British Columbia.

While I'm on the subject, I'd also like to acknowledge and thank all the other people who work to make an event like this a success.

I know that so much goes on behind the scenes and there are a lot of unsung heroes.

I'd also like to thank all the speakers who contribute their time, energy and knowledge to the event. It's really a privilege to be in such distinguished company.

It will be no surprise to anyone when I say that we've been facing some challenging economic times over the last couple of years.

And we all have a part to play in generating the opportunities that will support B.C.'s and Canada's economic recovery.

I really believe that Aboriginal business has a fundamental part to play in that recovery.

I had the privilege of speaking last week at the National Young Entrepreneurs Symposium.

It was so exciting to feel the energy in the room with some many young Aboriginal people who are determined to make their mark on the business landscape of B.C. and Canada.

There is definitely something to be said for age and experience, but I believe there's room in the business world for all ages. In the longer term, an economy is only as strong as the next generation. If the young people I saw last week have anything to do with things, B.C. and Canada will be very strong indeed.

When we look at the economic situation, we can't just look at the present. We have to look to the future. By

doing that, we have to acknowledge both the strengths and the challenges that we and the next generation face.

B.C. will be one of many jurisdictions facing an unprecedented labour and skills shortage.

One of the reasons for that is the nature of our aging workforce. The baby boomer generation that makes up about one-third of our current work force is retiring or moving to part-time work and will continue to do so over the next two decades.

That seems a long time away, but when we're talking about economic planning, it's just around the corner.

That's why government is expanding training opportunities to help people and businesses meet their skilled-labour needs. We've been forging partnerships with industry, labour and education to address our labour challenges.

I mentioned the National Young Entrepreneurs Symposium earlier. As I'm sure you know, Aboriginal youth is the fastest growing demographic in B.C. It's also the only segment of our labour force – except for immigrants – that will proportionately expand over the next 10 years.

So from both a present and future planning perspective, that's a section of our business community and labour force that we really have to engage with, and make sure we're delivering the skills training programs needed for the future success of our economy.

With that thought in mind, I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about just a few of the programs that are designed to help Aboriginal youth reach their potential.

Skilled trades people provide vital services to the people of British Columbia and to our economy. Over the past few years, government, through the Industry Training Authority and BladeRunners has run 13 demonstration projects, enabling more Aboriginal people to begin trades careers. Their success has been followed up with over \$1.9 million in continued funding for programs covering a whole range of trades.

A number of programs have recently been offered through ACCESS – the Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society. Their sheet metal program already boasts a number of graduates who have been hired, and I know that they also have a welding program that's up and running right now.

I mentioned Blade Runners which is another highly successful youth training program, with a 15-year track record of success in the construction industry and an expanded budget of over \$14 million.

I should acknowledge that Blade Runners isn't specifically Aboriginal, but approximately two-thirds of its trainees are Aboriginal, so I think it's appropriate to mention it here.

I'd like to mention the Aboriginal Training for Employment Program (ATEP). We're investing almost \$4 million to deliver job-related training for over 600 Aboriginal people in communities across B.C.

Participants will receive job-related skills training and introductory trades training, coupled with mentoring, coaching and support through public, private and Aboriginal-controlled training organizations.

Seventeen Aboriginal organizations have partnered with industry, education and training providers to deliver services in over 60 communities.

And I really do mean that all parts of the province will benefit from this program.

In the Fraser Valley, Métis Nation BC is providing trades training at their new skills training centre.

In the Interior, the BC First Nations Forestry Council, the Xeni Gwet'in First Nations Government and the Shuswap Nation Tribal Council Society are involved in ATEP.

In the North, the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, the Tse Keh Nay Consortium, Yekooche First Nation and the Prince George Nechako Aboriginal Employment and Training Society are all involved.

Those are just a handful of the organizations involved in a few parts of the province. There are many more, but if I were to name everyone I would be here all day. So I will apologize if there is someone in the room today whom I have not mentioned.

Programs such as Aboriginal BEST – the Business and Entrepreneurship Skills Training Program illustrate our commitment to entrepreneurship development. Government provides funding for twelve free training sessions to Aboriginal people, leading to the development of a business plan. Many of you are familiar with that program and have even assisted with its delivery.

Since its inception in 2004, over 626 students have completed Aboriginal BEST training, and previous evaluations of the program have shown that a high percentage of BEST graduates move quickly into employment or self-employment.

My Ministry, in partnership with Western Economic Diversification, also supports Business Advisory Centres in Fort St. John, Prince George and Cranbrook. These centres provide a range of

supports to Aboriginal business people either hoping to start a business or already in business and in need of some advice. They have contributed significantly to the development of successful businesses in their regions.

For over 20 years, we have supported the First Citizens Fund Business Loan Program. This program, which is delivered by Aboriginal Capital Corporations throughout the province, supports about 125 Aboriginal small businesses every year. It helps small business owners to start, expand or make improvements to their business across a range of sectors from retail to fishing, forestry to tourism and many more. It's just another example of the kind of support that is out there when you're thinking about the kind of business you want to build.

I would also like to mention the second Annual B.C. Aboriginal Business Awards which will be taking place at a gala event tomorrow night at the Hyatt Regency

Hotel. I'm sure many of you will be attending this celebration. These awards recognize successful First Nations and Métis business owners in a number of categories. It is wonderful to be able to publically acknowledge the successes of the Aboriginal business community in this way. I look forward to seeing you there.

I'd like to thank everyone for supporting this Forum. I believe occasions like this, where organizations and individuals can come together and share their experience and their knowledge are very important to the economic and business health of the province and the country.

I think it's significant that we are here in the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. 'Dialogue' is an important word because it refers to two-way communication.

That's the way communication works best, when people are willing to both speak and to listen.

If we keep the dialogue strong between Aboriginal business, non-Aboriginal business, business service organizations, individuals and government in all its forms then we will be well-prepared to meet the challenges of the present and the future.

We'll be prepared to lay the economic and business foundations that will allow the next generation to thrive.

Thank you.

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