

Statement by Chief Erwin Redsky on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to Shoal Lake 40 First Nation,

April 28, 2016

(Check against delivery)

Mr. Prime Minister, we thank you for coming to share this day with us. You have seen and heard a lot and you have been generous with your time and your availability to our people. It's appreciated because their daily reality has been ignored for a very long time.

I understand you were even trained in a new line of work today, but I have to warn you that, if I have anything to do with it, water delivery in Shoal Lake 40 is not a career opportunity.

I hope you now understand some of the consequences of Indian Affairs taking our land so long ago. Canada stole our land, imposed Winnipeg's water intake on us, then abandoned us to cope with the results you saw today. That act of colonial theft began what Canada's new Museum for Human Rights has described as "a cascade of human rights" implications, including a threat to our very existence.

Like other Indigenous people we also deal with the Province of Manitoba, the Province of Ontario, cottagers, local municipalities, mining and forestry companies and they're all greedy for the rich resources the Creator gave us in our homelands. We're under constant siege and, as you have seen, the results of that assault are not pretty. We've got a 19 year boil water order, forced isolation, no economy, garbage and sewage piling up, moldy houses, mud roads, a school that's falling down and funding that's been capped for a generation. Our people are denied access to jobs, education and health services, all while struggling with the trauma of a century of cultural genocide. It's a constant, grinding fight for survival and far too many people just give up.

Mr. Prime Minister, the whole Canadian economy is going by on the highway right beyond our front door but we have been denied access to it because, for years, Canada refused to support our basic right to be equal participants in the economy. It's not that we are neglected. What you see here is the results of one hundred years of methodical, institutionalized racism. Just compare what you see here with the thriving settler communities in our homeland. We are not geographically "isolated". It's political and economic isolation. We are denied essential services and opportunities because we are an Anishinaabe community.

This kind of institutionalized racism hits directly at our right to exist. It makes every day of living while Anishinaabe a difficult day. It grinds away at the hearts of people ...most especially the young people whose main job it is to hope and to dream.

Our situation might be unique but the process of colonization that hardened into today's institutionalized racism gets played out against Indigenous people and communities all across

Turtle Island. It's a process designed to erase us from our land –to get us to move.

Speaking of which, I find it interesting that when Winnipeg floods, no one suggests those people move. Instead, Canada does whatever it takes to protect them --often to the detriment of Indigenous people up and downstream. Alberta's petro-economy becomes uneconomic and no one tells them to move. No. Suddenly there's a huge national effort to support them. An once again First Nations are asked to put aside our lands and interests for more pipelines so the settlers in Calgary, Edmonton and Bay Street can continue to prosper.

This double standard, the attitude that Indigenous people matter less, that we are less valued, creates the hopelessness faced by our young people. It's a lethal flaw in this country that only Canadians can fix. We have a lot to offer but it's not our role to fix your country. Our role is to ensure that our people and the land survive ...that our knowledge and our sacred connection with the land carries on --because we're not going anywhere.

Canadians really need to look in the mirror. The truth is that Canada is not an equitable country. Our experience is that Canada has been a racist, colonial liar and thief. It's a sad fact that needs to be acknowledged so we can all move on. We've said it for a long time and lately the Supreme Court, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal and the United Nations are looking at the facts and they are agreeing.

But the old pattern can change, and, as the Human Rights Tribunal said the other day, "The time is now."

As a new Prime Minister, as a young man, you're in a position to lead that change. The time is right. Colonialism can end. You can insist on equality now. You can demonstrate that Indigenous lives and Treaties do matter. For the sake of all our children, I'm urging you to end the patterns of the past and be the collaborative partner and ally Canada promised to be.

You have said some fine words about how you want our relationship to be. Your words are welcome but, unfortunately, we have a whole museum full of fine Canadian promises that are unfulfilled. Real change, the kind you are talking about, is going to take courage, tenacity and deep, deep commitment. Achieving a respectful, equitable nation to nation relationship is going to take real stamina. The people of Shoal Lake 40 know the kind of tenacity and resiliency it takes to achieve a dream. It's going to be tough but be assured that we are prepared to work beside you along the difficult path you have said you want to follow.

Before we part, our drummers will sing a healing song. It's a song for all of us as we move forward together in a good way in this sacred land. It's a song for reconciliation. Their second song is for your safe travels and for the protection of you and your family until we meet again.

I hope that one of your very next stops is Attawapiskat. Those people need the attention of your heart right now.

I have said some difficult things but I want to repeat that I do appreciate the time you have taken to learn of our situation and listen to our people face to face. If your visit to Shoal Lake 40 helps you recognize the pattern of institutionalized racism in Canada, if the bright eyes of our young people help stiffen your resolve to end Canada's inequality of services to First Nations, if the urgency of health services for our elders gives you the motivation to act quickly and if the memory of this day helps give you the stamina it's going to take to be a true Treaty partner, then your time here will be well spent. If, by your resolve, the young people you met today see real change in their lives and real hope in their future, then you will be most welcome to come back. If you succeed in making those fundamental changes to our relationship, you will deserve the celebration of a feast and an honour song for your accomplishment –and you will have earned it.