

Remarks, prepared for
Georges Erasmus, President
Aboriginal Healing Foundation

Public Policy Forum
Award for Public Policy Work

*Metropolitan Toronto Convention Centre
Toronto, Ontario
April 6, 2006*

Mr. Doer, Mr. Sabia, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends, Good Evening.

I thank the members, jury, and board of Public Policy Forum. I am honoured to share this evening's award with Mr. Rae and Ms. Fréchette.

This occasion elicits reflection upon the character of excellence in government and the possibilities and limits of public policy from each of our individual perspectives.

My perspective is rooted in the history and culture of the Dene. Often have I been described as an "activist." That I have been active I concede, but the image of a crusader is perhaps misplaced. It may be that I have played a part in advancing a certain set of political ideas and ideals. This evening, then, shall be no different. For I have a proposition which may come to you as something of a surprise. That is how it came to me.

My career began at home, in Denendeh, the land of the Dene. You may say that I was then pursuing the cause of Aboriginal self-government, but since in our view we Dene had never ceded our right and responsibility to manage our affairs it would be superfluous to label matters quite in that fashion. We were merely doing what came naturally – living as Dene – for which some of us received the designation of a radical.

When the Public Policy Forum's Testimonial Dinner was established in 1988, I was the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. It was in this role that I participated in negotiations designed to resolve peacefully the Oka confrontation.

As a direct consequence of this dangerous moment in Canadian history, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was established by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. And out of this Royal Commission, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation was established in 1998 as a cornerstone of *Gathering Strength – Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*.

You may be wondering at this point, Why is he rehearsing his curriculum vitae? —is he looking for work?

No, rest assured I am not. I am turning a narrative which has its conventional expressions in our media and our policy fora. According to the received formulations, the Oka Crisis like many confrontations had been at bottom a conflict over land. At best however this is, I think, a partial truth. There is something missing from policy considerations construed in this fashion.

I am no stranger to conflict and controversy. I think I'm reasonably informed about the issues which are of importance to Aboriginal peoples. Yet I was taken by surprise when the Royal Commission held national hearings across Canada. As we travelled to communities, I expected to delve into matters of governance, self-determination, and land agreements. Something else, however, emerged: the deep and, until that moment in time, unspeakable shame of physical and sexual abuse suffered by many, many Aboriginal people in Canada's Indian residential schools.

As I stand here tonight, I bear a message not readily heard or accepted in the world of policy formulation. The message is that this historic institutional trauma must be addressed. There must be a concerted and sustained national commitment to healing and reconciliation. The wellbeing of

Aboriginal people depends upon it. I also have come to believe that the wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples's relationship with Canada, and the wellbeing of Canada itself, are involved.

I could speak of the cost benefit of healing, of the economic impacts of suicide, incarceration and addiction. So many of what we call the "intergenerational impacts" of this system of forced assimilation receive the attention of public policy.

When I have the occasion to speak on the topic of government, I speak of a relationship between peoples. I speak of restoration and renewal. There have not always been pain, mistrust, and shame in the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadians. But that there today is we can not deny, and this understanding compels us to conclude that there must be healing and reconciliation. That, I believe, is the policy challenge before us. It is the cause to which these days I am principally committed.

For this and other reasons I am proud to have been part of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. From its inception, I have been aware that we are engaged in an effort which has many implications for what is today called Aboriginal governance, and what tomorrow may be too obvious and natural to merit a label.

I believe that the Aboriginal Healing Foundation is one of the most promising models, both from policy and governance viewpoints, for supporting the good work of community development among Aboriginal people.

Our mandate is to promote community-based healing initiatives which address the legacy of physical and sexual abuse suffered in Canada's Indian residential schools, and to promote reconciliation between Aboriginal people and Canada. I submit that healing and reconciliation ought to be essential consideration in the present and future formulation of public policy in relation to Aboriginal people.