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PRIME MINISTER'S Q&A ON FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

MODERATOR: Thank you, Grand Chief.

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER (Prime Minister of Canada): Sorry, ladies and gentlemen. We'll just finish this part and then move to the feast, although I thought Chief Weaselhead had the right idea: just go right to the feast. (LAUGHTER) But anyway, here we are. Go ahead.

MODERATOR: The Prime Minister will now take some questions from the media. When I call your name, if you can please make your way to the microphone, which is on your left. We will start with Rob Gibson from Sun News, please. Come on over, Rob.

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Where is Rob?

REPORTER: Hi, Mr. Prime Minister. I don't know if Neil Young would call this honouring the treaties. Would you say this is an important first step between improving relations between First Nations and the federal government, and perhaps moving forward with important projects like the oil sands development, Keystone, and Northern Gateway? And is there a timeline for a decision on Northern Gateway?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Well, look, I think today is what it is. It is a great step forward towards a historic reform of the First Nations education system, a reform that we need for the next generation of

First Nations children. It's obviously one of many things the government has done, but it is one that I think is, if we're able to see it through, a remarkable transformation in a way that will make a tremendous difference to communities, to families, and ultimately to individuals. I would point to what we did on specific claims, agreement we had with the Assembly of First Nations several years ago and with the chief's predecessor, to move forward on that in a way that has, you know, unblocked something that had basically not been moving forward for decades, and I think this is similar to that. All of those other issues, I think, are evaluated in their own times, on their own merits. They are not part of what we're discussing today. Obviously in terms of the specific project you answered, the government has... you asked about, the government has some specific responsibilities under the act, and will in due course deliberate on that and make its judgement known.

MODERATOR: We'll continue with Terry (inaudible) from CTV.

REPORTER: You... we heard a comment...

MODERATOR: The microphone is... You need to go to the mic.

REPORTER: Also we heard a comment earlier today in this room, but outside this room and outside the backrooms of Parliament and the First Nations councils, there's concern that real consultation should be happening on First Nations with people, with elders, with youth, and there is some concern that that hasn't been happening to this date. I was just wondering if that's going to happen in the future.

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: It certainly has been occurring. The Minister has described and can describe to you in detail the things we've been doing. As you know, that ultimately culminated in the government putting forward draft legislation that would accomplish the things we thought needed to be accomplished in the Assembly of First Nations

through its own process and deliberations, coming back to us with its disagreement and its five principles on the things that they believed needed to be changed, and we have sat down and we have found, we think, a way forward that accomplishes both of our objectives. Obviously the dialogue is going to continue throughout the country and throughout Parliament, but as I say, I do think we have an unprecedented opportunity to move forward in a way that will make a great deal of difference to First Nations children. And, you know, I just would point out the culmination of this entire event today was really with Isaiah and Cassie, and you know, we can talk all we want about various processes and approvals and consultations and authorities that we all have in our various communities and levels of government, but in the end, we cannot lose focus on the necessity of providing top quality for education for the next generation of First Nations children. (APPLAUSE)

MODERATOR: Francis Silvaggio from Global News.

REPORTER: Mr. Prime Minister, just a clarification, I guess. How does your government see the term First Nations control, because education as it stands is this journey from... through grade school, through high school, into a university system or post-secondary institution system that really does have basic standards. So how do you see a First Nation controlled system work within something that is very standardized?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Well, obviously, you know, the agreement that we have with the chief and with the Assembly, and ultimately all of these things will be reflected in the legislation. But you know, let's be clear here, that we're talking about the kind of local control and as well, you know, response to local culture and history that we have in education across the country, for most communities, and most Canadians. That does not, you know, we're not suggesting for a moment that in doing that - I don't think anyone would suggest that for a moment of doing that we do away with all standards. That's not what we're suggesting. We're suggesting that within that

framework there be part of that framework, for the protection of our children. Our standards of curriculum, our standards of governance, our standards of accountability. But ultimately those things must serve the people and the parents of the children we are trying to educate. That's the important thing. I say repeatedly to the Assembly of First Nations, to the chief, to my ministers, we are prepared to move forward on this. We want to move forward with you, and we can't move forward without you. So let's move forward together on that.

MODERATOR: We'll continue with Caroline Dunn from CBC.

REPORTER: Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Given that this is a retooled version of another proposed act, is there any possibility, as we see some opposition being voiced, that this one could be changed as well?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Of course, there is always the possibility. We have an elaborate legislative process that, you know, opens itself to change. Obviously, though, in the process, I think both the Assembly of First Nations, the government of Canada, we will want to make sure that the framework we have agreed on and that the principles are respected. We both know what we are trying to achieve. I think we both have the same ultimate aims. Obviously the ultimate aim is the children. The emphasis of the Assembly of First Nations is to ensure there be local control and at our end, to ensure that be within a strong and accountable governance framework. I think, you know, I think we've got it. Obviously as we move forward, we'll look at how we can move forward and make sure people have full information, and make sure we get as much buy-in as possible. But I will just mention, you know, in the Parliament of Canada, I have mentioned from time to time, there are people who don't agree. It does happen. (LAUGHTER)

MODERATOR: We're going to continue with Bill Graveland from the Canadian Press.

REPORTER: Prime Minister, I was wondering, children who start school, kindergarten in September of this year, what do you expect to see in 12 years?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Well, look, I think the single most important thing from the government's perspective is that those children finish school, they go through the whole 12 years, hopefully in many cases, they go beyond that, and that the education they have is transferrable to educations... to systems of higher learning or to other systems that they may move towards, and that those skills, the things that they are learning will get them well-paying jobs and good futures in the Canadian economy. That's what we're looking for.

MODÉRATEUR : On va terminer avec Sandra Gagnon de Radio-Canada.

JOURNALISTE : Je veux juste demander, Monsieur Harper, de nous dire votre réaction par rapport à l'opposition, et qu'est-ce qui serait fait en place pour justement s'assurer de la qualité dans les écoles autochtones?

TR. HON. STEPHEN HARPER : Comme je viens de dire, nous avons fait des consultations sans précédent, pas seulement avec les chefs autochtones, mais aussi dans les communautés. C'est un processus. Par ce processus nous avons développé une embauche, un projet de loi proposé. Nous avons eu une réaction de l'Assemblée des Premières nations, qui ont demandé des changements selon cinq principes. Nous avons... nous sommes assurés que nous avons atteint un accord qui respect nos objectifs pour un système avec une bonne gouvernance, des standards, et de l'imputabilité, la responsabilité en même temps, avec un cadre qui respecte le contrôle des Premières nations pour leur éducation, et leur autonomie. Et évidemment on va donner plus d'information à travers le pays, et on va encourager la participation. Nous ne pouvons... nous ne pouvons... nous ne pouvons le faire seuls. On doit... on

doit poursuivre en partenariat; mais en même temps, comme le parlement, on ne s'attend jamais à l'unanimité. Ce n'est pas la nature d'un débat politique démocratique.

MODÉRATEUR : Merci. Avez-vous des commentaires sur les...

TR. HON. STEPHEN HARPER : Ah oui, juste une autre chose.

I should say... I just want to say one word, because we have an important international event today that I know we all want to mark.

C'est l'ouverture officielle des Jeux olympiques d'hiver à Sotchi pour 2014, et nous avons là nos athlètes canadiens et canadiennes, des jeunes incroyables qui ont... qui dédient leurs... qui travaillent depuis presque toute la vie pour donner une bonne performance. Nous sommes très fiers d'eux et d'elles, et nous voulons leur donner nos meilleurs vœux.

So just let me repeat that. Obviously the opening of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. We have Canadian athletes. Any of you who have ever met any of these young people, great young people, men and women who have spent almost their entire lives dedicating themselves to excellence in their particular endeavour. We're very proud of them, and I know we all want to wish them well for the next couple of weeks, to our Canadian athletes. (APPLAUSE)

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