

**The full interview: Perry Bellegarde on running again, ‘closing the gap,’ and more**  
'We've got momentum. So why should Perry Bellegarde be given a second chance? To continue the work that's been started, so we can bring it to completion,' says the AFN leader.

AFN national chief Perry Bellegarde speaks to The Hill Times' editorial board on Dec. 13.

By JOLSON LIM

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It's been a busy three years for Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde. Since he was elected as national representative for the influential association of chiefs in 2014, the Liberals have swept to power in Ottawa, promising a reset in the relationship between Indigenous communities and the federal government, and increased financial support to improve the lives of First Nations people. Mr. Bellegarde has welcomed this newfound political momentum for First Nations people, and has enjoyed a prominent seat at the table in discussions with the federal government. It's an approach, though, not entirely without its critics.

Some First Nations leaders and activists have labelled the Saskatchewan-born chief a sellout for attempting to foster closer relationships with politicians on the Hill. Others, though, have credited him for burnishing the AFN's influence with a government in Ottawa that appears sympathetic to the needs of the Indigenous community. In any case, Mr. Bellegarde's leadership will be on the ballot later this year when he stands for re-election as AFN national chief in the July 2018 vote. In the run-up to the election, Mr. Bellegarde spoke to *The Hill Times'* editorial board on Dec. 13, discussing closing the human development gap between First Nations and non-First Nations communities, his relationship with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.), and why he should be re-elected as national chief, among other things.

The following Q&A was edited for style and length:

**What's your central goal?**

"I've been national chief for three years. A couple years before the federal election, we used the Closing the Gap document to influence the NDP, Liberals, Conservatives, and the Greens. That's kind of the list of priorities we used. Take a look in there, put it against what this Liberal government is saying, and to me, you're going to see we've had some influence in terms of public policy and public statements, and programs and things moving forward. "But this is what we wanted to see done. As AFN national chief, my job is to advocate for legislative and policy change. My job is to influence the federal budget every fiscal year. That's all I am as national chief, servants or helpers of the people. "This gap I identified—sixth vs. 63rd gap—Canada's up here as sixth in the United

Nations Human Development Index. Apply the same to First Nations people, we're 63rd. This is the gap that needs to be closed. That's why we need long-term sustainable investments in water, in childcare, in health. I will always be focused on that. "I always tell people closing the gap not only benefits First Nations people. It benefits all Canadians. Because that huge social cost, that huge financial cost—to maintaining that sixth vs. 63rd gap—will close. That's in the best interest of the country. That's what motivates and fuels me."

### **Why is it taking so long to close that gap?**

"It's so huge. You're not going to close that gap in one-to-two fiscal years. We've been forgotten for many years. When were First Nations issues and priorities gaining the attention that they are now? I can't remember in the 30 years I've been in politics. Maybe in 1982 with repatriation of the Constitution. Maybe some focus there, when we cut the umbilical cord with Great Britain. The Oka crisis in 1990 that resulted in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples—a \$60-million study over five years. Great recommendations, but how many of those were implemented? You had the Hawthorne Report, the Penner Report, and now the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "Now we're going to have another one with Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). You get these reports but the most important thing is the implementation of the recommendations. That's where we have to put our energy. We've never had a government open-minded to do something about it. But because we've been forgotten for many years, this gap is huge. It's going to take long-term sustainable investments."

### **You're running for re-election in July. Why should you be re-elected?**

"There's momentum on a number of fronts. We've got things moving. We have a memorandum to cabinet on education, to access \$665-million to help close the education tuition gap and have proper salaries for teachers and proper schools. That's in play. I have a memorandum to cabinet on housing. We have people in overcrowded conditions, we have black mold. "We've got the commitment to work on the Indigenous Language Revitalization Act. That, in itself, is an investment in human capital. Because studies have shown when young First Nations men are fluent in their language, they're more successful in school, and therefore more successful in life. You know who you are, who you come from. "Then the big one is United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Bill C-262. There's commitments from the prime minister to work in partnership with the AFN, to give it legal effect. There's momentum but we're not done yet. "When the prime minister came to the chiefs' assembly two years ago, he made five commitments: MMIWG, implementing the 94 calls to action from the TRC, the removal of the 2 per cent funding cap, working towards a new fiscal relationship with the Crown, that of long-term sustainable and predictable funding, and a law and policy review. "The prime minister came last year and made three commitments: working with the AFN on a languages act, which received a standing ovation from the chiefs, he committed against UNDRIP, and to law and policy review. That's a big one. The comprehensive claims policy, the specific claims policy, in addition to reserve policy,

and the inherent right to self-government policy are all flawed and outdated. We've got to fix those before we can have movement. "We've got momentum. So why should Perry Bellegarde be given a second chance? To continue the work that's been started, so we can bring it to completion."

**But what can be accomplished with another three-year term?**

"Hopefully, those 132 boil waters will be way down. We want to continue to influence the federal budget. You go back two years: \$8.4 billion in 2016 and last year \$3.2 billion, totalling \$11.8 billion. When was the last time you had that kind of investment on First Nations issues? Never. People talk about the Kelowna Accord, [\$5-billion over 5 years in 2005], and everybody says it was a great investment. We got billions done in six months of lobbying and advocacy work. But we got to do more."

**How would describe your leadership?**

"I've been involved in First Nations politics for 30 years. I've been council at Little Black Bear [First Nation], I've been a chief. At every level that I've been as a leader, it's about getting things done and having an impact, and bringing about positive change. It's never about "I," it's about bring together the elders, the chiefs, the youth, the women."

**What would you say about some of the criticisms that the AFN is a sellout because it promotes working within the confined structure of the federal government that's long failed First Nations people?**

"You have to have a working relationship with all parties. I'm not a Liberal, Conservative, NDP, or a Green. The AFN is an advocacy organization and you advocate for legislative and policy changes. You have to work with whoever gets in. Go to bed but don't pull up the covers. I have a good relationship with Jagmeet Singh and Andrew Scheer. Scheer's a good friend of mine, because he's from Regina-Qu'Appelle, where I'm from. I got him 15 votes on Little Black Bear. "Before the 2015 election. one of the reporters asked, 'chief, do you vote?' I said, 'no, I don't vote.' 'Well how do you expect First Nations to vote if you don't vote?' the reporter said. I said, 'good question, let me get back to you on that.' "I have to explain why I didn't vote. We have a treaty relationship with the Crown. Our own people said don't vote. That's their government. We have our own government. I got that. But now, I had to go home, and go through a ceremony and talk to our elders, youth and aunties and uncles. They said, 'It's okay now. It's time.' I came back two weeks later and said, 'I'm going to vote.' I voted for the first time ever in a federal government election. It's scary. I didn't know what to do.

"The act of voting was such a catalyst among First Nations people. More First Nations people voted in the last federal election than ever before. They even ran out of ballots on some reserves. Elections Canada ran out of ballots. "Did you know we influenced [51] ridings? If you want to become an MP, you better listen to us. You better focus on our issues because we're voting now. You know the concept of dual citizenship, we're embracing that. I don't tell people I feel any less Cree for having voted in a federal government election. We're harnessing that political power now. It's very important. And I think federal MPs are paying attention to us now because we have influenced a

number of ridings. We don't have any economic power—most of our people are poor—but we can harness that political power. Prior to us voting, if you're an MP running, you don't care about the First Nations issues because they don't vote anyways. Now, you're concerned because we will help you get elected or not elected. We've got some political power I think we should exercise. “[Unity empowers] the AFN to be a strong national advocate organization and that power comes from the rights and titleholders, which the chiefs and council people are out on the land. I feel very humble and fortunate that they've empowered me to do that job. We're not a government. Not at all. But because of that unity, we can bring about policy and legislative change on a national basis. That's what I see.”

**UNDRIP, environmental assessments, pot, and better FN-government dialogue**  
**Why do you think there was this long hesitancy for the federal government to finally support UNDRIP, and what was the cause of it?**

“It was [NDP MP Romeo Saganash's] private member's bill, Bill C-262 It was introduced during the time of the Conservative government. Very tough times. Boom, the election happens. Liberals are in with a strong majority. He re-introduces his bill. Took a little while for the Liberals, but remember, there was a caveat to the UNDRIP because of 'free, prior, and informed consent.' “They asked: How you can implement UNDRIP, an international agreement? How do you implement that and give it life? How does it fit into Section 35, existing Aboriginal treaty rights? It takes some time to figure that out. I think the Liberal government have figured out it can be implemented within the structure and confines of Section 35, which is what we've been saying all along. We're going to work with them based on the prime minister's commitment to work together, so we need to take them to task.”

**Why did it take so long?**

“Probably educational awareness. Understanding takes a little while. But the prime minister committed to all 94 calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which includes full implementation of UNDRIP. It also calls on provincial and municipal governments to do it. That takes time. “I'm just pleased they've made that public statement to support Bill 262. But it won't be adopted as Bill 262. It's an NDP private member's bill. [The Liberals going to introduce their own bill], Of course. That's what I would do.”

**Do you have a sense of when they're going to do that?**

“May or June. If you want legislation before the next federal election you have to have it introduced before then to hit that legislative timeframe. Maybe sooner. All I want to do is make sure it's done jointly with the AFN.”

**What does full implementation mean to you?**

“A legislative framework. If you embrace UNDRIP, it's a roadmap for Indigenous reconciliation. It's going to create more economic stability, not create more divisiveness. Like I say, veto, veto, veto. Put it on the shelf. It's about respectful dialogue. Before you

build a mine or a pipeline, build a respectful relationship with the rights and title holders. Get that right, you won't have any legal challenges. You won't have any need for discussions on veto. "Find that legislative framework so it gives it legal effect in Canada. If you don't do that, it's just words within the UN. Let's build upon the prime minister's [UN General Assembly] speech. Again, when was the last time you had a head of state say those things? It's the first time ever. We lobby and push for those things to happen. If Canada can't go out and put pressure on China or Russia on human rights, when they've got this little dark secret in their own backyard."

**Do you think the Liberals are respecting "free, prior and informed consent" in the way that they've gone about deciding on their major resource projects like up to date?**

"Yes and no, depending on what project you talk about. We've got an AFN chiefs' resolution not backing up Site C because it's going to impact Treaty 8's traditional lands. In that instance, inherent rights, treaty rights are not being respected.

"You've got to move beyond the duty to consult and accommodate Supreme Court of Canada directives. For me as national chief, it's more about respecting the right to self-determination. It's not up to the AFN to make that determination. It's up to the rights of titleholders.

"Take the issue of pipelines: families and communities, towns, cities, First Nations are divided. I'm more prone to trying to move toward places where you have the space for dialogue and bringing all the parties together. If that can happen, you're going to create better relationships.

"You can't forget provincial governments in the mix either. They're huge players who give licenses and permits out to industry to operate. I've asked premiers for simple policy change: Before they give a licence or permit to any industry or company operating in the provincial boundary, they better make sure the company has a strategy in place for First Nations involvement in terms of procurement. If that was in place, you would see so many key strategic partnerships between the private sector and First Nations people. It would be huge as an economic development driver. Do you think First Nations people are involved in a company are going to protest or picket or stop some development when they're involved? Probably not."

**On environmental assessments, you had three AFN executives in October putting forward a letter to the government that the AFN would refrain from further collaboration. You didn't sign that letter. Why?**

"I didn't sign that because you also have to be a realist in terms of what you can and can't do. Loving to hold a pen on all legislation that would come down, that would be the ideal. "You've got to talk about the Navigable Waters Act. You talking about transportation, the National Energy Board, about the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency. Well that ship has left the building already. Those legislative frameworks have been done. But we can still influence the policy and regulations that have to be developed and we can look at co-development on those pieces. We've got an AFN executive resolution now calling again for re-engagement.

"All I can do as national chief is give out portfolios, and so if you're a regional chief from

Saskatchewan and I give you an opportunity with a portfolio, you don't just work on those 74 chiefs from Saskatchewan. You got to work on 634 First Nations' behalf."

**Are you saying that when they wrote the letter they were going against the AFN?**

"No, it was fine. We talked about it at the executive. We supported it. But if it's your portfolio, run with the ball."

**So you're giving them the authority to do it?**

"Yeah. But if you have any problems, bring it back. National chief's here to help."

**Do you think the fact that no Indigenous leaders were invited to the minister's meeting on pot revenue earlier this month sent a bad message to you?**

"Yes. The federal and provincial governments talk about a 75-25 per cent split for revenue. We've got First Nations governments that are going to be affected by cannabis. You're going to have extra policing costs.

"We weren't even at the tables. We were left out, we should not have been left out. I think we have to have a better relationship at all federal-provincial tables, not just this one on cannabis. If you're talking about health care, education, the environment, we've got to be there. You're going to get better decisions, better policy legislation if First Nations peoples are at those tables."

**Do you think Ottawa's moving to fast?**

"Yes. But again, it's their political time frame. The provinces are scrambling to get ready. First Nations are scrambling to get ready. Will it impact our rights, sovereignty, and jurisdiction? Of course it will. It's going to have health, social, and legal impacts. There's a lot of things that have to be studied a lot closer and reviewed. We weren't fully involved and fully engaged and so we've got to play catch-up."

**Has Ottawa given you any assurance that you'll be at the table in the future on revenue sharing?**

"We need a first ministers' conference on Indigenous issues, First Nations issues. You need the provinces there too. We want to see First Nations governments not recognized as a third order of government. We have to have capacity building and move beyond the Indian Act."

**But are you confident that the provincial and federal governments will have you at the table?**

"No, I'm not confident. But I'm going to keep pushing. I wish I could say we're going to be accepted at all federal-provincial tables. It's starting to move in that direction. But more work needs to be done and I'm going to encourage all governments and all decision makers to get our voices around those tables. You're going to get better decisions. "The other point is we need to get First Nations people at all decision-making tables, where policy and legislation are brought about and discussed in dialogue. I'd love to see an Indigenous person on the Supreme Court, on the National Energy Board, on

the board of directors of universities.

"I'd like to see more deputy ministers that are First Nations people. Politicians are saying all these great things: nation-to-nation reconciliation, Section 35, UNDRIP. But in the executive branch, all 34 deputy ministers are stuck in the same old way of doing business. This has to keep up with what the judicial and legislative branches are saying. We've got to work with the Privy Council Office and all the deputy ministers to push them to be innovative and creative, to think outside the box."

### **Indigenous Affairs, working with Trudeau and party leaders, and the impact of increased funding**

#### ***Is splitting Indigenous and Northern Affairs into Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, and Indigenous Services, respectively, a good idea?***

"It's a huge step. There's the word 'Crown.' Now, we have an opportunity to really engage the Crown, so you can have those rights and treaties respected and implemented. It's not all about recognition and respect. Go beyond those things. It's about implementation and enforcement now. That's the big challenge. But anytime you have a 'Crown' within the department, it becomes an opportunity to think outside the box. "Remember, this is the old Indian Affairs bureaucracy that's been there since 1876. We didn't get a treaty implementation act in 1876. We got an Indian Act. The problem in Canada is that these treaties have never been honoured or implemented or enforced according to their spirit and intent. "That's what we have to find: Mechanisms to do that. We can say, 'well, let's fill out section 35 by going to the Supreme Court for the next 35 years.' You don't want to do that. Let's find a process to work it out and get it done."

#### **But aren't you worried it can end up being some kind of bureaucratic nightmare, as some have said?**

"I think there's more pluses than minuses because if you didn't do this, what you're doing is signalling the status quo. That you still have things in the same old way. Accepting the status quo is just not on for me in 2017. You've got to find new mechanisms, you've got to find new departments, new deputy ministers, policies, new legislation to close the gap and to finally enforce the treaties according to the spirit and intent. To me, this is an opportunity."

#### **How would you evaluate Carolyn Bennett?**

"She's a good worker. And she's so committed to First Nations peoples, when she was in opposition and now as minister. She wears her heart on her sleeve. She's a strong advocate for change. We have to support any person that has a difficult job in order for them to be effective and efficient in their new position. I always find more constructive things to say about people than destructive things. That's where I'm at."

#### **Many people would say you have a rather close relationship with Mr. Trudeau. Is that a problem? What's the balance?**

"It's like go to bed but don't pull up the covers. That's how close it should be, because

you've got to influence the policy decision-makers. You have to have a relationship and it's better to have a positive than a negative one. It's better to have access to the people who make decisions than not having access. Going back to the Conservative government before, we never had access to the policy and decision makers. That wasn't helpful."

**How would you have a strong relationship with Andrew Scheer then?**

"Because I know Andrew. He's my MP from back home. So that's why I can have a good relationship. Like I said before, the only card I carry is a status card. I'm not a Liberal, Conservative, or NDP, I get along with everybody that's involved in leadership. They're the ones influencing policy and legislation. Because who knows what's going to happen in the next federal election. "It's also good to have relationship with the finance minister because he's the one putting together the federal budget. It's good to have a good relationship because of all the ministers because they're the ones putting together the policies and programs in their departments. It's common sense. If you don't have a respectful relationship how are you influencing change. How are you advocating for change? That's the way I see it."

**The government has promised money to improve First Nations water infrastructure and education. Have you seen that make a difference on the ground for communities yet?**

"No, not as much as it could be. The Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) has already indicated there's short \$2 billion in water [according to one of its several estimates]. Obviously, the gap is so huge you need more if you want to end boil water advisories within the [2021] time frame they've indicated. "The \$11.8 billion, it's unprecedented, no question. We advocated hard for these resources to close the gap. If they're not getting out to the communities, that's where the bureaucracy gagging comes in—all the deputy ministers, the executive branch of government. This has to be brought to speed, so there's got to be new innovative ways of thinking and making sure the resources flow out. "They're tied to getting results and objectives met. That's the big challenge now. So we can all feel good, not only First Nations people, but Canadians can feel good that it's making a difference. Once people see that, there should be no problem for people to say we got to do more."

**Let's use boil water advisories as an example then. We've seen some advisories ended, some added on. Is the problem the amount of money or is it the infrastructure being built?**

"A combination of both. You need capacity-building. I'm going to use my reserve for example. We have a little water treatment plant on the reserve. On Little Black Bear, we have a water treatment plant. You've got to have trained technicians and personnel to run that water treatment plant. My cousins would go there, but Balcarres, [a nearby town], is paying \$55,000 while Black Bear pays \$35,000. Where do you think they're going to go? They go to town. "That leaves me without a person to run my water treatment plant on the reserve. Technical skills training has to be tied in with this because if you build these great modern plants, who's running them. So you have to have capacity and skills training. That's got to be part of it. And they got to be compensated properly or adequately as well so they stay. "The PBO was clear, there's

not enough being budgeted for in this fiscal framework. There are a lot of other cases where the infrastructure is so old and hasn't been maintained. If you knock two or three advisories off, more come on. It's revolving. It's going to take a little while to catch up."

### **MMIWG inquiry, balancing competing interests, and the look ahead**

**What do you think needs to be done for the MMIWG inquiry to get it on track, and what do you think the reaction is going to be from Indigenous people in Canada if it can't produce a meaningful report at the end of all this to make a difference?**

"We've passed a chiefs' resolutions calling for the whole reset and putting families first. We've had two chiefs' meetings and when we have this item on our agenda, and it takes up hours because we want to give the families time to share. When the families come, you can't cut them off, because you see there's a lot of hurt, there's a lot of pain. They're seeking justice and closure. If the commissioners can focus on families first and have culturally relevant support systems in place, they'll be fine. But two years is just not enough time to get all the territories and all the families to have a voice.

"I've also said we don't have to wait two years or four years for their final report, to do things about ending violence for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Things can happen now. Governments—federal, provincial, municipal, and First Nations—can make investments in proper housing, education, more day cares, more transportation services, more detox centers, more wellness centers, and more safe shelters now. What do you think the reports are going to say in two or four years when they're done? They're probably going to recommend what I just talked about.

"There's another very important piece that people don't talk about enough, which is fixing the justice system and policing system. Seventy five per cent of the families that come to the microphone when I'm in the meetings listening, talk about the lack of sensitivity from the police, that they don't listen properly, didn't communicate effectively, or dedicate enough resources. "When I met with the Police Chiefs of Canada two years ago, I told them to get ready because they're going to be taken to task. They're going to be questioned when it comes to the cases or files in their police departments on MMIWG. They're there to protect and serve everyone, including First Nations men, women and children."

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**Leaders sometimes give up their most cherished opinions and a lot of ego, of course you have to deal with more than 634 First Nations, how do you balanced that?**

"Very carefully. Because that's 634 bosses. I asked them for a three-year contract. I think we have to show respect for the diversity that's there because we're all at different levels. Every province and territory is different. Our AFN tent has to be big enough to include that diversity and respect. Because what works in B.C. will not work in Saskatchewan."

**When will we see an Indigenous Governor-General, a Supreme Court justice?**

"Soon. I've said it this way: we've always talked about Canada's last 150 years. But we're into the first year of the next 150 years. If we're going to have a country we can all be proud of, that respects and shows the pluralism and diversity of Canada and the

contribution of Indigenous peoples, I think it should be reflected in all the institutions of the country. There's movement towards that."

**Would it be better if Jody Wilson-Raybould was the minister for Indigenous Affairs?**

"I think as First Nations people, we shouldn't be pigeon-holed. We have First Nations people who are scientists, lawyers, and businesspeople. Why should we just give First Nations people the First Nations stuff? We can be ministers of finance, of justice and the Attorney General of Canada, ministers of infrastructure."

**Wouldn't she be more effective though, in that role?**

"Yes and no. It depends on your perspective. I think First Nations people are capable to do a job in any given area. I think it's value added to have that experience but I don't think First Nations should be pigeon-holed in any given area. We've got many gifted people. You can make contributions wherever. "They have robust meetings in cabinet I'm sure, but she's the Minister of Justice, very high. I'm very proud of Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould because she's the first First Nations person in that position. Ever. That's huge. To me, she's a leader in that light."

**Lastly, what should Canadians look ahead to?**

"I think you're going to look at curriculum changes across the territories and all the provinces as well to include treaty and Aboriginal rights, to include residential schools, to include the Indian Act, so that your grandchildren will know about Treaty No. 4 and the Two Row Wampum Treaty, and the Treaty of Niagara. We learned about the Treaty of Paris and the Treaty of Ghent, not about our treaties. "No more though, should our languages be in the shadow of French and English because they're beautiful languages. That's why we've focused on the revitalization of Indigenous language and there's an acceptance they're equally as valid. There's also the idea that Canada was founded with two nations, but we say, respectfully, that it's a myth because you had many different nations here. It was all about peaceful co-existence and mutual respect and sharing the land and resource wealth.

"Mutually benefiting from sharing the land and resource wealth. That's what treaty relationships are all about. I think when we get that out to the general Canadian public, they get it. They get that this gap, residential schools, and the Indian Act are not acceptable. I think the times are changing.

"I got heck from different people for celebrating July 1st, Canada's 150. They said, 'chief Bellegarde, why are we going to celebrate Canada's birthday. After everything we've been through.' I said, 'we're not so much celebrating, we're going to participate because in spite of the genocide we've faced and endured, and in spite of the control of the Indian Act, we're still here, as First Nations people.' And you can still here Cree being spoken, you can still see our ceremonies. "That's why we're going to participate. It's not so much celebrating where we've come from, it's celebrating our diversity and how we're going to build the next 150 years together. That's the message I try to get out, and

it seems to be resonating not only among our people, but the rest of Canadian society. Nobody is going anywhere, so how do we work together to build a better country. And it's going to be our children and our grandchildren that are going to write that story.”  
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