



Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Assembly of First Nations Chief Shawn Atleo at the signing of the First Nations education agreement in Standoff, Alberta on February 7. Four days later, the \$1.9 billion in funding for the accord was in the federal budget. PMO photo

First Nations Education: Anatomy of a Breakthrough

Robin V. Sears

History is often written in moments of unforeseen opportunity, blessed serendipity and politically harmonic convergence. When Stephen Harper and Shawn Atleo jointly announced a new, long-sought deal between the federal government and First Nations on education February 7, it wasn't simply the predictable product of bureaucratic slogging. There was an element of chance involved, best illustrated in an astonishing message Atleo received while attending Nelson Mandela's funeral with the Canadian delegation.

Outsiders often mutter grumpily about politicians' waste of time and money lavished on grand state occasions. Summits, glamfests like Davos, state funerals and weddings are sneered at as self-indulgent extravaganzas merely feeding the vanity of leaders and their entourages. And many are.

Those "in the life" know that they can also be essential venues for breakthrough discussions. Long dinners, with no agendas or staff present and even chance corridor encounters can sometimes offer unique opportunities for discreet intelligence sharing and mood testing.

The funeral of Nelson Mandela was one of those.

The Canadian delegation to the elabo-



Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt, Grand Chief Charles Weselhead, Prime Minister Harper and AFN Chief Atleo at the announcement of the historic First Nations education accord. PMO photo

rate ceremonies honouring the life of the hero of South African liberation was an unusual group—prime ministers, premiers and governors-general—some who rarely spoke to each other, and others who were barely on speaking terms. But the emotion of the occasion, the shared pride at Canada's role in defeating apartheid, meant the closing dinner for the Canadian delegation was a night of laughter and shared stories.

Brian Mulroney had just finished one of his hilarious tales of being “hand-bagged” by Maggie Thatcher over his support for Mandela, when Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo's BlackBerry buzzed with an astonishing message.

Atleo had taken the bold, but not uncontroversial, decision to miss his own organization's annual assembly in order to attend the funeral. He had long revered Mandela, and saw in the South African liberation story important lessons for Canadian First Nations. Some of his supporters were worried what use his internal opponents might make of his absence.

Those opponents had been raising their rhetoric about the failure of Atleo's government negotiation efforts. None of the dossiers that Prime Minister Harper had promised action on in their January 2013 summit, nearly a year earlier,

had moved much. Indeed, on the education file, the government had issued a provocative and certain-to-be-rejected draft bill only a month earlier. It had been curtly dismissed by Atleo in an open letter to Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt.

The paralysis—the same players playing their usual roles over and over again—seemed to be impossible to break. Many angry chiefs refused to grant any trust to the government's education plans, their faith having been broken too many times to recall. The department officials used this distrust to defend their inaction. Successive bureaucrats had warned keen new ministers of the risk of moving on education without “First Nations unanimity.”

In their continuing parody of a *Yes, Minister* sketch they would describe any new initiative as, “Courageous, Minister! But do you really want to risk igniting a civil war among First Nations, and huge attacks on your government by all the usual suspects, if you support one faction....” The loss of control over hundreds of millions of dollars in funding, and many hundreds of gatekeepers' jobs, was surprisingly never cited as a more powerful motive for their resistance.

The weeks following the January 2013 summit had looked more positive. The PM's chief of staff, Nigel Wright, was

seized of the file, and was applying his remarkable deal-making skill. His departure in the spring left an enormous hole in the PMO. Neither his replacement as chief of staff, nor Ray Novak's hyper-partisan deputy, Jenni Byrne, had much knowledge of, or interest, in First Nation issues. “Nothing our base cares about,” was the sneer one often heard from hardline Tory staffers, whenever the government's failure to deliver on promises to the First Nations community was raised.

Atleo and his supporters had to fight a constant two-front war on education reform. They attempted to keep their coalition of supportive chiefs united in the face of little or no progress, on the one hand, while keeping up pressure on the bureaucrats on the other. The endless excuses of the officials as to why no deal was possible were at times insulting. A final gambit was the bizarre demand that First Nations signal their public support for the draft legislation without any financial commitment. “The money to implement we can discuss immediately after,” the bureaucrats promised.

A very dim used car dealer would not attempt such an obvious bait-and-switch.

Atleo decided that they had to “remove the excuses” being employed by the department and to force a clear

choice on the government. He would do it by taking forward a clear list of demands reflecting what First Nations leaders were saying across the country and pointing a clear path forward, and an alternative to conflict, encouraging the AFN to stand united for kids and for change.

Then, Nelson Mandela died.

With the backing of his national executive, the decision to attend the funeral and honour Mandela was taken and Atleo left the all-important assembly trusting that dialogue and discussion and leadership among chiefs would prevail. It turned out to be an inspired decision. With Atleo thousands of miles away, both his critics and his friends could have an open discussion about the merits or miscalculation of his strategy on education, without having to resort to oratorical excess.

And they did, for nearly three hours.

It was among the most honest and politics-free discussions on one of the most powerfully emotive subjects in the First Nations world. Veterans of the residential schools battles, aging chiefs who had led the fight for “Indian control and history in Indian education,” 40 years earlier, young chiefs angry at the rising cost in suicide and dropout rates as a result of the 15-year stalemate on funding and curriculum control on their reserves, lined up at the mikes. Out of the cathartic debate emerged a clear resolution.

There was a sense in the room that the moment had to be seized. Atleo and Harper’s terms would be up in 18 months. The government was going into a pre-election period. If no deal could be made in the next year, it would probably be many more years before they arrived at this place again.

The resolution demanded a “child-centered” education solution. It called for a “culturally grounded” curriculum. It demanded statutory guarantees of “sustainable funding” from Ottawa. But it was also deliberately free of the usual desk-pounding rhetoric of convention resolutions. It also committed the AFN chiefs to “working together” and “to press Canada to respond” to both the demonstrated need and Canada’s long unmet obligations to provide First Nations children with decent schools.

But even more improbably, it was adopted unanimously.

This was the message that erupted on Atleo’s BlackBerry, late at night, thousands of miles away. He immediately recognized the importance of the decision and the power of this occasion to help secure a path forward. Atleo reported to the Canadian delegation dinner at Mandela’s memorial in South Africa what had just been agreed to in Canada, and was greeted with smiles and applause. Prime Minister Harper was, as is his wont, more reserved. Later he committed to Atleo his willingness to give the issue one last push.

Atleo reported to the Canadian delegation dinner at Mandela’s memorial in South Africa what had just been agreed to in Canada, and was greeted with smiles and applause. Prime Minister Harper was, as is his wont, more reserved. Later he committed to Atleo his willingness to give the issue one last push.

Each returned home, determined to make a serious push for an early announcement of a way forward. Needless to say, the previously hostile bureaucrats’ political antennae signaled a fateful shift in the political winds. They climbed on board, claiming to have favoured the ultimate deal all along.

Valcourt, in a surprising mid-course correction, responded to Atleo’s open letter with one of his own. This time, more temperate and conciliatory with a hint of further concessions.

The final details were put into the joint announcement by the prime minister and the national chief only hours before they stood before a First Nations reserve audience in Alberta on February 7. There, they declared that they had broken the stalemate on the linked issues of governance and control and the financial paralysis surrounding a guarantee of high-quality, culturally sensitive schools for Canada’s indigenous peoples. It was an emotional scene, made more poignant by an angry demonstrator denouncing Atleo as a sell-out.

Now, the hard work begins. The \$1.9 billion First Nations education initiative was part of the budget, four days

later. The funding is now fully committed. Within weeks, the grinding work of negotiating local level governance structures and funding mechanisms, one by one, will begin. Then negotiations over curriculum and hiring will need to be undertaken. Only then will students be invited to cross the threshold to a new era in First Nations education.

And then, of course, the scrutiny about how well the reserve schools are run, how quickly they can improve graduation rates, will turn an intense spotlight on First Nations educators. The dropout rate of 62 per cent in reserve schools speaks for itself, and all stakeholders can share the blame. Their success is far from guaranteed. The list of those who would like them to fail is not short. The Quebec Assembly of Chiefs has threatened legal action.

However, as a result of the serendipity of timing, an unplanned absence, and the courage of two leaders, a poisonous stalemate may have been broken. Later, those who struggled so hard on all sides, behind the scenes, to make the breakthrough real will have their day in the sun. If the first steps taken in this school-building process do recreate trust, the stage may be set to tackle the even more vexed Gordian knots surrounding treaty implementation and land claims resolution.

As a result of the serendipity of timing, an unplanned absence, and the courage of two leaders, a poisonous stalemate may have been broken. Later, those who struggled so hard on all sides, behind the scenes, to make the breakthrough real will have their day in the sun.

Many fingers are now crossed that this education agreement may begin the healing process and “our restoration to the path of respect and partnership” between Canada’s first peoples and its governments, a journey to which Shawn Atleo, in his own words, has devoted his career. **P**

Contributing Writer Robin V. Sears is a principal of the Earncliffe Strategy Group. robin@earncliffe.ca