

AFN Election 2018: About the Candidates

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THE ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS ANNUAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY will be held in Vancouver from July 24 – 26, with the **election of a new National Chief** scheduled to occur on Wednesday, July 25.

It's hard to pinpoint one specific ballot box issue in this election. But, it's clear that resource development (and all of the attendant issues of rights, benefits, and legal protection) matters to the public and to the press. In particular, each candidate's position on the TransMountain pipeline is under careful scrutiny.

Another important issue in this election is how a new leader will keep the AFN relevant, responsive, and representative. There has never been a woman or non-binary person in the role of National Chief, for example.

Indian Act elected Chiefs are also the only people who vote in Assembly. Is it fair or reasonable to assume that one vote per First Nation community is an accurate representation of the interests of ALL First Nations people?

Finally, there is a glaring accountability issue regarding the effectiveness of a lobby or advocacy group that is funded by the very political body it is intended to influence.

In light of the current moment in the campaign, here is an overview of the five candidates for National Chief:

PERRY BELLEGARDE, LITTLE BLACK BEAR FIRST NATION, TREATY 4 TERRITORY, SASKATCHEWAN

Perry Bellegarde is the incumbent in this race and as a result holds a statistical advantage over the other candidates.

Brief Bio & Context //

Bellegarde won the 2014 election after Atleo's early resignation over Bill C-33 (First Nations Control of First Nations Education). Prior to winning in 2014, he had put his hat in the leadership ring in 2009, losing in an eighth ballot to Atleo. He served as a Regional Chief to AFN from 1998-2003 and then again from 2012-2014 while he was the Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (since renamed the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations).

Bellegarde's 2014 **platform** called for revenue sharing, environmental sustainability, and enforcing principles of free, prior, and informed consent for resource development. He also ran on the promise of a new fiscal relationship with the federal government, the launch of an MMIW inquiry, and new funding for language revitalization.

While there has been movement on these fronts during his term, critics ask how much success has been a result of his leadership? How much can be attributed to the serendipity of a Liberal government during a time of

national reconciliation? New funding to the AFN has not necessarily been felt in First Nation communities.

About his Platform //

Bellegarde's current platform is an extension of his 2014 promises, highlighting his political experience, his ability to bring government to the table, and his catchphrase of "closing the gap" between Canadian and First Nation "well-being."

Challenge & Opportunity //

His challenge will be convincing voters that he is capable of getting results even without a sympathetic Canadian government (if and when Trudeau's Liberal cabinet isn't re-elected) and showing how those results will benefit individual First Nation communities.

There are also concerns the National Chief is too "friendly" with Justin Trudeau and that his position on pipelines and resource development is too vague. It's difficult to say if this will read as strategic diplomacy in the face of diverse positions on this matter, or if it will come off as a lack of conviction on a pressing matter.

RUSS DIABO, KAHNAWAKE MOHAWK, QUEBEC

Russ Diabo might be considered the populist candidate of this race. He is a well-known policy analyst and commentator in Indian Country and is the most visible candidate on social media – a tool that shouldn't be underestimated.

Brief Bio & Context //

Diabo has more than 40 years of experience in Indigenous politics, in particular where it interfaces with the Canadian political agenda. On the one hand, he has served as a main political advisor to at least two National Chiefs at the AFN. On the other hand, he helped author the Aboriginal policies of the Liberal Red Book of 1993, which, while rooted in the language of partnership, rights, and equal opportunity, is notorious for the string of Canada's broken promises that followed. He is likely most well known for his publicly available First Nations Strategic Bulletin - a staple for in-depth critical engagement of Indigenous policy in Canada.

About his Platform //

Diabo's AFN platform is rooted solidly in treaty and aboriginal rights, respect and protection of the land, community-based initiatives to support and empower youth, elders, and women, and, he is very vocal about reforming the structure and role of the AFN.

He has positioned himself as both a strong opponent of the co-optation of Indigenous rights and reconciliation language by Canadian governments, and the lack of accountability of the AFN to grassroots people.

He comes with the most backroom political experience of the group, but with the least leadership experience.

Challenge & Opportunity //

While he is opposed to the expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline, he also uses the language of "sustainable development" and Indigenous rights to "resources" in his campaign literature. As a consultant who helped negotiate the controversial Barriere Lake Trilateral Agreement, it would behoove Diabo to clarify his position on environmental issues and resource agreements. Even though the failure of that agreement lies predominantly with the Quebec and Canadian governments (and not the actual content of the agreement or the intent of the negotiators), First Nations will want to know what Diabo has learned since then, and how he plans on moving forward with deals that actually deliver for communities and nations.

**Russ Diabo is a candidate for AFN National Chief and is also on the advisory board to the Yellowhead Institute.*

SHEILA NORTH, BUNIBONIBEE CREE NATION , MANITOBA

Sheila North is best known as a tireless advocate for Indigenous women and youth. In particular, she was an early champion of the MMIW inquiry (she is credited for creating the #mmiw hashtag) and has been candid and public about her personal experiences with domestic violence and youth suicide. Having grown up on a reserve in northern Manitoba, she also has the lived experience of transitioning to the city and the unique challenges facing both on-reserve and urban Indigenous peoples.

Brief Bio & Context //

North has an interesting career history. She has been a small business owner, professional journalist (with both CBC and CTV), and a politician. She served as the Communications Director for the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs under the leadership of Derek Nepinak and in 2015 became the first woman Grand Chief of Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) – the Indigenous advocacy group that represents 30 Northern First Nations in Manitoba. While four MKO member nations cut their ties with MKO during her time in office, her bid for National Chief was supported by many other MKO nations.

About her Platform //

North is running on a platform that centres community and grassroots solutions and voices. She relies heavily on the language of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples - and the concept of Free Prior Informed Consent embedded within - to frame her perspective on rights and self-determination. She is also a proponent of AFN reform that is more reflective and responsive to community needs and stresses tradition and language revitalization as cornerstones of community wellness.

North has yet to make a clear statement on her position regarding environmental issues and land protection – her closest official position is supporting equitable and fair revenue-sharing.

Challenge & Opportunity //

North has a clear communications advantage over other candidates in this race – she is a powerful, focused, and intuitive speaker and is able to connect with a large audience, both as an orator and writer. Plus, it is not lost on First Nation leaders that AFN is ready for its first National woman Chief. Her biggest challenge will be balancing her passion for community-led initiatives with strong, tangible policy positions that hold weight at the national level – for First Nations and the federal government.

MILES RICHARDSON, HAIDA NATION, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Given the political climate of Indigenous rights and resource development in BC right now, Richardson is a candidate to watch.

Brief Bio & Context //

Having been the President of the Haida Nation for 12 years, he is a seasoned politician and not unfamiliar with the diverse positions presented west of the Prairies. As President, he led the negotiation of the Gwaii Haanas Agreement – a modern treaty that prompted the creation of a Haida Constitution and a protected national park with joint First Nation and Canadian land and water management boards. He is a founding Director of the David Suzuki Foundation and was appointed to the Order of Canada in 2007.

However, Richardson will be most recognizable to BC First Nation leaders as the Chief Commissioner of the BC Treaty Commission from 1998 – 2004. The BCTC has been an area of tension among First Nations in BC since its inception. Proponents of the process laud the benefits of economic development opportunities and greater control and self-government. Critics call the process divisive, expensive, and an abrogation of inherent rights to title and self-determination. No final agreements were reached under his 6-year term, and that may influence voters in this election.

About his Platform //

Richardson has a three-part platform:

1. Recognition and affirmation of Indigenous rights;
2. Closing the gaps in socio-economic realities and outcomes; and,
3. Self-sufficient economies.

He highlights the rich resources available for extraction across many territories and envisions self-sufficiency as a model that can be realized with Indigenous governance structures informing development and revenue sharing. Richardson includes renewable energy as part of a successful economic development strategy.

He is adamant that doing away with the Indian Act is an essential step towards First Nation self-governance, although his strategy for re-invigorating individual nations and governance is not clear. His work to date indicates he is more than amenable to negotiating with various levels of Canadian governments to accomplish his goals.

With BC holding a third of the votes in this election, his success or failure will be greatly influenced by his credibility and reputation with BC First Nations.

KATHERINE WHITECLOUD, WIPAZOKA WAKPA DAKOTA NATION, MANITOBA

Katherine Whitecloud is a self-described community leader, knowledge keeper, mother and grandmother.

Brief Bio & Context //

Whitecloud is from the Wipazoka Wakpa Dakota Nation (Sioux Valley First Nation) where she has served terms as both Chief and Councillor. She has been engaged in politics for more than 30 years in positions of notable influence: the CEO of the Dakota Ojibwe Tribal Council; the CEO of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs; and, the CEO of the AFN. She was also a Regional Chief to the AFN during part of her term as Chief of her community. Whitecloud comes from a background in education and has also worked as a teacher, guidance counsellor, and Director and Superintendent of Education (from local to national levels).

About her Platform //

Whitecloud's platform is based on traditional knowledge and governance roles. She articulates her position with four pillars that uphold traditional governance values and call for Indigenous peoples to implement our original instructions and responsibilities. She contends that it is only by remembering and reinvigorating our traditional governance practices that we will have the capacity and vision to exercise our inherent rights and assume our rightful place as self-determining nations.

Her position is that those responsibilities include nurturing and honouring our relationship to the land and with each other – with particular attention paid to the most vulnerable community people – that is, children, women, and elders.

Challenge & Opportunity //

Whitecloud plays an important role in this election: it is difficult to disagree with her assertions that self-determination comes from the land, language, and community cohesion and wellness. But, within a political system that is more colonial and Western than traditionally Indigenous, she faces the challenge of turning those indisputable principles into policies and practices with substance and measurable deliverables/ outcomes for more than 600 First Nations across Canada. With her experience, it is not necessarily an impossible task, but certainly a daunting one. But, then again, it wouldn't be out of line to presume that political posturing is exactly what she is running against.