

Intelligence MEMOS



From: Don Drummond
To: The Hon. Marc Miller, Minister of Indigenous Services
Date: January 14, 2020
Re: **IMPROVING ON A MANDATE LETTER**

Your mandate letter falls short of setting out a vision for really making a difference for Indigenous Peoples because it lacks targets for specific, measurable outcomes that would reflect improvements in living standards.

There is much to be applauded in the letter. Set in the context of the need for “capacity building to bring control of and jurisdiction for service delivery back to Indigenous communities,” it correctly identifies many of the areas, such as health, education, housing, water, infrastructure and child and family services, in which improvements are necessary. There is appropriate recognition that success requires shifting toward a long-term, stable funding mechanism although you should have been encouraged to explore statutory forms of payment rather than promoting only the new 10-year grants.

Yet most objectives in the letter come across as incremental improvements. Worse, in some cases it does not reiterate the clear and more ambitious targets committed to previously by your government.

On several occasions the Prime Minister and his office have committed to closing the gap in living conditions between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians. For example, the 2017 PMO [backgrounder](#) issued when two new departments were created to oversee Indigenous issues, referred to implementing a vision to “close the socio-economic gap between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians.” [The 2018 Budget Plan](#) stated “the investments in Budget 2018 continue our focus on closing the gap between the living conditions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.” Such statements do not suggest merely improving living conditions for Indigenous Peoples or narrowing the gap. They, unlike your mandate letter, are clear that the gap is to be closed.

The same distinction between closing and narrowing gaps can also be seen in particular policy areas. [The 2019 Throne Speech](#), for example, commits to “work with Indigenous communities to close the infrastructure gap by 2030,” your mandate letter is much vaguer in its call to address critical needs by 2030.

Should you put your mandate letter into the more ambitious context of your government’s previous commitments, your department’s focus could then be on program outcomes rather than inputs. As such, policies and procedures should be targeted at achieving certain results in health, education, and other key areas. Such a shift in emphasis will require a great deal of consultation with Indigenous communities on what outcomes would best reflect improved living standards. This cannot simply be measured in terms now applied to non-Indigenous Canadians but consideration must also be given to [Indigenous languages and culture](#). Realistic time periods should be set for closing existing gaps and efficient and effective programs designed and funded (and be subsequently modified if they are not achieving their objectives).

In order to create capacity in Indigenous communities to deliver their own services, you must remove barriers that are imposed from within government. The many divisions of government responsibility have been a longstanding barrier.

You will benefit from the 2017 action bringing most Indigenous services matters into your portfolio. But there remain exceptions, which will require collaboration with other departments. For example, the funding and revitalization of Indigenous languages remains solely within the Heritage Canada portfolio according to the [mandate letter](#).

Undoubtedly, the omission in your mandate letter notwithstanding, you will need to pay attention to this file as language is deeply embedded in Indigenous culture, which in turn is critical to well-being. One of your priorities should be to consult with that minister on how to interpret the reference to funding. The funds allocated in the [2019 Budget](#) provide only about one-tenth what is needed to achieve the objectives of the *Indigenous Languages Act*.

The programs being unveiled to support the *Act* are destined to failure under existing funding and this will become readily apparent by the five-year review mandated in the *Indigenous Languages Act*, if not much sooner. The language issue illustrates a broader problem that funding for Indigenous communities has always been largely extraneous to the identification of needs and design of programs.

Success in transitioning to Indigenous delivery of service will require differentiation and experimentation by Indigenous communities. You will need to find ways to allow those communities to find what works best for them rather than imposing service delivery protocols from Ottawa. There will be instances where the risks seem higher than usually accepted by risk-averse financial guardians in Ottawa. The right balance will need to be struck between experimentation and accountability.

Above all, success in your portfolio will depend upon embracing the overall objective of closing the gap in Indigenous living conditions and focusing on outcomes rather than just the improvements and inputs as described in your mandate letter.

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