

Announcement: Atleo elected new AFN chief

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Shawn Atleo has been elected as the new national chief of the Assembly of First Nations after an eighth ballot.

His rival, Perry Bellegarde, the former leader of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, conceded.

The race had stretched well into a second day today. Mr. Atleo, the AFN's British Columbia vice-chief, widened his lead after the seventh round of voting. The number of delegates voting had slowly dwindled with each round. Candidates required a 60 per cent majority to be declared the new chief.

The men were battling to succeed Phil Fontaine, who served as national chief on and off since 1997 and declined to seek a fourth term.

Mr. Atleo was seen as the education candidate, pressing the importance of languages, history, teachings and cultural values, while Mr. Bellegarde emphasized economic development, such as securing resource benefits and pressing Ottawa to remove a cap on increases in aboriginal funding. Both were perceived as front-runners in the five-person race.

Mr. Atleo immediately said Thursday he would press the federal government to back up its apology over residential schools with more help for native people. He also talked about the importance of treaty rights and the government's obligation to fulfill agreements it signed decades ago. The new grand chief also signalled he would like to focus on aboriginal youth. He said too many are in care, too many are unemployed and not enough are getting a proper education.

“There is work to do,” Mr. Atleo told the assembly.

“It is our time as indigenous people in this country to take our rightful place. It's our time to see the treaties implemented. It's our time to see the young ones supported. It's our time to make sure that the murdered, missing women that we call for a public inquiry.”

While the assembly represents more than 700,000 natives across Canada, only the 639 first nation chiefs or their proxies were eligible to vote in the election held in Calgary. Of those, 553 registered to vote in the election.

After the first votes were cast, Mr. Atleo was the easy front runner. Two candidates were eliminated and a third dropped out. Many of those men's supporters turned to Mr. Bellegarde.

Shortly after the fifth ballot, Mr. Atleo and Mr. Bellegarde met privately for about five minutes. They emerged from the closed-door meeting smiling and claiming no deal had been struck and the election would continue. They were surrounded by their supporters. Each side was telling their candidate not to cut a deal or give up.

Mr. Atleo, a hereditary chief of Ahousaht First Nation, a small Vancouver Island band, was the contest's youngest candidate at 42. His supporters claimed he represented an important and needed generational change in leadership for the non-profit AFN. About half of First Nations Canadians are 25 years old or younger.

The married father of two has a master's degree in education and is chancellor of Vancouver Island University. He also pledged to focus on economic issues.

“We know economic independence is political independence. Economic power is political power,” he told assembly delegates Tuesday.

Mr. Bellegarde, 46, was born and raised in Saskatchewan's Little Black Bear First Nation and holds a bachelor's degree in business administration. He said he would push to improve the economic situation for native people in Canada, including securing resource rights and push for more money from Ottawa.

“We need to close the socioeconomic gap between First Nations and non-First Nations people. It's huge,” he said.

After the first ballot, the third-place candidate, Ontario's John Beaucage, earned 15 per cent of the votes, but withdrew and threw his support behind Mr. Bellegarde. Two other candidates – Terry Nelson and Bill Wilson – missed the second ballot.

It set up a tense battle, and on the two ensuing ballots the men tied. Both are young, well-spoken leaders looking to revitalize the AFN. Both have served as a vice-chief for the organization under Mr. Fontaine.

The close race kept observers and voters on their toes at the Calgary convention.

“I think there was a lot of uncertainty about the outcome of this particular election, and the reason is that Phil had carried the day for quite some time,” said Paul Chartrand, director of the Aboriginal Governance program at the University of Winnipeg. “So, it's the first time for quite a number of years that the outcome has been pretty well a wide-open issue. No one I spoke to leading up to this felt confident enough to predict a real front-runner.”