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The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau
Office of the Prime Minister of Canada
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2

An Open Letter to the Prime Minister and Minister for Youth

Dear Justin,

On Christmas Day you celebrated your 44th birthday, no doubt with your family at your side. Please accept this letter as belated birthday wishes – and also as the seed of a New Year’s resolution.

Looking at photos of you and your young children, we see three of the main reasons for your concern about climate change and the need to ensure fresh air, fresh water, and fresh local, affordable food for all children. We, the youth of North Pickering, applaud you for this!

We’re also reminded that you were an infant 44 years ago, on March 2, 1972, when much of North Pickering and environs was expropriated for an airport that was never built. All of us were born after that date. The expropriated area, most of it rich farmland, became known as the Federal Lands, and we are the Children of the Lands. We weren’t involved in the earlier decisions and neither were you. Yet all of us have been left with the consequences. The question is, what will be the legacy?

We firmly believe that safeguarding these Lands as a permanent source of fresh food and water would be the greatest gift you could give to us and the Greater Toronto Area.

Growing up on the Lands was a unique experience and endlessly educational. Our neighbours were generally few and far between, so the woods, wetlands, fields, and creeks became our playground, where we learned about nature by experiencing it directly. We fished and swam in the creeks, learned the birds’ names, saw the effects of weather and the seasons on the crops, plants, and animals around us. Without knowing about the Oak Ridges Moraine or Class 1 soil, before the Greenbelt protection came into being, and before climate change was even a concept, we learned through osmosis to love these Lands, the way our parents, grandparents, and ancestors had, and to see their true value. We grew up to be advocates and then ‘advocates’ for the Lands.

We learned about Pickering’s history and heroes – from its early settlers, who took part in the Farmers’ Rebellion of 1837, to the women of People or Planes, who, in 1975, occupied an about-to-be-demolished, century-old farmhouse and cheered Toronto’s Mayor David Crombie as he rode across the field in the back of a pickup truck to bring them the City’s flag. From People or Planes we learned tenacity, and that some things really are worth fighting for, even if it takes years or decades of effort. We came to realize what a precious gift we’d (inadvertently) been given in these Federal Lands even as we agonized over the harm done by decades of uncertainty and government mismanagement. We felt duty-bound to accept the torch that People or Planes had passed on. We developed a strong sense of stewardship even while always knowing that our life on the

Lands could be ended by a government eviction notice in the next day's mail. That knowledge haunted us. It also made us strong.

We are the Children of the Lands – but truth be told, none of us is a child any more. There are very few families on the remaining Federal Lands today. No schools, playgrounds, or daycares. There are, quite simply, no children.

So we are writing to you, as the Minister of Youth, to ask you to bring 'sunny ways' back to the Federal Lands, to return vibrancy and possibility to an area left on hold for close to half a century in a state of debilitating uncertainty. During that time, whole communities, most jobs, a way of life evaporated. What remains? Priceless assets. The Federal Lands are a spectacular natural resource – a place of clean water, clean air, and thousands of acres of Class 1 soil, a place supremely suited to producing fresh, affordable, local food of all kinds for the health and wellbeing of generations of Canadians. It's our dream to see this vision realized.

We have never felt as hopeful for the future of these Lands as we have since your government came to office. Words matter. The addition of 'Climate Change' and 'Agri-food' to the names of two of your Ministries spoke volumes to us. We hope that our words, in turn, will speak volumes to you.

You, Justin, our new Prime Minister, can make our dream come true. Dare we ask: Have we planted the seed?

Sincerely,

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Attachment

cc:

Navdeep Bains, Minister of Innovation, Science, and Economic Development

Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Gerry Butts, Senior Political Advisor to the Prime Minister

Celina Caesar-Chavannes, Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister

Marc Garneau, Minister of Transport

Mark Holland, MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Democratic Institutions

Jennifer O'Connell, MP for Pickering-Uxbridge

Jane Philpott, Minister of Health

Lawrence MacAulay, Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food

John McCallum, Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship

Catherine McKenna, Minister of Environment and Climate Change

Adam Vaughan, Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister

Brief Biographies of the Signatories

Sara Barclay is a direct descendant of Elder George Barclay, one of Pickering's most prominent settlers. Elder Barclay was Pickering Township's first Scottish settler, founder of the Baptist Church in Pickering, first Postmaster of Brougham, and (along with his sons) a participant in the Farmers Rebellion of 1837 which led to the hanging for treason of his neighbour, Peter Matthews. Sara grew up in the charming original home of Elder Barclay, where her family still lives despite having been threatened three times with 'eviction for the purpose of demolition' by Transport Canada. Through high school and university Sara logged hundreds of volunteer hours and later joined the summer staff at the Pickering Museum Village, earning municipal and provincial awards for Youth Heritage Leadership. Today she is a nurse in Brockville.

Alison Bezubiak grew up on a farm near Brougham, working and volunteering at the local museum village, where she earned provincial Youth Heritage Leader and Brougham Citizens League awards. The fear of losing this land and her home instilled in her a deep appreciation of the environment and conservation, which led to post-secondary studies in globalization and history at Trent University, and Ecosystems Management at Fleming College. In summers she worked with youth as an environmental educator at the Toronto Zoo, later volunteering on organic farms in BC and Ontario and with the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre, raising awareness of Ontario's species at risk; and with Land Over Landings. Most recently she assisted with LOL's Eat Think Vote event for Food Secure Canada and co-presented a hands-on soil workshop for the Durham District School Board's Geo Day.

Andrew Bieler is a scholar of environmental communication and education. His Doctoral research examined the cultural and political thresholds of arts-sciences collaborations in the context of the development of public pedagogy on a sustainable response to climate change. He is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Sustainability and Education Policy Network at the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. He recently coauthored *Critical education and sociomaterial practice: narration, place, and the social*, for the (re)thinking environmental education series published by Peter Lang. His passion for environmental education stems from his North Pickering childhood, playing in fields and along the shores of Duffins Creek. He still has a strong connection to this place, often returning to see the Trillium fields and the fiddleheads along the creek beds, and to help with his family's organic garden.

Alexis Edghill Whalen, Membership Coordinator for Land Over Landings, spent most of her childhood in the great outdoors, much of it on the Federal Lands, where she developed a deep connection with the natural world. Some of her most significant childhood memories are of her efforts to persuade others to see the world the way she did. A woodlot wasn't just waiting for a highway to burst through it, but a habitat for native species. A pristine river system wasn't a potential storm sewer for urban sprawl, but a vital source of clean water. Silence and darkness weren't a void destined for development, but a space in which to breathe, listen, and imagine a world where the economic benefits of preservation would trump those of development. Alexis is an entrepreneur, photographer, artist, mother, and active volunteer who firmly believes in advocacy through doing.

Zoë Mager grew up in the Duffins/Rouge watersheds. She remembers boiling down maple syrup over a fire, climbing on sculptures in the woods, and harvesting fiddleheads in spring. These first impressions stuck, and her curiosity about the natural world became insatiable. While living in the Pacific Northwest, she became involved in organic farming, herbal medicine, ecology, and social and environmental justice, sensing her responsibility as a Canadian to work in solidarity with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Zoë returned to Ontario to complete a BA (hons) in Indigenous Environmental Studies at Trent University and is now working on a Masters of Planning in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York. Her focus is on consultation processes with Indigenous communities and how to support planning practices and policy that are centred on respectful, bilateral, and collaborative working relationships.

Chris Miller is a PhD Candidate in History at Concordia University. His dissertation project seeks to create an oral history of the Federal and Seaton Lands, expropriated in 1972, and looks at life in North Pickering in the years since. His great-great-grandfather, John Miller, settled in Pickering, establishing the family farm –Thistle Ha' – in the mid-1800s.

The Millers won recognition throughout North America as expert importers and breeders of sheep and cattle. Two generations later, Chris's great-uncle established the Brougham Pioneer Museum, which became Pickering Museum Village, and, with his wife, wrote a history of Brougham. In 1972, Thistle Ha' was expropriated for the federal airport but, thanks to the efforts of Chris's grandparents, the expropriation was overturned by the Supreme Court of Canada. Thistle Ha' is now a National Historic Site maintained by his parents.

Nicole Norris is a Masters of Nutrition Communication Candidate and Registered Dietitian who was born on the Federal Lands and currently resides in Toronto. Her student career was dedicated to contributing to the field of food and nutrition, delivering science-based information, collaborating with others on matters of food security, and advocating for the food rights of all people as a way of enhancing the health and food sovereignty of individuals and communities. She helped build a quarter-acre rooftop farm on Ryerson Campus and a student community kitchen that addresses the complex issues of food insecurity and hunger. She is passionate about fostering connections between her urban and rural neighbours and hopes in the future to influence the development of sustainable food systems.

Edward Untermann was raised on the Federal Lands, where he developed a deep appreciation for Canada's natural resources and the fundamental importance and value (fresh water, air quality, biodiversity) of conserving green space. He majored in environmental science and worked for a regional Conservation Authority after graduation, providing environmental education services and protecting green space in the GTA. He now works for an LED lighting retrofitter in the sustainable energy sector, supervising six auditors in three cities across Canada, and has a particular emphasis on creating hiring opportunities for recent graduates and qualified youth. Despite the recent financial recession, his company has posted exponential growth over four consecutive years – prime examples of a pioneering Canadian business and the advantages of nurturing the green sector.

Benjamin Voss is Program Manager, Emmanuel International Water and Sanitation for Zomba and Machinga District, Malawi, a project funded by the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (now Global Affairs Canada). His formative years in North Pickering led him to his current work, helping to provide locals with access to clean water, and training them in how to protect and manage the vital resources that remain. Seeing an area as devastated as Malawi has given him a greater appreciation of the fertile Lands where he'd been raised. Knowing that his government cares about protecting water, forests, and lands in Africa, and seeing the positive impact on people's lives, gives him hope that the streams, trails, fields, and forests of his childhood will still be there for his own children in the years to come.

Reid Williamson is a recent University of Waterloo graduate with a Bachelor of Environmental Studies and a Sociology minor. She completed her undergraduate thesis on the topic of youth civic engagement, with the Pickering Airport and Land Over Landings as a case study. The topic is near and dear to her, as a member of the third generation of Williamsons to live in the shadow of a perpetually threatened airport. Her grandparents were victims of the 1970s provincial expropriations next to the airport site, and both Reid and her father witnessed the degradation of the family home over the subsequent decades. She was drawn to Land Over Landings, and the effort to preserve a beautiful and life-giving natural resource, by the links with her personal history and by her desire to inspire a love of nature in younger generations.