

## AS RUN IN THE VANCOUVER SUN, MARCH 3, 2011

### BC's New Premier May Face Unprecedented Native Unrest if rights ignored

In an article in *The Sun* February 14, ("The Skeetchestn say enough already"), Rich Denault, the Skeetchestn Band Chief served notice that the way business and governments ride roughshod over native rights in BC has to come to an end, or face the consequences, which may not be pretty.

He says, very bluntly, "In the days ahead, those companies and agencies that have not acted honourably will be receiving letters from us, advising them to tell their customers to expect possible service interruptions regarding their operations in our traditional lands. We're writing to the six Liberal leadership candidates to advise them as well...(to ask if) ...a first nations community should be shredded for the betterment of forest companies, or railway companies, or energy companies, or tax revenues."

One might have thought that such a threatened disruption of BC's economy might have stirred some debate among the Liberal leadership candidates, but none was noticeable. And that is too bad because I expect that Chief Denault's impatience might signal broader direct action in the native community over the next few years.

Why, most BC people might ask, has it come to this? Is there not a Treaty Commission charged with getting modern treaties arranged with BC's Natives? Is not a lot of money being spent on this by the BC and Federal governments? Are there not a lot of negotiators working to resolve matters?

The answer is, of course the machinery is in place, but it is all jammed up for lack of political mandates to actually operate, to see progress come out of the end of the spaghetti machine. One does not have to sit around a negotiating table for long to realize the elaborate charade taking place. Able Government negotiators stall, fiddle, obfuscate, redirect discussion, and come up with more questions requiring answers than you could believe existed all in the name of delay, delay, delay.

The game is, a day of delay is another day the Governments do not have to pay for anything more than air fare and hotel rooms for negotiators, another day of the native groups going further into debt to stay in the game, another day of hopelessness for most on-reserve Indians and another day BC and Canada avoid actually choosing to make difficult choices. Frankly, what is taking place these days falls far short of meeting any test of sincerity by either Government, protestations to the contrary.

The negotiators have honed their skills in being helpfully not helpful for, now, a generation, since BC consented to being brought into the modern treaty-making process after 150 years of shameful behavior towards its native population.

Can you imagine how frustrating and angry one becomes, sitting around a “negotiating table”, literally for 20 and more years and achieving, well, nothing? All the while, you see members of your community, whom the Supreme Court of Canada have ruled have aboriginal title to the lands and resources, suffer Third World levels of unemployment and health outcomes, the country’s highest suicide, crime, and substance abuse rates? You see those who take forest and mineral wealth from lands in which you hold rights being exploited with scant regard for your welfare; sometimes a penny or two is dropped to claim ‘accommodation’, but there is no plan and no commitment to actually address and improve native conditions by either Government.

This is not to deny that some progress has been made by the Campbell Government, because it has shown a change of attitude and a willingness to at least begin. But for lack of clear, strong direction from the top to the whole government that this was a priority, and a regular rotation of Ministers, little real progress was made.

The Province’s native communities are very likely not to be able to restrain those who would be much more militant in the near future and it will be up to the new Premier to face this reality.

Through the regulatory processes we have seen native obstruction doom the Kemess and Prosperity mining projects over the past 6 years. We see the Enbridge pipeline facing the same sort of opposition. Any number of government and private-sector projects over the past few years much less newsworthy have been ground to a halt as well.

As Chief Deneault has said, it’s going to get worse, much worse, because 20 years of almost no progress on most land claims is becoming an issue around which to rally for a more militant next generation that will look to recent events in Cairo and Benghazi for examples of how to make change.

For Premier-designate Christy Clark, this should indeed be a top of the “in-basket” issue. It simply has to be. That it was not addressed by any leadership candidate is a shame. But maybe Clark will recognize this and make addressing it a lead item in a first Throne Speech, and very clear new marching orders will be given to officials in the aboriginal affairs, education, attorney general, and finance ministries Or maybe the expectations of the coming political change that now abound in the native community will be dashed. And if Clark is smart, she will re-assign George Abbott to the portfolio because he has shown evidence of understanding the issues and wanting them resolved. Sorry, George. And Premier Clark will have to tell Ottawa that it, too, had better get serious.

But if real progress on the native file is not a Clark priority, the result could well be what Chief Deneault predicts.

And what Deneault foresees is more than a few days of inconvenience. It could well be province-wide. It could be a signal to all sorts of putative investment in BC that maybe somewhere else is better. This is particularly true of the mining industry which has not been as engaged in the issues as it should have been. If BC and Canada do not take

seriously the warning of Chief Deneault and others, the damage done to our recovering economy could be serious, and our reputation as a fair and progressive society very much harmed.

The ball is now in the hands of soon-to-be-Premier Clark. Every person in BC that would like to see an end to generations of wrongs done to BC's first nations will be watching. It will be a real test of "change".

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