

There is an Alternative to the Present Treaty Negotiations in British Columbia

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Introduction

Over five hundred years ago, immigrants arrived on the shores of Eastern Canada. Their purpose for coming varied, however, mostly to escape wars and famine in their country. The Kings of England and France ensured their possession of Canada by enticing their subjects to move to Canada by granting each head of the household and family members acres of land. Consent was not obtained from the Aboriginal people. Not only was the land stolen, the government and the religious organizations lost very little time to begin assimilating the First Inhabitants by setting up residential schools and forcing them to attend.

The residential schools were owned and operated by the Church Organizations with help from the governments. This method forced the First Nations to adopt their way of life by educating them about European laws and history.

If First Nations failed to adopt any of the above, they were considered dumb and lazy. And yet, these changes were and are traumatic that leads to substance abuse and subsequent family breakdown. In order to escape the religious and the governments grasp, many fled to cities only to find that they faced worse conditions such as living on skid row and facing death. This process of assimilation was government approved as shown by Thomas Berger:

"Always, assuming our goal was not extermination by deadly force, our object has been to transform the Indians, to make them like our selves. But if they become like ourselves, if they assimilate, they will no longer be Indians, and there will be no Indian languages, no Indian view of the world, no Indian political communities." T. Berger, p. X1

It has been over two hundred years since the government turned their attention to British Columbia First Nations. The method that was used in Eastern Canada to assimilate and to remove the inhabitants from their land was repeated in British Columbia. The question is this: what current conditions are the First Nations in British Columbia facing today. They live on reservations that have become overcrowded and there is 95% unemployment. Over 70% of the members have moved away to cities in the hope of finding employment. Usually they lack experience and education and are reduced to labour type work or to simply accept government support. This is uncalled for because as original owners of the land, they should remain on their homeland in order to extract the natural resources. Most often the corporations or businesses discriminate against First Nations that leaves many unemployed.

As if First Nations do not face enough discrimination from the dominant society, they experience the same or worse on the reservations. Each year the governments give the Reservation administrators thousands of dollars most of which is used for administration and the balance is handed out to relatives and friends. The evidence of excess dollars is new cars, large new homes, lots of travel, entertaining and so forth. There are a few exceptions where

some administrators are fair, but those Reservations are hard to find. Many members move away out of sheer disgust. When they move off reserve, the reserve administration continues to receive grants and administration dollars on their behalf. It is evident: the poor remain poor.

"Native people feel an attachment to their land, a sense of belonging to a part of the earth, that we can scarcely comprehend. For Native people, their land is not a commodity but a heritage of the community, the dwelling place of generations. It is where they were born, where they will spend their lives, and where they will die. For them to lose their land is a misfortune beyond measure." T. Berger, p. xi, paragraph 2.

The attitude today of the dominant society regarding the Land Claims by First Nations

It is true that the First Nations constitute only 8% of the Canadian population. It is also true that they were the original owners of the land. It is also true that the land was given to immigrants without the consent of the First Nations. This occurred several hundred years ago and for this reason they say these words: "I have rights too. I am third (or whichever) generation Canadian".

"The Canadian Constitution guarantees equality"

"Why do we owe them (First Nations) a living? It is my tax dollars that keeps them alive"

"Why should I pay for the 'sins' of my ancestor".

It is obvious that many from the dominant society have benefited from the sins of their ancestors. And since over 70% of First Nations have moved off the reserve, they also pay taxes and help to support others who are in need. And although the Canadian Constitution guarantees equality, First Nations face inequality in British Columbia.

The First Nations answer to the dominant society

"The land, who made it? I really want to find out who made it. Me? You? The government? Who made it? I know (of) only one man made it-God. But on this land who besides Him made the land? What is given is not sold to anyone. We're that kind of people. What is given to us, we are not going to give away." Gabe Bluecoat of Arctic River speaking to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, 1975.

"If you dig deep near the beach, you will find our clam shells. If I dig where you live, I will find cow bones". Elder Robert Sport at Bamfield, B.C., 1975.

Despite the arrival of the Europeans and their imposition of their values, and their encroachment on our lands, the First Nations in British Columbia have remained in their territories and have never surrendered their lands (except for a few treaties). And it goes without saying, without our land the dominant society would not have progressed in science and technology. Science and technology only advances when there is excess wealth.

What is the First Nations entitlement today?

We are entitled to payment from the extraction of our natural resources. We are a proud people and we want to be self-reliant. We want to ensure that our children have a future. We do not want to be merely "curious cultural backdrop to the activities of European civilization".

The alternative to the treaty making process For the past eleven years, several groups of Tribal members have been exploring treaty options and to date, some have agreements in principle. During this time, millions of dollars have been spent on wages for the participants. This money will be taken out of any future settlement.

The discussions cause disagreements over territorial boundaries. Chiefs, who are custodians of the land now feel that they should receive the benefits instead of sharing it with each member of that group. The government would like 95% of the territory that is rich in natural resources. A legion of lawyers are required to explain the legal jargon. Even then, the Tribal members in attendance find it difficult to give reports. It is regrettable that the 70% of the off - Reserve Members are not included in the discussions.

The alternative to signing Treaties Do not sign treaties that will extinguish rights to the land. Instead, what is wanted is a settlement that will entrench their rights to the land that will lay foundations of Native self-determination under the Constitution of Canada. The First Nations wish to have jurisdiction over the lands that are scheduled for development. First Nations have to become part of the decision making process in all areas such as parks, marinas, fishery, forestry, mining and so forth. This will include acting as Directors or being hired to work with the companies or the Government. After all, they own the land. To place trust in the government is to wait for years for results. In the meantime, the elders die without just compensation. Also, in place of monthly government support payments, they want each member to benefit from royalties that come from the extraction of natural resources.