

Government's Failed Negotiation Policy in Central British Columbia Land Claims Puts Citizens at Risk

Chilcotin, BC. Residents, business owners and families living in the Chilcotin Region of British Columbia are calling on the Federal and Provincial Governments to acknowledge their concerns after years of being ignored and having their business operations forcibly curtailed.

The future of their homes, livelihoods, and business operations hang in the balance due to the secret negotiations taking place between the Province, the Federal Government and the Tsilhqot'in First Nation. Recent events on the other side of the country should reinforce the need to bring all impacted parties to the table in a spirit of cooperation and transparency.

The "Lobster War" in Atlantic Canada that has pit Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities against one another, clearly reveals the abject failure of the Federal Government's policy of stubbornly excluding non-Indigenous stakeholders from negotiations that impact their lives and livelihoods. When any community feels that their needs and rights are being ignored, when they are excluded from the process and feel powerless, eventually they turn to more desperate and unacceptable means to try and solve the problem.

In the Tsilhqot'in Land Claims negotiations in central British Columbia, the Federal and Provincial governments are applying this same failed policy of excluding non-Indigenous stakeholders from negotiations that will have a lasting and significant impact on their communities and livelihoods.

In the six years since the Tsilhqot'in Title Lands were created overnight in 2014, trapping non-Indigenous businesses under a new legal regime, many non-Indigenous businesses have been driven to the brink of bankruptcy by government's purposeful inaction. "We are not sure what the future holds now", says Sabina Harris of Harris Ranch. "The government has arbitrarily cancelled our valid grazing permits and offered no secure alternative to allow us to continue. They don't seem interested in addressing our problems."

Once thriving tourism businesses, ranches, and guiding operations have been denied permits to operate, threatening their existence, but no attempt has been made to find a solution. According to Brian McCutcheon, owner of an award-winning lodge engulfed by the Title Lands, businesses in or near the Title Lands are imperilled. "We've been hung out to dry by the indifference of our own government, making them complicit in the collapse of multiple businesses. We invested millions of dollars faithfully following the laws of the land but government has made no effort whatsoever to live up to their responsibilities." Added Phil Huston, who invested millions of dollars into a luxury resort at Chilko Lake that he is no longer legally in a position to operate, "In my opinion British Columbia has become a very dangerous place to invest, and I would certainly not recommend it to anyone."

The Federal and Provincial governments are now pressing ahead with secret negotiations in conjunction with the Tsilhqot'in First Nation that exclude all the region's non-Indigenous stakeholders, where a huge additional land grant is being discussed that will escalate all the problems resulting from the original land grant that governments have so far refused to deal with.

According to Petrus Rykes of *Canadians For Fairness And Transparency*, "The Federal and Provincial Ministers are conducting backroom negotiations with the Tsilhqot'in First Nation to cede millions

more square kilometers of land in central BC, trapping thousands more Canadians, their properties and their businesses in the same situation. What happens then? We don't want a repeat of the Atlantic Canada fiasco.”

“It is clear that nobody is representing our interests in these discussions” said Rykes. “Without representation the very real anxiety and desperation of the region's residents and business owners will continue to grow. Our stakeholder group insists upon three things: A seat at the table to directly represent our interests, fair compensation for all businesses and properties adversely impacted, and our rights as Canadian citizens protected. It is a reasonable request, and we are very hopeful that newly appointed BC Minister of Indigenous Relations Murray Rankin will acknowledge our concerns and support fairness and transparency in future negotiations. ”

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