

Chilcotin Business Owners Seek Answers as Government Policies Cause Economic Failure

Chilcotin, BC - How would it be if the lands encompassing the City of Vancouver were suddenly deeded back to the First Nations that once occupied them, without any input or discussion with the current residents, and business owners were told that they would no longer be granted the right to operate under the new First Nations government. Residents and business owners might turn to the Governments of BC and Canada to make the case that they should be treated fairly and with respect, as they have been living and doing business on these lands for generations, only to be systematically ignored. Business failures, bankruptcies, and hardship would soon follow, and land values would plummet to insignificance.

What would the people of Vancouver do? How would they react? Would it lead to extreme bitterness or even violence between First Nations and non-First Nations communities? Is this what government had in mind when it talked about “reconciliation”?

This scenario is exactly what is playing out in the Chilcotin region of central British Columbia. Two thousand hectares of lands (the “Title Lands”) were deeded back to the Tsilhqot'in First Nation in 2014, and since then neither the Federal nor Provincial government has made any effort to deal with the issues that have arisen for non-First Nations residents and business owners. Extensions to business operating licenses ran out in 2020, and no framework has been put in place to compensate or assist the affected businesses and landowners.

Consequently, several dozen business – including tourism resorts, cattle ranches, agriculture and guiding operations – that once had legal residence or tenure in the Title Lands, are now staring at either bankruptcy or permanent closure. Tens of millions of dollars were invested over decades by these business owners, faithfully trusting in the laws of the land, but now neither level of government is willing to lift a finger to help them. They are going broke fast, and their government seems to want it that way.

Prime Minister Trudeau, Premier Horgan, Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Bennett, and Provincial Indigenous Affairs Minister Rankin bear full responsibility for this fiasco. What's more, they are pressing ahead with additional secret negotiations to vastly expand the Tsilhqot'in deeded lands, putting thousands more British Columbia businesses and residents at risk of losing everything.

According to Petrus Rykes of *Canadians For Fairness And Transparency*, “The Federal and Provincial Ministers are conducting backroom negotiations to cede millions more square kilometers of land in central BC, trapping thousands more Canadians, their properties and their businesses in the same impossible situation. What happens then? When a similar situation unfolded in Atlantic Canada over the lobster fishery, it led to extreme bitterness and violence. We don't want that here.”

“It is clear that nobody is representing the interests of local residents in these negotiations” said Rykes. “Without representation the very real anxiety and desperation of the region's residents and business owners will continue to grow. Consequently our stakeholder group insists upon three things: A seat at the table to directly represent local interests, fair compensation for all businesses and properties adversely impacted, and our rights as Canadian citizens protected. It is a reasonable request, and one that the Ministers involved must pay attention to.”

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