

Eva Clayton: Proposed tanker ban hurts the Nisga'a people



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Terry Azak, of the Nisga'a First Nation, blows feathers in the air while participating in a procession with a totem pole before it was raised in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, B.C., on Saturday November 5, 2016.

DARRYL DYCK / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Prime Minister Trudeau told a meeting of Canada's modern treaty Nations last fall that he "was

inspired to hear from indigenous governments taking concrete steps to manage their lands and resources, and to promote the social and economic health and stability of their communities.”

So why is his government proceeding with Bill C-48, the proposed moratorium on oil tankers calling at ports on the B.C. north coast, and preventing the 7,000 Nisga'a people from taking the “concrete steps” available to us to promote our social and economic health?

This bill offends the spirit of our treaty with Canada and B.C., which commits all parties to work towards greater economic independence for the Nisga'a people. It is a very serious commitment for ourselves and our generations to come. The Nisga'a Nation is committed to being self-sustaining and to bringing an economic base to the north.

We believe that a deeper dialogue with the federal government on this proposed moratorium would allow us to achieve the balance between building a strong economy and protecting sensitive ecosystems while moving towards true and lasting reconciliation.

Instead, the Trudeau government, without more than a general introductory dialogue, announced legislation that conflicts with the principles of self-determination that lie at the heart of the Nisga'a Treaty, and undermines our shared objective to help the Nisga'a Nation become self-sustaining.

A moratorium like that proposed in Bill C-48 exists nowhere else and, for reasons inexplicable to us, does not apply to the south coast of B.C. or to Canada's north or east coasts despite tankers carrying foreign oil routinely calling at eastern ports without restriction. Oil tankers from Alaska go past our coast every day, and will continue to do so under the proposed moratorium.

Why does the proposed moratorium single out B.C.'s north coast? The Nisga'a Nation is and always will be committed to protecting the integrity of our land and marine environments and we do not support any particular oil export project.

But we want all economic development options to remain available, in the same way they do for First Nations on the south coast, the north coast or anywhere in Eastern Canada, so that we can have an evidence-based decision-making process about what projects go ahead in our treaty area.

We signed the Nisga'a Treaty with Canada and B.C. after 113 years of negotiations, determination, and patience. It was a landmark day for Canada and its indigenous peoples. We are advocating for our treaty — for our people to have a say in what can happen and can't happen where we live. It's a matter of principle. We believe that decisions about any export projects can only be made after a thorough environmental assessment and review of evidence.

The Trudeau government has recognized Indigenous peoples' right to "self-determination, including the right to freely pursue their economic, political, social, and cultural development." It has introduced 10 principles to guide Canada's implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). It has also promised to help bring Indigenous people out of poverty, and to ensure that we play a meaningful role in environmental assessment.

It is hard for us to reconcile these commitments and the promises made by Canada in our treaty with Bill C-48's removal of our right to determine if we would support this kind of economic development.

Economic opportunities are limited in northwest B.C. Forestry and fishing are both in long-term decline, and while tourism is growing it is not yet a year-round employer and revenue generator.

Ottawa is rushing ahead with Bill C-48 without having shown us why it is needed. It appears to be poised to close the economic development door on the Nisga'a and First Nations on the north coast while preserving opportunities for our neighbours to the south, north and east.

Bill C-48 won't stop diesel and oil barges (like the one that foundered in Heiltsuk territory in late 2016) from traveling between coastal communities. It won't stop smaller, older oil-powered vessels, those without sophisticated technology, detailed safety and marine protection plans, or escort tugs or pilots, from plying coastal waters.

Our government is committed to creating an economic base that meets the requirements of our treaty. We owe it to our people and their futures to preserve the opportunity to have different economic development options available to us. We will not continue to see our way of life eroded and consign our children and grandchildren to life without meaningful opportunities, based on an ill-conceived policy decision.

Eva Clayton is President of the Nisga'a Lisims Government.

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