



Statement from Wet'suwet'en Elected Leadership

May 11, 2020 — Following last week's meetings with the Federal and BC governments, and separately with the Office of the Wet'suwet'en, regarding the presumptive announcement of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on rights and title, the Elected Chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en Nation have issued the following statement:

"Upon request, our Wet'suwet'en Nations conducted separate phone meetings last week with Ministers Bennett and Fraser. While we were asked to have these meetings independently of each other, our messages to the Ministers and their governments were clear and consistent. We reiterated to the Ministers once again, that the process they have conducted to date is completely unacceptable and disrespectful to our people. The Elected Council members were not even permitted to see the draft MOU until Thursday morning and it has not yet been fully circulated to the clans. The Elected Councils are the existing legal authority in the territories and are actively involved in all of the issues included for negotiation in the MOU. We feel it is important to reiterate that we agree with the pursuit of negotiations for Wet'suwet'en Rights and Title, but we take issue with the improper consultation with respect to an MOU which would lead to negotiations.

We understand that the government simply accepted the Office of the Wet'suwet'en's word that the MOU had been approved when they agreed to the Joint Statement announcing that it would be signed on May 14th. They, however, knew that the elected councils disagreed, and should have also known from ensuing media coverage and fall-out that the majority of our people and Hereditary Chiefs also disagreed.

Almost a month later, we received a written response from Minister Fraser with vague assurance of full involvement for the Elected Leadership, but he did not follow through. Minister Bennett did not have the decency to respond in any form.

On Thursday, May 7th, a 6-hour virtual meeting was held between the Wet'suwet'en Elected Leadership and the Office of the Wet'suwet'en. The meeting was at the request of the Office of the Wet'suwet'en, but they treated us improperly, and failed to adequately inform us regarding the proceedings and processes that have taken place to date. They are not following the responsibilities of Hereditary Chiefs. To ignore their clan members and Elected Councils, something is terribly amiss. They do not represent us, and they have no legal authority to negotiate or sign any documents on behalf of our clans or our members without a mandate.

This flawed and incomplete consultation process by the Office of the Wet'suwet'en and government in their dealings with the Elected Councils means there is no validly approved MOU. This lack of proper consultation and secrecy means the governments are acting in bad faith contrary to the Honour of the Crown. The law requires government to always act honourably in its dealings with Indigenous people.

The Elected Councils have an interest in seeing Wet'suwet'en rights and title properly negotiated and implemented. All members and interests must be respected at every stage. Aboriginal rights and title are the collective rights of ALL Wet'suwet'en people; they are not held only by Hereditary Chiefs and they cannot be defined or compromised by the small hand-picked group the government is dealing with. That is 19th century treaty making, not 21st century reconciliation.

We are calling today for the following actions:

- To the BC and Federal governments: Withdraw the joint statement issued on April 29th, reject the current MOU and begin the negotiation process again including the elected councils as full participants.*
- To Minister Carolyn Bennett: Due to your disregard for our special relationship, we call for your resignation, immediately, as Minister of Crown–Indigenous Relations.”*

Chief Rosemarie Skin, Skin Tyee Nation
Chief Dan George, Ts'ilh Kaz Koh First Nation
Chief Maureen Luggi, Wet'suwet'en First Nation
Chief Patricia Prince, Nee Tahí Buhn Indian Band