

Terry Teegee: The Declaration Act Works for BC

The upcoming Provincial Election offers a stark choice for British Columbians. Either we continue the difficult work of implementing the internationally recognized minimum standard of human rights of First Nations peoples through the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, or we risk jeopardizing the economic future of this province for First Nations and non-First Nations alike. I believe that British Columbians know which choice to make.

For more than a century provincial governments have infringed on the human rights of First Nations, and we have been wrongfully excluded from decision-making on our own lands and territories. This denial of our human right to self-determination and self-government — a right enjoyed by every other Canadian citizen — has led to years of conflict, legal battles, and economic uncertainty.

The 2007 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, negotiated between states and the world's Indigenous peoples over thirteen years, represents the most comprehensive articulation of the minimum standards necessary to recognize Indigenous human rights. BC's *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, passed in 2019, legislates the creation of a provincial action plan to guide implementation of the *UN Declaration*.

The recognition of First Nations human rights isn't just about fairness or correcting historical wrongs; it's about ensuring predictability for First Nations governments, BC businesses and industries, preventing costly legal disputes, and paving the way for more responsible and collaborative development.

But John Rustad's BC Conservatives are threatening to shred the *Declaration Act* in favour of what he calls "economic reconciliation." His definition of economic reconciliation strips these human rights to self-determination from First Nations. This short-sighted move is in direct opposition to the years of progress this province has made under both NDP and Liberal governments and under the direction of our courts. Such an act would dishonour the commitments BC has made to recognize our right to self-determination, and would disrupt partnerships that drive our shared prosperity. First Nations have been clear – the wellbeing of all British Columbians depends on recognizing our human right to be included in decision-making over our territories.

Rustad's position on the Declaration Act smacks of old approaches that demonize First Nations. We have municipalities, corporations, and the Federal Government implementing the UN declaration in a variety of ways – demonstrating a growing consensus across society that sees that the basic human rights of First Nations must be recognized. Rustad calls the *Declaration Act* divisive, all the while using our people as a wedge issue to score political points. I am certain that BC will see through his outdated, toxic rhetoric and vote for a government that brings us together instead of playing us off against one another.

The *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* compliments a growing jurisprudence which recognizes the application of the UN Declaration within the federal and provincial jurisdiction. Without this protective legislation, we will not only lose decades of progress, but the rights of First Nations will continue to be vulnerable to violation and infringement. The end result will be lengthy legal battles, social unrest, and expensive redress as required by Canada's courts. These legal protections, recognizing First Nations title and rights, were hard fought by First Nations leaders through decades of advocacy and legal battles, many of which drained valuable resources from First Nations, the Province, industry, and ultimately all British Columbians.

Rustad's plan to remove First Nations rights to participating in decision-making processes would have disastrous consequences throughout this province. It would thrust BC back to an era of conflict and instability that would hurt everyone, from industry leaders to workers and families, both First Nations and non-First Nations communities alike. Rustad's claims of supporting economic growth ring hollow when his proposals would undermine the very stability that BC businesses and communities rely on.

The prosperity of British Columbia is inseparable from the recognition of the rights of First Nations peoples. The outdated approach denying First Nations' rights to self-government and participation in decision-making over our own lands has never worked. It has resulted in political, economic and social turmoil. Rustad's attempts to revive this failed model will harm every British Columbian by creating economic instability, deepening divisions and furthering financial dependency.

As a province and as a country we have made a historic commitment to recognize the human rights of Indigenous peoples, and promoting collaboration, mutual respect, and shared prosperity through partnership. By protecting the Declaration Act, we ensure that BC's future is one where everyone can thrive — First Nations and non-Indigenous communities alike.