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It's time Campbell talked about native-relations plan

GARY MASON VANCOUVER Once upon a time, elections would have been won or lost over issues like this. But in the recent provincial contest in British Columbia, barely a word was mentioned about Premier Gordon Campbell's plans to transform native relations in the province.

I'm sure Mr. Campbell couldn't believe it himself. Here he is proposing to confer enormous new powers on aboriginal groups and there wasn't a protester to confront or an uncomfortable question to field about his plan. Even his political opponents refrained from asking him to explain himself.

Mind you, all that most British Columbians know about the Premier's intentions comes from a discussion paper released a couple of months ago.

It indicated the province intends to pass legislation that would entrench native rights, title and shared decision-making.

The proposed Recognition and Reconciliation Act would supersede all other provincial laws dealing with land use and resource management, completely altering the province's political and economic landscape in the process.

Still, enough information, you would have thought, to prompt someone to ask: Before we elect you, Mr. Campbell, could you give us a better sense of what you're suggesting here? How, for instance, would this law alter business dynamics in the province? Would native groups have to be consulted on every planned project? Are they effectively new partners that have to be factored in to all prospective deals? In the days since Mr. Campbell's May 12 victory, there has been some discussion about his potentially risky proposition. And opposition to what he's contemplating has come from an unlikely source: native leaders themselves.

Some, at least those who weren't involved in the collaboration with government that produced the plan, are saying that the legislation would recognize a weakened version of aboriginal title and not the "exclusive title" sought by native groups. They also maintain that proposals to share revenues and decision-making don't go far enough.

Then there is the call for native groups to reorganize themselves into 30 regionally based "indigenous nations" from the 203 locally based first nations organizations. Many see the

move as an attempt by government to reduce the number of first nations groups with which it has to deal. The reorganization would seem to have slim chance of surviving.

There also seems to be frustration, shared by non-aboriginals, about the process behind the planned legislation, one conducted entirely in private. Many believe there should have been wider consultations - among aboriginals and non-aboriginals alike - before any discussion papers were written and legislation drafted.

The whole matter seemed to come out of the blue and, for policy that is potentially so groundbreaking, you would have thought there would have been some type of public discussion beforehand.

That said, the Premier should be commended for his efforts to address an issue that too many political leaders in the province have avoided for too many years.

Successive B.C. governments have tried to take a hard-line position with native groups by forcing them to try to prove, in court, they occupied the territory at the centre of a particular dispute. But that position has been called "impoverished" by no less than the Supreme Court of Canada. This is what prompted Mr. Campbell and his advisers to try a new approach.

The proposed law would recognize aboriginal rights and title.

Going ahead, government agencies and businesses would have to deal with native groups as if their rights and titles existed - indisputably.

"We can follow a path of litigation and confrontation, or we can follow a path of consultation, mutual understanding, mutual benefit and mutual strength in our commitment to creating shared prosperity for all of the people of British Columbia in every region," Mr.

Campbell told the legislature in March.

Sounds reasonable and even forward-thinking. But until British Columbians actually see the legislation, Mr. Campbell's intentions remain noble, but vague, ideas.

The debate that should have happened during the provincial election may yet take place. If Mr. Campbell hopes to change the aboriginal-relations landscape in the province, he is going to have to sell the merits of his vision and sell them hard.

Right now, his dreams are far from a reality.

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