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BYLINE: ROD MICKLEBURGH

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RECOGNITION AND RECONCILIATION ACT B.C. puts aboriginal recognition act on hold Industry leaders worry proposal to grant aboriginal title by statute would give First Nations a veto over land-use and resource decisions

ROD MICKLEBURGH VANCOUVER In the face of growing opposition and concern over the implications of such a move, Premier Gordon Campbell has abandoned plans to push through speedy legislation granting unprecedented aboriginal title throughout British Columbia to the province's native groups.

"This is so important, we've got to get it right," Aboriginal Relations Minister Mike de Jong said yesterday. "We can't rush people." Mr. de Jong's comments followed the government's terse, unexpected announcement in the quiet news time of Saturday afternoon that the bold proposal was being put on hold.

B.C. would have been the first province in the country to grant aboriginal title by statute. Mr. Campbell had hoped to introduce and pass the necessary legislation, tentatively called The Recognition and Reconciliation Act, before the May 12 election.

But industry leaders in particular expressed alarm over the prospect, buttressed by a legal opinion that the measure would give First Nations a veto over all land-use and resource-management decisions in the province.

There was also some aboriginal opposition to another proposition in the bill, approved by the government and the First Nations Leadership Council, that would whittle the 200 or so existing native bands down to what native leaders call "the original 30 indigenous governments." Although native and government representatives, including Mr. de Jong and the premier's deputy minister Jessica McDonald, had been negotiating matters for months, there had been no public disclosure of the government's intentions until a four-page discussion paper outlining the proposals was obtained by the media late last month.

Several private meetings with members of the business community did little to quell worries over what the granting of such sweeping aboriginal title would mean in practical terms.

With the current legislative session expected to end April 2, Mr. Campbell backed down.

"We need to take the time for consultation and further discussions before tabling this bill," said the government's brief statement.

"The Premier and Minister de Jong will continue to engage with the business community on this important initiative." Native leaders supported the postponement.

"We've been waiting for this for 150 years. I guess we can wait a couple more months, that's for sure," said Grand Chief Edward John of the First Nations Summit. "There are a lot of questions and clarification issues." **But Chief John made it clear that recognition of aboriginal title would have far-reaching implications, with shared decision-making a requirement for all future economic development on traditional native territory.**

"It will apply to oil and gas rights, to everything," he said.

"There will need to be joint planning about how resources and the land are going to be used in the respective territories. We will have to engage with each other and make decisions." Chief John said aboriginal title covers the entire province. "It exists everywhere. Who owned the land before the colonists came? Monkeys? Chipmunks? The whole province belonged to some tribe or another." However, the respected native leader said aboriginal title doesn't mean native groups will start claiming privately owned or Crown land. It's a question of sharing the benefits.

"Are we going to take our marbles and our land, and run away with this? No. We have to make responsible decisions like any government. Just because we're Indians doesn't mean we're any less intelligent or less able to manage our land." Mr. de Jong rejected charges that granting aboriginal title would give native bands a veto over future resource decisions.

"It doesn't do that. It does speak to creating a framework, within which we speak to one another about sharing the benefits that go with resource development on the land base," he said, adding that the government proposals will assist economic development by increasing land certainty in B.C.

NDP leader Carole James lambasted the Premier for his handling of the issue.

"He dropped the ball," she said.

"This is yet another example of Gordon Campbell coming up with an approach that wasn't thought out. He didn't look at implementation. He didn't involve people in discussions." Ms. James, who nevertheless supports the intent to grant aboriginal title, said that by failing to consult interest groups, Mr. Campbell had created more division.

"It's got people's backs up again. They wonder what is going on."