

Treaty not living up to its billing

Ted Murphy
The Delta Optimist

Wednesday, December 05, 2007

The Tsawwassen First Nation treaty seems to be a bit like an onion these days: the more you peel back its layers, the more you're likely to cry.

Before I go on, let me say I support the treaty as a mechanism to right past wrongs and to provide the TFN with the ability to create a prosperous and sustainable future. The idea of cash and land transfers to facilitate this process makes eminent sense. I can even endorse the removal of property from the Agricultural Land Reserve so band leaders aren't restricted in their efforts to chart a new course for the Tsawwassen people.

However, there are other aspects of the agreement now coming to light that are far less palatable and, in fact, strike at the heart of what this whole process is intended to achieve.

MP John Cummins has done a good job researching this treaty, delving deeply into the side agreements, those little known, but extremely important components of the document. His findings are nothing short of shocking

By extrapolating the sockeye salmon catch allocated to the TFN to all native bands along the Fraser River, Cummins figures there will not be any fish left for non-native commercial or sport fishermen. Since when were treaties intended to put an end to the more than century-old commercial fishery on the Fraser?

Equally as troubling is the notion that income taxes paid by non-band members living on the reserve will go to the band government, not Ottawa. It perpetuates the handout arrangement that exists today, yet instead of the federal government collecting taxes and providing grants to native bands, it's giving them the power to collect those taxes directly.

The band has a similar set up now with the school portion of the property tax bill, so adding income tax to the mix isn't a big leap, but this surely can't be the self-sufficiency goal treaty advocates have been extolling for years.

Rather than integrating and supporting natives, while still recognizing their heritage, this treaty has the look of casting in stone the inequities and divisiveness that exist today, the very situation this whole process was supposed to address.

I can remember on more than one occasion the treaty being characterized as a "hand up, not a handout." That's a laudable goal, but it appears the bureaucrats who negotiated this agreement on our behalf have fallen short of the mark.

In its present form, the treaty won't accomplish what we were led to believe it would.

That is truly a shame.