

Little time left for any real debate

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I'm assuming because it took 14 years to draft the Tsawwassen First Nation treaty, that's the reason they've run out of time to debate it.

The treaty, which was essentially finalized last December and is now going through the formal process of government ratification, is, for the record, being debated in Victoria and will then make its way to the House of Commons in Ottawa. However, any suggestion this public discourse is a legitimate analysis of the precedent-setting document would be a stretch.

Given it was non-elected government negotiators representing the public in closed-door bargaining sessions all these years, you'd think there would now be spirited debate in the legislature, particularly given all the potentially controversial components included in the treaty.

How constructive could that debate be when NDP leader Carole James tells her caucus members they must support it? At least Gordon Campbell has allowed Liberals a free vote in the legislature, although you have to wonder how many are willing to pop the balloon that is the premier's first urban treaty. Three backbenchers have spoken out, which suggests to me their concerns are so significant they felt compelled to break ranks on this one.

It doesn't appear it will be any better in our nation's capital. MP John Cummins has said his input was never sought when the treaty was being developed and, as a member of the ruling Conservatives, he will simply be expected to vote in favour of it. He won't, but will undoubtedly be in the minority.

The funny thing is I'm not hearing people say they're against the treaty, or even opposed to the scope of the settlement when it comes to cash and land transfers, but there are genuine concerns with a number of elements. Entrenching a new level of government, fish allocations, farmland designation, tax exemptions ... there are a host of issues that beg for greater scrutiny. Yet it doesn't appear we'll get that level of review.

There's no way substantive changes are being made at this point, not after TFN members have already ratified the deal. That would throw the negotiating process for a loop, something I'm sure neither government wants to happen, so that means what's going on in Victoria, and soon in Ottawa, is little more than window dressing.

Given its long-term ramifications and finite nature, we should be doing everything to ensure the best agreement is struck. Something tells me that's not happening.