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Some Libs can't stomach Tsawwassen treaty

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Byline: Michael Smyth
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When it comes to political infighting over the new Tsawwassen treaty, much attention has been focused on the NDP and their squabbles.

Several NDP MLAs oppose the \$120-million settlement with the Tsawwassen First Nation because it will convert prime agricultural land to industrial use.

But the governing Liberals have internal divisions of their own. Despite Premier Gordon Campbell's support of the treaty, three of his MLAs voted against it: Dennis MacKay, Blair Lekstrom and Dan Jarvis. And their opposition runs much deeper than paving over some potato fields.

"We are all Canadians -- all of us -- and we should all live under the same laws, pay the same taxes and be governed the same way," MacKay (Bulkley Valley-Stikine) told the legislature. "We cannot and must not continue down this road that is race-based and affords one group of people benefits and privileges that are there because of their race. It's wrong."

He said most MLAs don't know what's in the treaty, especially the special taxation deal for the Tsawwassen.

Under the treaty, the Tsawwassen would begin paying sales taxes after eight years. After 12 years, they'd pay income and property taxes.

But MacKay said most people don't realize the vast majority of those taxes will be remitted to the new Tsawwassen government, not to Ottawa or Victoria.

Despite that, the federal and provincial governments will continue to provide services to the Tsawwassen such as medical and dental, just like under the previous reserve system.

"They're going to have the best of both worlds," MacKay said.

He noted the Tsawwassen are being given subsurface resource rights -- "nobody else does that; none of us owns the resources underneath the homes we bought" -- and a share of the Fraser River sockeye run. What if other First Nations along the Fraser receive similar fishing quotas in future treaties? "There would not be a public recreational or commercial fishery -- period," MacKay predicted.

"End of fishing for everybody except natives. This is a race-based fishery and I cannot and will not support it."

Like MacKay, Lekstrom pointed out the new Tsawwassen government has vastly more power than a municipal government -- something B.C.ers rejected by 87 per cent in Campbell's "legally binding" treaty referendum of 2002.

But Lekstrom (Peace River South) noted a further irony: The Tsawwassen government will have a zoning veto over federal and provincial projects in their territory -- something the Campbell government stripped from municipalities just last year.

All three Liberals express grave concerns about setting up powerful First Nations governments that will further isolate aboriginal people from the rest of society.

"Call it a reserve; call it treaty lands," MacKay said. "I will not support any legislation that attempts to keep this invisible wall between us."

While the New Democrats wring their hands over farmland, the Liberals are fundamentally more divided over Campbell's historic treaty.

msmyth@direct.ca