



September 30, 2024

Sent via email to: [cbraker@fns.bc.ca](mailto:cbraker@fns.bc.ca)

To the First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC),

Thank you for your September 16, 2024, letter outlining key issues and questions for BC's political parties. The Conservative Party of British Columbia (CPBC) shares your commitment to advancing reconciliation, including Indigenous economic reconciliation, honoring the legacy of leaders like Dr. Joseph Gosnell, who championed the integration of traditional Indigenous knowledge with modern economic practices to raise the bar for First Nations in British Columbia.

### **Economic Reconciliation, Healthy Communities**

“Economic development is key to our survival. We are redefining our economic future by combining traditional knowledge with modern business practices. This is not about keeping up – it’s about raising the bar for our people.” – Dr. Joseph Gosnell.

Dr. Gosnell was a key figure in the fight for Indigenous rights in Canada and a passionate advocate for First Nations' economic advancement. His leadership underscored the importance of economic empowerment for Indigenous communities.

The Conservative Party of British Columbia is committed to realizing Dr. Gosnell's vision.

We will deliver on his vision of First Nations' economic and social progress, which is realized when communities have the capacity and empowerment to undertake economic development.

John Rustad, during his tenure as British Columbia's Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, signed over 435 agreements with First Nations—more than any

other leader in modern Canadian history. From this place of established trust, Rustad is uniquely positioned to lead the province towards economic reconciliation.

True reconciliation can only be achieved by ensuring First Nations can access the tools required to build their own economic futures. Through policies, investments, and collaboration to unlock the vast potential within Indigenous communities, we aim to support a new era of prosperity and wellness for Indigenous peoples in British Columbia.

### **Economic Reconciliation: Laying the foundation for prosperity and wellness**

The Conservative Party of British Columbia believes that economic reconciliation is the cornerstone of any lasting solution to the challenges faced by Indigenous communities. Historical injustices and government failures have left many communities managing poverty, when they could and should be managing success.

Between 2017 and 2021, average Indigenous life expectancy fell by more than 6 years. The current provincial government is overseeing a crisis in the wellbeing of Indigenous communities.

It is not enough to recognize the need for healing. There is a critical need to advance reconciliation through action and ensure that economic viability is realized in all communities throughout BC. Indigenous peoples have just as much of a right as anyone to achieve real wealth, and move beyond meeting the bare minimum.

Economic reconciliation requires direct engagement with First Nations, respect for their governance structures, and the necessary support to build thriving economies. Our policies will emphasize fostering partnerships between First Nations and the private sector, with a strong focus on key sectors including natural resource management, fisheries, forestry, and clean energy.

Our vision for economic reconciliation is one where Indigenous communities are partners and leaders in BC's economic future, thereby achieving the level of economic sustainability that is necessary for true self-governance.

### **Building the infrastructure of wellbeing**

The federal government is constitutionally obligated to provide housing and clean water to Indigenous communities. Yet, in many instances, these obligations remain unmet. A Conservative government in British Columbia will hold Ottawa accountable for delivering on these commitments.

We will act to secure the well-being of Indigenous communities ignored by Ottawa: Whether it be through providing clean water, adequate housing, or other critical infrastructure. Where the federal government fails to act, the province will step-up; the province will then pursue reimbursement from the federal government through the appropriate legal avenues, ensuring that Ottawa's responsibilities are met. UNDRIP will continue to be the guiding framework for this accountability.

### **Strategic land return for economic empowerment**

Returning land to First Nations is critical for achieving economic self-sufficiency while addressing legal uncertainties surrounding rights and title. This approach will help resolve long-standing issues related to Section 35 of the Constitution, which recognizes and affirms the existing Indigenous and treaty rights of First Nations.

The Conservative Party of BC is committed to the strategic and collaborative return of land to First Nations, enabling bands to forge their own economic future.

### **Indigenous leadership in industry**

Each First Nation has a unique path to economic reconciliation. Among those paths are major opportunities in natural resource sectors: forestry, fishing, energy, and mining.

Indigenous knowledge and stewardship play a vital role in the sustainable management of British Columbia's natural resources. First Nations should be equipped to thrive as not only resource managers, but also business owners and leaders in diverse sectors of the economy. The Conservative Party of British Columbia will:

- Open new pathways to economic reconciliation by working in partnership with Indigenous leaders to identify the unique opportunities in each community for unlocking long-term prosperity.
- Invest in the capacity-building, infrastructure, and regulatory changes required for Indigenous communities to act with confidence and embrace new opportunities, on their own terms.
- Provide loan guarantees to assist First Nations in acquiring equity positions in natural resource and other major commercial projects.
- Return 20% of BC's forests to First Nations, enabling Indigenous groups to manage these resources sustainably and in line with their traditions and values.

- Support activities that bring both economic and environmental benefits for Indigenous communities, such as the use of forestry byproducts in local power generation.

### **Honouring UNDRIP as it was intended**

DRIPA legislation was intended to represent a shift towards reconciliation and the recognition of Indigenous self-determination in British Columbia. However, its implementation and interpretation by the NDP has stalled Indigenous-led development in industries like mining, forestry, natural gas, and other sectors.

Our government will honour the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as it was intended: the central set of guiding principles for how governments can recognize and strengthen the rights and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples.

Our government will work in partnership with First Nations to develop new legislation that advances, not stalls, economic reconciliation and Indigenous autonomy. This is a process that will be grounded in the aspirations and rights of Indigenous peoples.

### **Strengthening Indigenous wellness and cultural autonomy**

True reconciliation cannot happen without addressing the social and wellness challenges facing Indigenous communities. It has been common practice for governments to acknowledge these challenges, then fail to elevate them to the level of action and resolution.

One of the most pressing issues is the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the provincial foster care system: for generations, First Nations youth have had to endure neglect, abuse, and weakened cultural ties to their community. Rectifying this injustice is a top priority for the Conservative Party of British Columbia.

These changes will reverse the harmful effects of state intervention and ensure that Indigenous children grow up in strong, healthy communities. We will work with First Nations to build capacity to provide culturally appropriate support for children. When parents are unable to provide adequate care, we will support the community in taking the lead for the future of its children.

We are committed to transferring authority for child welfare and family services to First Nations, enabling communities to raise their children according to their cultural

values and traditions. The Matriarchs and rights holders that are identified by First Nations leadership will lead the change.

The legacy of trauma and ongoing challenges that face Indigenous peoples have contributed to addiction and mental health struggles. These experiences have created a critical need for culturally-appropriate care and recovery services, which are often not available within First Nations communities.

Economic reconciliation aims to address the root causes of wellness challenges in the Indigenous community. However, this will take time, and action must be taken today to improve access to care and build healthier communities.

We will work with Indigenous leaders to develop treatment and recovery programs available within First Nations communities. Individuals undergoing treatment for health challenges including addiction, should have the option of receiving the support they need close to home, in a familiar and culturally appropriate environment.

### **A vision of progress and prosperity**

The Conservative Party of BC envisions a future where Indigenous peoples continue to be defined by their deep rooted culture, and not only their aspiration, but their right to achieve prosperity from the vast economic opportunity available in British Columbia.

Through real partnerships, economic development, and respect for Indigenous governance, we are dedicated to a bright future for First Nations where communities thrive, children grow up in healthy environments, and cultural traditions are preserved for generations to come.

Sincerely,

John Rustad  
Leader, Conservative Party of British Columbia