

OUR LAND IS OUR FUTURE

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March 30, 2016

The Honourable Carolyn Bennett
Minister, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada
10 Wellington Street
Gatineau, Quebec K1A 0H4

OPEN LETTER

Federal Budget Silent on First Nations Land Disputes Indigenous Affairs Minister Must Keep Promise to Restore Specific Claims Research Funding

Dear Minister Bennett:

On February 13, 2016, you met with the Union of BC Indian Chiefs ("UBCIC") Executive in Vancouver to initiate a working relationship and review our organization's priorities with a view to future discussions. At that meeting you made an explicit commitment to restore funding for specific claims research and development to Claims Research Units ("CRUs") and First Nations across Canada. In 2014, drastic funding cuts ranging from 30-60% were meted out to these organizations as part of the Harper government's Deficit Reduction Action Plan. We stressed to you the urgency of restoring funding, and the timeliness required as INAC's responses to annual research funding proposals submitted by CRUs and First Nations in January 2016 were expected at the end of March.

On March 24, 2016, the UBCIC received a response to our annual budget submission for the 2016-17 fiscal year. Contrary to your explicit commitment to restore research funding to pre-2014 levels, we received no increase. Our offer from INAC is identical to the one made by your predecessor, as is every offer received by every CRU across Canada to date.

At our meeting with you the UBCIC Executive stressed the impacts of the cuts to specific claims research funding on First Nations claimants. We explained that significantly reduced research budgets have placed an enormous burden on our ability to advance First Nations claims in a timely manner. The UBCIC Research Department currently struggles with a 35 percent reduction in research staff despite a 34% increase in the number of claims on our work plan since 2013. We have faced severely curtailed travel budgets resulting in long delays obtaining records and oral testimony, restricted abilities to purchase documents and grossly inadequate funds to cover

legal fees. We also face considerable increased costs connected with accessing documents from provincial and federal repositories, as well as increased research and legal costs arising directly from the need to sever the majority of claims into discreet allegations as a result of the previous government's jettisoning of negotiations in favour of small, partial, often non-negotiable offers to First Nations claimants.

The UBCIC takes seriously our ethical duty to BC Indigenous communities to listen to their concerns, and undertake to research all of the specific claims issues they bring forward to us by way of official mandates. We have an extremely large volume of work and our member communities have an expectation that we will accomplish this work on their behalf thoroughly, with the highest professional and ethical standards and in a timely manner so that they may achieve some measure of justice for these historical wrongdoings. We are hindered from meeting this expectation without adequate resources.

At our meeting, you emphasized your government's commitment to resolve specific claims through meaningful negotiations in a fair, just and timely manner and acknowledged that research funding must be restored to sufficient levels in order to accomplish this objective. It is imperative that as Minister you understand that specific claims research funding is not a discretionary expenditure. On the contrary, sufficient and stable research funding is a requirement for Canada to honourably fulfill its fiduciary obligations to First Nations by resolving claims through good-faith negotiations and fully address its outstanding legal obligations to First Nations. A commitment to renewing Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples was prioritized in the 2016 Federal budget.

Any genuine reconciliation process must include resolving Indigenous land claims in an honourable way, and must provide Indigenous Peoples with fair and equal opportunities to participate in the legal processes that frame the negotiation of our grievances. The historical nature of specific claims grievances in no way diminishes the urgency of taking immediate steps to resolve them. The repercussions of failing in this regard have been well documented: protracted conflicts and violent stand-offs such as Oka, Ipperwash and New Caledonia, all unresolved specific claims, are blights on Canada's national conscience and international reputation.

We call on you to fulfill your promise immediately to restore specific claims research funding to all CRUs in Canada. Talk of reconciliation is an empty gesture without taking concrete action to set the process in motion.

On behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS



Grand Chief Stewart Phillip
President



Chief Robert Chamberlin
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BC Assembly of First Nations
First Nations Summit