

# Indigenous people need place around Site C table: new report

Richard Watts / Times Colonist

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“Collaborative consent,” an approach to making political decisions about land and fresh water as they affect First Nations and other Canadians, can offer some answers to issues like the Site C dam, says an advocate for Indigenous Peoples.

A report by the POLIS Water Sustainability Project at the University of Victoria and the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources lays out a shift to achieve what it calls a more equal and fair relationship between First Nations and other governments in Canada.

Merrell-Ann Phare, lead author of the report, Collaborative Consent and British Columbia’s Water: Toward Watershed Co-Governance, said collaborative consent starts with agreeing to have discussions with Indigenous Peoples on a nation-to-nation basis.

On a project such as the Site C hydroelectric dam, it becomes important to recognize First Nations’ rightful place in the decision-making, Phare said. And that goes beyond mere consultations — it means a place at the table when and where decisions are made.

“The [Site C] decision could be revisited with Indigenous governments at the table making the decision together,” Phare said. “It may well result in a different decision, it may not — it depends on the conversation. But that’s the whole point of collaborative consent. It’s for governments, including Indigenous governments, to make decisions together.”

The \$8.8-billion Site C project would dam the Peace River near Fort St. John, flooding the Peace River Valley to create an 83-kilometre reservoir. Two Indigenous communities, the Prophet River First Nation and the West Moberly First Nation, have sought to halt the project. The Supreme Court of Canada declined to hear the case in June.

The B.C. Utilities Commission is reviewing the project. A preliminary report from the commission said it doesn’t believe it has enough information to assess whether to continue, suspend or terminate the project. B.C. Energy Minister Michelle Mungall’s request for the review, made in August, did not ask the commission to consider impacts on First Nations.

Phare said collaborative consent means governments in Canada have to stop being so wary of giving First Nations a place in decision-making. “Long-term reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples will only happen when Indigenous governments have seats at the table,” she said.

Phare said Indigenous Peoples in Canada are in a bind because they have often not yet fully formed their own representative governments. Too often leadership is split between small communities even when they share common ancestries and cultures.

But she said that’s OK. Other Canadian governments might even start by assisting with that political formation and a new fair decision-making process can begin. “Our fundamental view is Indigenous people are one of the three founding nations of Canada,” said Phare. Collaborative consent “is Indigenous people becoming involved the future direction of Canada.”

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