

Treaty not likely high elections priority

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Stalled treaty negotiations between B.C.'s First Nations are not expected to be a major issue in the upcoming federal election.

While just a handful of First Nations in B.C. have successfully concluded treaty negotiations with the province and Ottawa, dozens more, including the Snuneymuxw First Nation, have gone through years of intermittent negotiations with no end in sight.

David Mannix, a spokesman for the Snuneymuxw, said he's "not optimistic" there will be any movement in the negotiations regardless of what comes up during the election debates and who forms the next government.

"B.C. doesn't matter in the federal context," Mannix said.

"Besides, I don't believe (Prime Minister Stephen) Harper will form a majority government so I expect the next federal government will continue to sit on their hands when it comes to our treaty negotiations, like they do now."

Robert Morales is the chief negotiator for the First Nation Unity Protocol group, representing more than 60 B.C. First Nation bands including the Snuneymuxw, that was created in Nanaimo in 2006 in an effort to form a united front to spur stalled treaty negotiations.

The group held talks with representatives from senior government levels last spring in Vancouver in the hope that they might help break the deadlock in negotiations, which revolve around the constitutional status of treaty lands, governance, the co-management of traditional territories and other issues. Morales said the government negotiators brought their findings back to Ottawa and Victoria after 13 meetings with the hope of returning with some new strategies to break the impasse this fall, but the election call has delayed the process.

"We were expecting some changes in their stand on some of these issues, but finding out how significant the changes were to be is still a waiting game," he said.

"With the Harper government's hard line stand on many of these issues I expect negotiations would be even harder if the Conservatives were to form a majority government."

Morales said, if history is a guide, he doesn't expect much of a policy change from Ottawa towards treaty negotiations, regardless if the Liberals or the Conservatives form the next government.

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