

BC Treaty Referendum Offers Choice of Not Being Counted

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By Beverley O'Neil

I panted and counted the beats of my heart, two-four-eight-twelve. It was beating faster than I could count so I had to double and quadruple the numbers. This counting was not an easy feat, and anyone who has heard me speak knows that I can talk fast. I've waited a month to receive my ballot for the BC Treaty Referendum, and you know, when I finally did receive it, it just sits unopened. I don't know why, it just has. Perhaps it's because I already knew the questions, and was certainly confident that I already knew the outcome. There would be no surprises; the majority of the ballots would be 'yes'. I was reminded of Christmas day, all the anticipation leading up to it, but this was different. The BC Treaty Referendum ballot was an event I, as well as 197 first Nations accompanied by more than 200,000 Aboriginal people in BC, didn't anticipate with the same level of enthusiasm or excitement.

I was enthusiastic at the beginning of April when the ballots were being sent out. I conducted my research by going on-line to the BC Treaty Referendum website, spoke to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, as well as read articles and numerous emails. One of the emails evaluated the questions from different perspectives of how someone would answer the question if they were an Environmentalist, Industry/Business Person, Redneck and of course, Racist. From this information, I wrote a lengthy article for the Jewish Outlook Magazine giving my analysis of the Referendum providing a dissertation of the history of the relationship of first Nations and the governments of Canada and British Columbia.

Then I spent most of April in the Yukon doing my best to follow the actions and views of this process from a region where the majority population is Aboriginal. There was next to no information on the Referendum on the radio or television. It was as if the Referendum didn't exist; however, there was a lot of coverage on health care issues.

Upon my return to BC, I found myself in conversations with my non-Aboriginal friends to discover another perspective... the Referendum wasn't a big issue for them. They just completed the ballot and sent it in sort of like deciding if you want chocolate or vanilla pudding. The questions and issues seemed very reasonable to them, although somewhat confusing despite no background research was done on their part. Now, let me say that I don't believe that these people hate Indians or are Racist. I think that for most they just see it as a process, and nothing more. A bit comforting, but their lackey approach is frustrating. BCers should be more concerned than they are, but it doesn't appear that they are. They're paying for this process and so are first Nations, triple... as original land and resource owners, as negotiators and as tax payers. Currently, there are 147 first Nations in the process for eight years that, according to the BC Treaty Commission, have received \$186 million of which \$149 million are repayable loans.

The federal government has provided 92 percent of these funds while BC provided the balance or \$8 of every \$100 the first Nations received. Now, using this formula... 8 percent of \$186 million is \$14.9 million or \$1.86 million per year. (I think this is less than what the fast ferries cost.) The cost of the BC Treaty Referendum is projected at \$10 million - \$10 million for one Referendum versus \$1.86 million a year to negotiate with 147 first Nations. Is the Referendum a wise expenditure?

The real tragedy is that every time a stall tactic is enacted, the cost to first Nations escalates creating a larger debt for our children and our children's children, and there's nothing to show for negotiations and nothing to do to stop neither the debt nor the stall tactics from continuing.

Now the options to respond to the Referendum are limited - return your ballot to the Referendum office, spoil your ballot by burning it or tearing it up, or send it to another location (a Referendum opposition drop off point), or ignore it completely and do nothing. Burning the ballot or tearing it up does nothing other than to give a few split seconds of satisfaction; the only one that will know about your opposition is you. Doing nothing again results in no one knowing your views but you. Another option of sending the ballot to another location, well... I really do want this BC government to know I disagree with the process, so I'm not convinced that is a good choice either.

I looked forward to receiving my ballot and casting my vote, because despite the fact that the only responses the BC government will recognize are 'yes' and 'no' I was and am still determined to voice my opinion. I've decided that my best option is to return the ballot to the election office is by either returning the ballot unmarked or uniquely marking the ballot.

According to the Referendum Act, "the entire ballot must be rejected by the referendum official..." if it is "altered in any way by the voter including, without limitation, the amendment of the wording of any question and any written comments" or not marked or marked in a way that it can be identified. Yes I realize the ballot will then be rejected and not counted because it is not a 'yes/no' response, however, I'd like the BC government to see how many voters do not agree. I'd like to know how many voters will reject the process, and I can only believe this will be done if they have the rejected ballot in hand where on the day, place and time they are counting the ballots.

I would like to see the Media on-site while the ballots are being counted and ensure the rejected ballots are considered, and I would like to know how many. Then I would like to see an evaluation of the cost of the process, and a projection of the real cost to all BCers including first Nations, industry / business and future generations. \$10 million is an opportunity lost in more ways than can be counted, including the lost of trust.

In the meantime, I will go home where the unopened envelop from Elections BC sits and ponder the realization that this is a process, nothing more, nothing less, and perhaps wonder why so much effort, energy, emotions and costs have been put into a process that was outlined 8 years ago.

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Poem by Pastor Niemller, Berlin 1939

First they came for the Jews,
But I did not speak out,
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists,
And I did not speak out,

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Page

Because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade-unionists,
And I did not speak out,
Because I was not a trade-unionist.

Then they came for the Catholics,
And I did not speak out,
Because I was not a Catholic.

Then they came for me,
And there was no one left to speak out for me.