

February 18, 2020

BACKGROUND

Building the foundations of Reconciliation

From the day this government was sworn in, it has made Indigenous rights and reconciliation a priority — not for one ministry, but across the whole of government. On the day each minister was given their individual ministerial responsibilities, they were also given a mandate letter. This letter directed them to seek true, lasting reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in British Columbia, and to support the work of adopting and implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the UN Declaration).

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act

Last fall, the legislature unanimously passed the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (the Declaration Act), developed in collaboration with the First Nations Leadership Council, which includes the B.C. Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit and Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs.

The Declaration Act requires government, in consultation and co-operation with Indigenous peoples in British Columbia, to take all measures necessary to bring provincial laws into alignment with the UN Declaration. It also mandates government create an action plan with Indigenous peoples on achieving the objectives of the UN Declaration, along with annual reporting on progress.

Government is committed to engaging with Indigenous peoples, Nations, organizations and leadership about next steps. This engagement will guide government as it begins to move forward toward full implementation of the Declaration Act.

Ongoing Work to Support Reconciliation

The whole of government has been engaged for the past two and a half years in taking steps to work with Indigenous peoples to support healthy and thriving communities.

Government moved quickly to change policies and address gaps long identified as a high priority by Indigenous peoples, including work to address the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The Declaration Act builds on the foundation of this work and demonstrates government's commitment to true and lasting reconciliation, and willingness to work quickly to meet the priority needs of Indigenous peoples.

The following items are a selection of just some of the important work has been doing over the last two years in anticipation of the Declaration Act.

Fixing the Child Protection System

No one wants to see a child harmed. And no one wants to see a child unnecessarily taken from their family. Because of the significant cultural harms caused by taking Indigenous children away from their families and communities, the Province has been working quickly to address the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the care of the Province.

To keep children with their families and in their communities, government boosted support payments to extended family members to match the supports given to all foster parents. Because more Indigenous children are being supported from within their families and communities, B.C. now has the lowest number of children and youth in care in 30 years, and the lowest number of Indigenous children in care since 2014. Still, this government knows much more needs to be done.

One key way government is working to keep Indigenous children out of care is by ending the practice of issuing "birth alerts," which saw children taken from their parents without consent by service providers who had child protection concerns.

Instead of taking children away because families need help, this new, collaborative approach involves service providers working closely with parents to identify and provide the supports they need to give their children a healthy start.

The continuing overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in B.C.'s care system makes supports for children and youth aging out of government care particularly important. That is why government was proud to expand the tuition waiver for former children and youth in care to all public post-secondary institutions as one of its first acts. It has since expanded the program to invest in a number of trades training programs and to increase and improve the financial supports former youth in care receive so that they can focus on their studies. *Budget 2020* continues to build on this initiative by making these important financial supports available to more youth who qualify for the tuition waiver.

The Province acknowledges and honours the more than 1,100 former youth in care now getting a post-secondary education or trades training, tuition-free, and getting started on the path to a bright future.

Supporting Indigenous Health and Healing

Supporting the health and healing of Indigenous peoples is critical to the well-being of Indigenous families.

In partnership with the First Nations Health Authority, government has invested \$40 million to build two new urban Indigenous treatment centres and rebuild or renovate six more in rural communities. It has also helped fund the Kilala Lelum Urban Indigenous Health and Healing Cooperative in Vancouver — a first of its kind in B.C., led by Indigenous Elders using both Indigenous and Western medicine and healing practices.

Recognizing that Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately harmed by the overdose crisis, government partnered with the First Nations Health Authority, Métis Nation British Columbia and Friendship Centres on a three-year investment of \$20 million to support First Nations communities and Indigenous peoples in addressing this crisis. Fifty-five grants have already been provided for initiatives under this program.

Making K-12 Education More Accessible and Reflective of Indigenous Experiences

For too long, too many Indigenous children and youth have been left behind by an education system that did not include Indigenous teachings and perspectives or reflect the lived realities of Indigenous peoples.

To help reverse this trend, government worked with the First Nations Educations Steering Committee and the First Nations Schools Association to deliver a collaborative tripartite agreement that ensures an equitable education for First Nations students, no matter where they live.

This \$100-million, five-year agreement supports First Nations students in B.C. who attend on-reserve First Nations schools or off-reserve public or independent schools.

Thanks to the hard work of Indigenous students, new investments and a new curriculum that better reflects Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and experiences, Indigenous students in B.C. are completing secondary school at the highest rate in history, with almost 70% completing secondary school last year. Still, the goal is to see every student in B.C. succeed, and so there is much more work to be done.

To reach that goal, government is continuing to work to improve education for Indigenous students by funding new Indigenous teacher education training spaces, two new Indigenous masters of education cohorts, and public-teacher education programs so teachers in schools are better equipped to support Indigenous learners. Government has also taken steps to better support Indigenous students in B.C. by bringing in a new professional standard that requires teachers to commit to truth, reconciliation and healing.

B.C. has also funded the creation of 17 First Nations language curricula, with more in development, and is also committed to moving to full course offerings in Indigenous languages. There are more Indigenous languages spoken in British Columbia than in any other province in the country — and government has a responsibility to do its part to support their survival and revival.

As part of addressing the vulnerability factors that can lead to Indigenous children struggling in the school system, government is investing \$30 million over three years to expand the Head Start program in more than 30 communities across the province. Head Start offers culturally specific early-learning, child care and parenting programs, with services available at no cost to families.

These investments, in addition to new funding in *Budget 2020* for vulnerable learners, will help more Indigenous students graduate with their peers.

Opening Doors to Opportunity

Indigenous students need to see a path forward for them at our post-secondary institutions, and a way to succeed in the workforce.

To better reflect the needs of Indigenous students, government is co-developing a new Indigenous post-secondary education and training strategy and Indigenous skills training programming with the First Nations Education Steering Committee, Indigenous Adult and Higher Association, Métis Nation British Columbia, the British Columbia Aboriginal Training Employment Alliance and other Indigenous post-secondary partners.

As part of helping Indigenous peoples access good-paying jobs, government is also delivering more than \$24 million a year in job-training funding in Indigenous communities through the Aboriginal Community-Based Training Partnerships Program, the Community Workforce Response Grant and Indigenous Skills Training Development Fund.

Community benefits agreements are being used to keep jobs in local communities, and government investments are being used as an opportunity to provide apprenticeships, skills training and employment opportunities on a priority basis for Indigenous peoples and others who have been shut out from opportunity.

Representation matters. That is why government has made sure there is Indigenous representation on every single board of directors of public post-secondary institutions in British Columbia.

In line with Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, government funded the creation of Canada's first Indigenous law program at the University of Victoria, which is now providing intensive study of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous law, allowing people to work fluently across both realms. Government is also funding the pilot for a new Indigenous language fluency degree.

Supporting Revitalization of Indigenous Languages

For too long, language revitalization was neglected and all Indigenous languages in B.C. are endangered. Many of the challenges communities face around language and culture are systemic and founded on colonial practices aimed at eradication of Indigenous culture, including the residential school system. By investing in Indigenous languages and culture, the Province is starting to address those systemic social challenges at the community level, connecting peoples to their communities, land and cultures.

\$50 million in provincial funding through the Indigenous-led First Peoples' Cultural Council is helping communities and peoples to reclaim connections to their language and culture. With this funding, the council has more than doubled the number of community language grants to support language revitalization, with more than \$16 million in grants distributed to First Nations since 2018.

The council is now supporting more than 30 language nests, which create cultural immersion environments for preschool-age children and their parents to become fluent in First Nations languages, as well as more than 100 mentor-apprentice teams. They are also significantly increasing the number of dialects archived on [FirstVoices.com](https://www.firstvoices.com).

While the continued work of the First Peoples' Cultural Council supports a foundation for the future, there is also still much to do together to support communities in their work to restore their languages, which are vital to nationhood and sovereignty.

Working Together to Address the Housing Crisis

Indigenous nations and organizations are important partners with government in addressing the housing crisis.

Through the Building BC: Indigenous Housing Fund, government is investing \$550 million over 10 years to build 1,750 homes for Indigenous peoples, both on- and off-reserve.

With this fund, B.C. became the first and only provincial government to fund on-reserve housing. Nearly 1,200 new affordable homes are underway through this program right now.

Additionally, each and every one of the Building BC housing fund streams welcomes applications from Indigenous partners.

The provincial government is working with Indigenous communities, Friendship Centres, and other Indigenous-led organizations to build the homes people need in communities in every part of the province.

Protecting the Things that Matter

Resource development is a vital part of the provincial economy. Resource jobs sustain families and communities. But resource development must be sustainable and pursued without jeopardizing the clean air, clean water and healthy land that people depend on.

Under the UN Declaration, Indigenous peoples have the right to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands, territories and resources.

As part of respecting this right, government worked closely with Indigenous leaders to find a way forward on the issue of salmon farms in the Broughton Archipelago. Using a consensus-based process, the Province and the Kwikwasut'inuxw Haxwa'mis, 'Namgis and Mamalilikulla Nations worked together to deliver recommendations to the federal and provincial governments on the future of salmon farms in the region.

Through this process, which included industry, all parties were able to come together around a just transition plan for fish farms in the Broughton Archipelago. This process also resulted in changes to *Land Act* policy, so that in the future salmon-farm tenures will only be granted where there is an agreement in place with local First Nations within their own traditional territories.

The *Environmental Assessment Act* plays an important role in involving Indigenous nations in land-use decisions. Recognizing that this legislation is critical to reconciliation, government worked closely with Indigenous nations to develop a new *Environmental Assessment Act*, which was passed in November 2018 and came into force in December 2019.

The new act increases avenues for Indigenous and public participation in the assessment process, involves all participants earlier and aims to identify issues of concern at the outset, improving outcomes and reducing conflict. Further, it requires the minister to consider participating Indigenous nations' consent to the project before a decision is issued.

Supporting Self-Governance

The right to self-government, autonomy and self-determination requires that Indigenous nations have stable, predictable sources of revenue to invest in critical things for every government, like infrastructure, services that build healthy communities and the staff to get it done.

In November 2018, government announced that B.C. First Nations will share in provincial gaming revenue, with a 25-year commitment that will see about \$3 billion in new revenues — transferred from one level of government to another — to support First Nations' priorities for social services, education, infrastructure, cultural revitalization and self-government capacity.

Through the BC First Nations Gaming Revenue Sharing Limited Partnership, \$100 million per year is going to all First Nations communities in B.C. to pursue their own priorities and serve the needs of their own communities. First Nations are using the revenues to make a real difference in communities. Examples include a community youth centre, a forest fuel management program to protect homes from wildfires and language programs that build connection to culture.

Friendship Centres provide important connections to Indigenous peoples in urban communities right across the province. Recognizing the important role these community hubs play for urban Indigenous peoples, government tripled the financial support for Friendship Centres. But more importantly, this represents, for the first time ever, stable core funding so that they can focus on their important work.

Justice for Indigenous people

Too many Indigenous peoples have had their lives irrevocably changed for the worse by a justice system that has been unresponsive to their needs and culturally unsafe. Meaningful, transformative changes to the justice system are needed to advance reconciliation.

To create these changes, government endorsed an agreement with the B.C. Aboriginal Justice Council, now the B.C. First Nations Justice Council, which identified seven priorities for transforming the justice system and committed partners to developing an Indigenous justice strategy.

To support this work, the BC Prosecution Service has been providing mandatory education and training for justice system staff, updating policy and practice, and engaging directly with First Nations to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous persons as victims, accused and offenders in the criminal justice system, and to make court services more culturally safe for Indigenous peoples.

Multiple new policies have been introduced through the BC Prosecution Service to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the justice system, including new charge assessment guidelines, a new bail provision that directs prosecutors to exercise restraint in all bail matters, especially where the accused is Indigenous, and new guidelines for probation conditions that direct prosecutors to consider systemic factors that affect Indigenous peoples when addressing probation violations. Additional policy changes are under development to further support the goal of making the justice system more fair and equitable.

Recognizing that the adversarial approach often taken by the court system is not in line with Indigenous justice practices, government has also been expanding access to specialized Indigenous courts. Two additional Indigenous courts have opened since fall 2017, with the next one in Williams Lake set to open in early 2020.

Connecting Indigenous Communities

Connections are important to communities. Articles 20, 21 and 24 of the UN Declaration require governments to support Indigenous peoples in gaining meaningful access to the internet to support economic activities, health care and social services.

In December 2019, government launched a new intake of the Connecting British Columbia program, offering an additional \$50 million to help rural, remote and Indigenous communities expand broadband infrastructure.

Work is already underway or completed under this program to offer high-speed internet access to 83 Indigenous communities in British Columbia.

Physical connectivity is as important as digital connectivity, which is why the Province is working with the federal government to maintain BC Bus North services. Government is also offering driver training to people in Indigenous communities, recognizing that the ability to get around is critical, especially for Indigenous peoples living in rural and remote communities.

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