Trudeau’s promises of ‘renewed relationship’ with First Nations evaporated with budget

By PAMELA PALMATER

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau won the hearts of many Canadians by finally getting rid of Stephen Harper and his decade of oppression, violation of civil rights and vilification of First Nations.

Most breathed a sigh of relief on October 20, 2015, when newly elected Trudeau talked about changing everything in Canada. He gave moving speeches about Canada’s shameful history with Indigenous peoples and committed to implementing all the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Trudeau promised to start this process by implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and respecting the right of First Nations to say no to development on their territories. Most significant were his promises to renew the nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and First Nations that would be guided by the spirit and intent of treaties and that respected constitutionally protected Aboriginal and treaty rights, inherent rights and First Nation jurisdictions.

The budget released on March 22 saw these promises evaporate into thin air only to be replaced by an underfunded program and service agenda.

Canadians are being asked to celebrate a budget which is being promoted as “historic” not just by Trudeau and the majority of journalists and commentators in mainstream media, but even by Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief Perry Bellegarde.

Canadians are faced with two major obstacles to understanding this budget: one, trying to figure out which numbers are accurate; and two, assessing those numbers in their proper context.

‘Real Change’ by shell game

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau poses for a selfie with an elder while visiting Tsut’ina First Nation on March 4, 2016. Photo from Google Images/Huffington Post.

Trudeau failed to deliver on his election promise to First Nations, blaming it on the Conservatives prior to the budget being released, but the failure is ultimately his. Still, without the proper context, many Canadians may think that billions of dollars is a lot of money.

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)’s own internal report noted that the housing needs for the 63 First Nations in Manitoba would cost $2 billion. Since Manitoba First Nations represent only 10 % of all First Nations, the national cost to address the housing crisis would be closer to $20 billion.

In First Nation education, the 2 % funding cap imposed by the former Liberal government created a cumulative deficit of over $20 billion. This means First Nations are more than $20 billion behind the starting line when it comes to infrastructure (schools), staff, training, materials, curriculum development, etc.

That doesn’t include extra costs for post-secondary education that have created a waiting list of thousands of First Nation students. Yet, there was no budget line for post-secondary education; instead there was only a promise that Trudeau’s government would work with students, parents, educators and Indigenous groups to “explore” future options.

First Nation water and sewer should have been an easy budget line to address since there are already independent studies on what the actual costs are to address the crisis. The last report said it would cost almost $6 billion to fix the current water and sewer stock with an additional $2 billion for operation and maintenance needed over the next four years. Add to this a conservative estimate of $18 billion to add new water and sewer infrastructure that will be needed to service all the new houses needed in First Nations, and you get a rough number of $18 billion. The longer houses, water, sewer or any infrastructure system is left without maintenance and service, the worse it deteriorates, costing more to fix.

The commitment to protect and support Indigenous languages is one of the most shocking lines in this budget. The TRC report recommended substantial support to revive and protect Indigenous languages since they are only endangered because of Canada’s purposeful attempts to wipe out our languages in various assimilation policies, including residential schools.

From the end of the line: Red Head resident on Energy East pipeline

By LYNAYA ASTEPHEN

Red Head – Every moment I am home I feel compelled to look out my front windows. Why? To make sure there is no new building for the tar sands. You see I live literally across from where Energy East would propose to end in Saint John, NB.

The pipeline would ship 1.1 million barrels of diluted bitumen from Hardisty, Alberta to a spot across from my house. A forested area filled with animals and streams run from the mountains behind my place through fields that run to the Bay of Fundy.

If I look to the right, I see a beautiful view of the Bay of Fundy, fishing boats, gorgeous sunsets and Partridge Island, where Irish immigrants landed during the potato famine. It is paradise here.

Unfortunately, it’s where a company supported by the New Brunswick and Alberta governments want to put an export terminal for the tar sands. In total, 281 tankers would leave here each year; about a ship and a half a day.

TransCanada plans on putting 22 tanks of 13.6 million litres of bitumen in the field and woods across from my home and in my neighbour’s backyard. Some homes will have the facilities less than 300 metres away. Some tanks would be six stories tall.

Just down the road is the Canoeport Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plant. In an incident, their flare killed 7,500 birds, some endangered species. Carapoint, owned by Repsol and Irving, got charged only $750,000 for the bird kill. TransCanada plans to transport the bitumen to Irving’s Oil refinery and export terminal.

Why have I decided to fight? In May 2014 I attended an open house for TransCanada. I had questions on environmental issues, Someone with TransCanada pointed me to the head environmental guy. Instead of answering my questions, he reached over to a nearby table and then leaned me a packet of jobs. To my surprise, I got angry and said I was not for his pipeline.

When I got home, I decided to find my own answers. For many months, I read about TransCanada, tar sands, climate change and politics. Meanwhile TransCanada was refusing to have town hall style meetings. They are only meeting with landowners, one-on-one, in their homes or in their own set-up, in their open houses, what the company control the message. They do not want open discussion with others to happen. The same thing happened in the U.S. with the Keystone XL pipeline.

Everyday, I watch a pipeline divide my country using arguments that are meant to distract us from real issues. My neighbors, some who have lived here their entire lives, shriveled with fear. We have fishermen here, their livelihoods depend on the Bay of Fundy in the exact same water near they proposed end terminal. This is where they fish for lobsters, a creature which is bottom-dwelling. A spill would wipe out these creatures like it did to the fish and wildlife of Kalamazoo River, Michigan when oil spilled there. Five years later, Kalamazoo is still not fully cleaned up and the cost is $5 billion.

Hundreds marched against the Energy East pipeline on a foggy Red Head Road in May 2015. The Energy East proposal includes an oil tank farm and terminal in Red Head. Photo by Tracy Gynn.
First Nations children still in crisis

It’s hard to believe that Trudeau would not at least ensure that the budget line for First Nation child and family services was consistent with the costs noted in the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in the child welfare case it lost. An increase of $200 million is needed annually just to get child welfare funding for First Nations children somewhere close to provincial levels of funding.

Yet, the budget shows a mere $71 million for next year. These levels are now near what is needed to address the crisis of First Nations children in foster care. In Manitoba alone, 90% of all kids in care are Indigenous with one baby taken away from its mother every day, even though being on 4% of the population, Indigenous kids represent about half of all kids in care. Sadly, it looks like Cindy Blackstock’s fight for justice for our kids is not over.

Even the amount set aside for a national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls pale in comparison to the costs of past inquiries. But we also have to realize that not all of the $5.3 billion is even going to go to First Nations. A large percentage is set aside for ICAC, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corp., the National Energy Board, various agencies, etc. Once again, the bureaucracy will benefit first.

There are other funding deficiencies for Indigenous peoples living off-reserve or for the Inuit in the North – we won’t even go into the various program progression on reserves, in comparison to the costs of past inquiries. But we also have to realize that not all of the $5.3 billion is even going to go to First Nations. A large percentage is set aside for ICAC, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corp., the National Energy Board, various agencies, etc. Once again, the bureaucracy will benefit first.

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