

From the House

Columnist Dennis Bevington, MP Western Arctic

Parliament reacts to Idle No More.

The 2013 Parliamentary season will start on a different note with the tremendous impact of the Idle No More campaign. It has dominated the Canadian New Year political agenda in a way that is unique in my time in Parliament, (three terms in both minority and majority governments). The only thing that compares to its impact was the 2008 coalition effort by Jack Layton and Stephan Dion. That was also a holiday season event that shook the political tree, with a few flying off the branches. Casualties have been limited so far, but the long term consequences of this unrest have many on both sides concerned.

As with the coalition, the First Nations movement's continued success will be measured not simply by the reaction of Prime Minister Harper and the Conservative Government, but by the support and understanding of non-aboriginal Canadians. The Coalition effort was lost in the eye of the public, through mishandling of the message and the poisonous presence of Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe.

The Idle no More movement was born out of frustration with the scope and significance of the legislative changes that have been brought in by the Conservative Government this year. Through two omnibus bills, C-38 and C-45, which eviscerated many of the environmental protections provided by Federal law across the country, the Conservatives have said very strongly that development will trump all concerns.

To First Nations, with their strong cultural attachment to the land, and their court established rights for consultation, this has been a great rallying point.

For many other Canadians, rallying around environmental protection is well received. It can elicit all kinds of support. Across the country, there is no shortage of allies for a civil

battle over the environment! So far, the collective leadership of Idle No More has struck the right note and made many positive and peaceful events.

The response from the Government side has been clear. They will not bend on the environmental legislation that has been put forward. They will continue talking with Grand Chief Atleo and the AFN about the endemic problems of First Nations life, failed education, missed economic opportunities and communities in crisis. This may or may not lead to improvements in the lives of First Nations people. They will deflect the Idle No More message towards that of poor financial management through leaked audits, and their media circus will continue to put the blame on the First Nations leadership for all and sundry. The government will not win with a discourse on land rights or the environment. The Courts have already spoken. With an impressive string of 30 consecutive favourable rulings on First Nation land rights, the moral high ground is clearly with First Nations.

There is much more to come in this affair for the north. Within the NWT, we will face further challenges to First Nations traditional land rights in the Conservative legislation that is either on the Order Paper right now or will be coming in the upcoming session. Whether it is the Bill 47, The Surface Rights Board Act or the soon to come amendments to the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act, the fit with Idle No More is very evident.

Across the NWT, I believe that it is safe to say that support for the Idle No More movement is very strong, and across all of our society. It is not unanimous, but in politics almost nothing is. Some will have a dilemma with this strong support. The Premier and Cabinet, who have been held silent on all the changes to our environmental laws by the dangling carrot of devolution, can expect to be further challenged by the movement. Industry in the north, especially our significant resource sector is caught as well, between desiring regulatory certainty and reduced start-up costs, and facing greater public discord, blockades and court challenges.