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# Despite great hopes, election campaign underwhelms on Indigenous economic policy

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As the federal election campaign unfolds, Sharleen Gale has been waiting to hear how candidates plan to support Indigenous companies, workers and investors.

To date, she has been largely disappointed.

“What I’ve seen in this election just seems like every other election, in that there has not been any public focus on Indigenous economic development,” said Ms. Gale, the chief councillor of Fort Nelson First Nation in British Columbia.

All of the major parties have included multiple commitments to Indigenous groups in their platforms. But Ms. Gale said she would like to hear more talk on the campaign trail about how First Nations people can become business owners and operators.

“We see projects that are important to us, as Indigenous people and Canadians, and they are not being built – or they are delayed, or there are extra costs, because our Indigenous values and culture and language are not being considered when these projects are developed in our territories,” Ms. Gale said.

For example, the Fort Nelson First Nation is developing the Clarke Lake Geothermal Development Project, recently renamed Tu Deh-Kah – meaning “water steam,” in Dene. The project, which is expected to generate up to 15 megawatts of electricity from a natural gas field nearing depletion, took several years to secure financing and approvals, Ms. Gale said. Plans call for it to be in commercial production by 2024. (The federal government has invested about \$40.5-million in the project.)

Ms. Gale and others had expected more vigorous discussion of Indigenous issues on the campaign trail – especially after this year’s revelations of unmarked graves at residential schools brought renewed attention to long-standing inequities in the federal government’s treatment of Indigenous people.

Even after recommendations from the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other reports, dozens of Indigenous communities lack clean drinking water. Indigenous children are overrepresented in child welfare systems. Housing on some reserves is crowded and mouldy. And there are gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians in areas including education, health care and employment.

In 2019, B.C. passed legislation to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. And in 2021, the federal government did the same, raising expectations for Indigenous voices to be heard.

“I don’t think the discussion around Indigenous rights, Indigenous socio-economic gaps and Indigenous prosperity is as prevalent in the campaign as it should be,” said Tabatha Bull, president and chief executive officer of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business.

The CCAB has been pushing for procurement targets that would require the federal government to purchase a certain amount its goods and services from Indigenous businesses.

Ottawa has for several years said it plans to increase the value of contracts going to Indigenous-owned business through a 5-per-cent target, but progress has been limited.

In June, Shannin Metatawabin, CEO of the National Aboriginal Capital Corp., told the parliamentary committee on government operations and estimates that the procurement initiative appeared to have stalled.

“As far as we know, the high point was in 2014, with \$227-million in Indigenous set-asides, which was only 0.8 per cent of total federal procurement that year. I say, ‘as far as we know’ because one issue our group has identified is the lack of consistent, accessible data across federal departments,” Mr. Metatawabin told the committee.

This past August, the Liberal government updated the initiative. It said a 5-per-cent target, with public reporting, would be phased in over three years.

The other major parties have also promised to buy from Indigenous businesses. The NDP platform says the party would prioritize procurement from Indigenous companies where possible. The Conservatives say they would set active targets with accountability mechanisms. The Green Party platform doesn’t specifically mention Indigenous procurement targets, but it includes other commitments, including support for Indigenous entrepreneurs.

In late August, citing potential economic benefits for Indigenous communities, Conservative Leader Erin O’Toole said he would prioritize building the Northern Gateway pipeline if he forms government after the Sept. 20 election.

The project, which was to carry oil from Alberta to the B.C. coast, went through a lengthy and controversial review process before the Liberal government rejected it in late 2016.

Before Northern Gateway was cancelled, Dale Swampy was involved with a group called Aboriginal Equity Partners, which represented First Nations planning to take an equity stake in the project.

Mr. Swampy is currently president of the National Coalition of Chiefs, which includes members of the former investment group. He said he welcomed Mr. O’Toole’s pledge to revive Northern Gateway. The project, Mr. Swampy said, would have brought substantial economic benefits to the Indigenous communities that backed it.

“To get Northern Gateway passed would have a huge impact on the oil industry in Alberta and a huge impact on our ability to access opportunities to get us out of poverty,” he said.

Although Aboriginal Equity Partners backed the project, other First Nations opposed it, saying it posed unacceptable environmental risks.

Charlene Higgins, CEO of the of the B.C.-based First Nations Forestry Council, said she had hoped to hear more from federal candidates about forestry-related skills training for Indigenous people. She added that the sector’s labour force is aging.

“I haven’t heard any of the candidates saying, ‘We really need to increase Indigenous participation in the forestry sector, not only in stewardship and governance, but federally. How can we get Indigenous youth trained up and involved in the sector?’” she said.

The council has received some federal funding for jobs programs, but would be interested in longer-term support, she added.

“We’ve got the relationships and ability to make this work. We just need the resources.”

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