

Ecumenical Letter of Solidarity with Wet'suwet'en Land Defenders

November 5, 2021

As representatives of an ecumenical community committed to the principles of reconciliation set forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we write to register our solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en peoples who are defending their lands in opposition to the Coastal GasLink Pipeline. This pipeline violates the fundamental right of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous Nations; it violates the Wet'suwet'en nation's right to "maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned... lands, territories, waters... and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities for future generations in this regard."¹

By granting approval to the Coastal GasLink pipeline, the governments of Canada and British Columbia fail to respect the Supreme Court of Canada's 1997 ruling that Wet'suwet'en title constitutes an ancestral right protected by section 35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982. We also believe this action is fundamentally at odds with the commitments made at both provincial and federal levels to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Presently, Coastal GasLink is preparing to drill under Wedzin Kwa, the sacred headwaters of the Wet'suwet'en people.² The pipeline endangers salmon populations and adversely impacts water quality during the construction phase at river crossings and poses a risk of future pipeline ruptures.

The pipeline further endangers the lives of Indigenous women, children, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples, who face an increased risk of violence from the presence of temporary work camps near their communities. There has also been an increase in police violence against Wet'suwet'en Peoples opposed to the pipeline. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has called on the government of Canada to withdraw RCMP and associated security and policing services from Wet'suwet'en territory.³

In our view, government backing of this pipeline serves the interests of the fossil fuel industry and continues the racist and supremacist legacy of settler colonial dispossession rooted in the doctrines of discovery and terra nullius, a legacy in which the State's jurisdiction, with its claims to radical/underlying title, runs roughshod over the Original Peoples' inherent rights, legal traditions, and jurisdiction.

We recognize that many First Nations band councils have signed mutual benefit agreements along the pipeline route. We know that some genuinely support these projects, while others

¹ Article 25, UN General Assembly, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly*, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/295, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/471355a82.html> [accessed 4 November 2021].

² See "Wet'suwet'en Blockade Erected to Stop Coastal Gaslink Drilling Under Sacred Headwaters," September 27, 2021, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c51ebf73e2d0957ca117eb5/t/615363131b4ce541bf8589c3/1632854804716/Sept+26+Press+Release+_Stop+Drilling+Under+Sacred+Headwaters+-+Google+Docs.pdf.

³ See "What cost are human rights worth?' UN calls for immediate RCMP withdrawal in Wet'suwet'en standoff," January 9, 2020, <https://thenarwhal.ca/what-cost-are-human-rights-worth-un-calls-for-immediate-rcmp-withdrawal-in-wetsuweten-standoff/>

have made a pragmatic decision, believing that the pipelines are inevitable (i.e., that without signing these agreements their communities will be left out of any economic benefits). Nonetheless, these mutual benefit agreements do not satisfy the principle of FPIC. As Canada and B.C. have recently acknowledged, "Rights and title are held by the Wet'suwet'en houses under their system of governance."⁴ **The Wet'suwet'en houses and hereditary chiefs have not approved the Coastal GasLink pipeline.**

We also recognize that we are in a climate emergency, and that the Wet'suwet'en are not only defending their homelands and homewaters, but our common home. Their resistance is part of a movement led by Indigenous water protectors and land defenders that has stopped the equivalent of one-quarter of emissions from Canada and the United States.⁵

Although the fossil fuel industry in Canada plans on increasing production in the coming years⁶, we need to rapidly replace that infrastructure through green energy such as wind and solar. The window for profiting from the extraction of fossil fuels is closing, creating an urgency for the industry to exploit the resource while it remains in demand. As humanity faces "an existential threat" due to global heating (UN Secretary General António Guterres), there is no moral or ethical reason to countenance new fossil fuel infrastructure. And yet we recognize that the government and corporations have a monopoly on the power of the courts, RCMP and private security firms to push the pipelines to completion despite the lack of consent from Indigenous Nations and a growing number of concerned citizens.

As people of faith, we urge the government to halt this project and the associated erosion of trust with Indigenous Nations. Our scriptures call us to right relationship with Creation and all of our relatives. The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has made plain that "greenhouse-gas emissions from fossil-fuel burning and deforestation are choking the planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk."⁷ As followers of Christ, we are called to be particularly attentive to the cries of the poor and the marginalized in society. Indigenous peoples and under-resourced populations are disproportionately affected by the consequences of climate change and resource extraction projects.⁸

We also call on the government to cease subsidizing this industry with money from taxes coming from citizens that do not agree with the government's actions in this regard. The Coastal GasLink pipeline contradicts the government's stated policy directions. We urge the

⁴ "Memorandum of Understanding Between Canada, British Columbia, and Wet'suwet'en," February 29, 2020, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/natural-resourcestewardship/consulting-with-firstnations/agreements/signed_mou_bc_canada_and_wetsuweten_may_14_2020.pdf?platform=hootsuite.

⁵ See "Indigenous Resistance Against Carbon," August 2021, <https://www.ienearth.org/indigenous-resistance-against-carbon/>

⁶ See "Canada's climate solution? Keep increasing fossil fuel extraction," National Observer, September 15, 2021, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2021/09/15/analysis/canadas-climate-solution-keep-increasing-fossil-fuel-extraction>.

⁷ "Secretary-General Calls Latest IPCC Report 'Code Red for Humanity,' United Nations, (August 9, 2021), accessed October 26, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20847.doc.htm>

⁸ See "Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home," June 18, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

government to move forward on its commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous Nations, as articulated in both federal and provincial legislation to honour and implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁹ and the Calls to Justice outlined in the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.¹⁰ These policy initiatives have our full support.

Yours sincerely,

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⁹ See Bill C-15 in Canadian federal legislation and Bill 41 in BC provincial legislation.

¹⁰ See "Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls," 2019, <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>

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