

'He's a liar': Why the Left Coast may be writing off Justin Trudeau  
British Columbians fell hard for 'sunny ways'. Trudeau's approach to development is changing their minds.

Michael Harris Thursday, February 23rd, 2017

The man sitting at the head of the table has a face that should be on money.

It is calm, etched with wrinkle lines of infinite patience, utterly immune to honeyed words. Grand Chief Stewart Phillip has heard more vows than the parsons in Reno's drive-thru wedding chapels — most of them destined to be broken by the politicians who made them. Yet behind the softness, the weary eyes suggest something else. These are undefeated eyes.

I am in the downtown Vancouver boardroom of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs and the gentle voice is saying some very tough things.

"My wife and I were scheduled to march in the Chinese New Year's parade in Vancouver, until we found out that Trudeau was going to be there," he says. "No way was I going to meet him unless I was on one side of the barrier, and he was on the other."

Even accounting for the usual gulf between the public and private rhetoric of First Nations leaders as they navigate the shoals and reefs of the relationship with Big White Government, the chief's words are remarkably blunt.

Not long ago, his Indigenous people were among the strongest supporters of Justin Trudeau in the country. Although a big part of mainstream British Columbia also succumbed to Trudeau's charms in 2015, it could be argued that the First Nations peoples showed the greatest enthusiasm of all. With good reason.

"Trudeau made serious and solid commitments. He said no relationship was more important to him than the nation-to-nation relationship with First Nations. He was so convincing that our

people went out to vote for him in unprecedented numbers,” Grand Chief Phillip says.

It sounded a lot better than the previous decade under PM Stephen Harper, a time of slashed funding and open insults.

“We were virtually at war with the Harper government for ten years,” Phillip says. “Harper inflicted great hardship on our people, openly attacking our communities and leadership. I woke up to that ongoing battle every single day.

“Trudeau gave us hope.”

All that changed when the Trudeau government gave the green light to British Columbia’s massive hydro development on the Peace River, the Site C Dam.

The project’s proponents, led by Premier Christy Clark, say the dam will bring prosperity and jobs. Critics argue that it’s a \$9 billion white elephant (the costs of the project have tripled) that will do irreparable damage to the environment and impinge on First Nations rights. Grand Chief Phillip recalls the day he got the bad news.

“It was late Friday afternoon when Ottawa made the announcement. This did surprise us. This was the acid test, that they would provide these approvals. Treaty Eight people had travelled to Ottawa and laid out the facts. We told them that this would have adverse affects on native people and the environment.

“The truth is, Trudeau lied to us. He is very close to violating the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I describe him now as a serial liar.”

His point-blank verbal blast at Trudeau is echoed by an iconic figure in Canadian public life and letters — author, scientist and broadcaster David Suzuki.

“I’m going to be much more outspoken in the coming election cycle. Trudeau is a liar,” Suzuki says. “For me, that’s the charge. He’s an out-and-out liar. I don’t think he deserves a second chance.”

Like Grand Chief Phillip, Suzuki didn’t always see it that way. In fact, he voted strategically for Trudeau in order get rid of the only politician he says he has ever “hated” — Stephen Harper. At first, it seemed like a sound strategy.

“Justin came in and it was such a huge relief after Harper. As a father of four girls, I loved his initial actions — gender equity, then Paris, and of course a big, big commitment to First Nations.

“What the hell is going on now? Site C, Kinder Morgan, he even snuck in the southern line! My daughter and both her two kids were arrested protesting this stuff. His grade today? F. He has lost all credibility with me.”

On a personal level, Suzuki’s most bitter disappointment was the PM’s flip-flop on electoral reform. As Japanese-Canadians born in 1909 and 1911, Suzuki’s parents had not been allowed to vote. Suzuki himself has voted in every election since he was 21 but never for the winner — until 2015. He sees the vote, and any promises about making it more effective, as sacrosanct.