What's good for First Nations is good for business too

By Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day, Wiindawtegowinini

What's good for First Nations is good for business. It's a basic fact that all members of the mining community should remember during the federal election. There's an honest truth that gets lost in politics: First Nations are looking for opportunities and partners who respect our rights, lands and treaties.

When I ran for election, I ran on a platform of Treaty implementation and opportunities for youth. The principle of sharing, which is the basis of our Treaty relationship, creates opportunities for youth.

Sharing the wealth of Turtle Island includes the resources above, as well as below, and is premised on respect for the health of our lands. Put simply, if we follow the Treaties, both industry and First Nations share in economic gains today and for future generations in a way that maintains the health of our lands.

The right partner understands that the economic fortunes of mines and First Nations are intertwined. Development is not a zero-sum game. Either we both win, or no one wins.

The largest obstacle to the relationship between the mining community and First Nations has been bad politics. As every mining company knows, accessing our lands can only be done within the context of Treaties. Every proponent knows it is the duty of the Crown to consult, and accommodate.

First Nations will always assert their rights and title, and when the Crown looks the other way both proponents and First Nations enter a mutually harmful cycle of litigation. That means when politicians get it wrong, we all lose.

This election should be an opportunity to figure out how we do better. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada is looking to create new consultation guidelines. Natural Resources Canada is tasked with implementing new transparency requirements on payments to First Nations by mining companies.

The Mineral Exploration Tax Credit will be up for renewal again next year and some political pundits have said the 2015 credit reforms are against First Nations best interests.

We need the right people in Ottawa to bring these pieces where we need them to be.

For First Nations, economic development and respect for the environment must go hand in hand. Opportunities that respect the environment, create opportunities for our youth, honour our Treaties, and acknowledge the wisdom of our Elders will be embraced in most circumstances.

It's difficult to meet those criteria when government refuses to consult, punishes First Nations with punitive cut backs under the guise of transparency, or ignores environmental concerns.

If we fail to get it right this election, we may lose our opportunity to move forward together and achieve mutual benefit. The stakes are high. The mineral sector may be in a slump, but the opportunities are endless.

We know the right industry players can be good partners. More than 300 Impact Benefit Agreements have been signed between mining companies and First Nations since 1974. We must continue following best practices and throw out ideas that stand opposed to our Treaty relationships. The opportunities are rich. Let's not allow bad policy and poor government practices to hold opportunities back.
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