

Cashore says Gitxsan treaty talks not broken off because of election

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The province did not break off treaty talks with the Gitxsan Indians because of the coming election, Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Cashore said Friday.

Cashore suspended land claims talks with the band Thursday, citing "fundamental differences" after 18 months of negotiations.

Indians and opposition politicians have suggested the move shows the government is afraid to reach a potentially unpopular deal on the eve of a provincial election.

The Gitxsan breakdown comes at the same time as an apparent crisis in the 20-year-old talks with the Nisga'a Tribal Council, which have been the target of high-profile political protests.

Cashore said the government could just as easily be accused of playing politics if it stretched out talks with nothing to show for them. Its enemies would then argue that it was dragging out the talks to keep the Indians quiet, he said.

"The fact is that we're making very substantial progress with first nations throughout the province," he said. "With this one, we're not. We don't have unlimited resources and we want to put those resources into negotiations where we can be productive."

As for the Nisga'a, "There will be a deal if there's a deal that we can support. There won't be if there isn't. It's as simple as that. The two issues [the Gitxsan and Nisga'a talks] aren't relat-

ed."

The Nisga'a talks adjourned Friday with the Indians planning to meet in Prince Rupert for private internal discussions Monday and Tuesday. Negotiations are scheduled to resume Wednesday morning in Vancouver.

"We think it's very close," Cashore said of a Nisga'a agreement.

"But it still has to be a treaty that, when it sees the light of day, will be one the people of the province will understand and will have a very positive sense about."

Negotiators had been hoping for a settlement by last weekend, to coincide with the federal cabinet's visit to Vancouver. Talks are stuck on the question of Nisga'a fishing rights.

Liberal aboriginal affairs critic Mike de Jong said the breakdown in talks with the Gitxsan was an inevitable result of the government's approach to land claims.

And Reform party leader Jack Weisgerber urged Cashore to not return to the table.

"Don't blink," he advised.

Cashore said the province would consider returning to treaty talks with the Gitxsan if it gets a written promise that the band will not block roads. But Gitxsan chief negotiator Don Ryan said the minister knows he's not going to get such a promise.

Ryan said he's already given the province an undertaking that none of the Gitxsan who are directly involved in the talks will set up a roadblock.