



**STATE OF VERMONT**  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

January 22, 2026

Representative Martin LaLonde, Chair  
House Ethics Panel  
Vermont House of Representatives  
115 State Street  
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

**Response to Ethics Complaint and Request for Closure**

Dear Chair LaLonde:

I am writing in response to the Ethics Complaint filed against me with the House Ethics Panel, dated November 17, 2025, and provided to me by the Panel on January 6, 2026.

The complaint originally filed with the Panel identified a singular and specific written communication as the basis for the allegations against me, stating that I had “published a letter” claiming that genealogical reports “unambiguously prove” there is “no historically or genealogically defensible connection between the First Nation Abenaki and the Vermont Abenaki.” I did not recognize the quoted language to be my own words, which is why I asked the Panel on January 7, 2026, for a copy of the specific letter or communication referenced in the complaint that I was alleged to have published so that I could respond appropriately. The Panel notified me on January 8, 2026, that it had “requested from Complainants a copy of the letter and any other statement that served as the basis for the complaint.”

In response, the following day the Complainants submitted to the Panel an expanded collection of materials, including links to media articles, opinion pieces, legislative bills, and correspondence, and a copy of the Representatives’ oath from the Vermont Constitution preceded only by “Regarding breaking the oath.” The Complainants did not specify how anything in those materials constituted violations of the House Rules or the Vermont Constitution, but they copied on their email new individuals who were not part of the original Complaint. One of those individuals took the opportunity to introduce broad new accusations that amounted to little more than a smear tactic. I consider this expansion of material and Complainants in response to my request for clarification to be an inappropriate use of the Ethics Panel process. However, in the interest of cooperation with the Panel and to ensure a complete record should the Panel elect to consider these additional materials, I have organized the following responses to address each category of allegation now presented.

For the reasons described in detail below, I respectfully ask that the House Ethics Panel close this Complaint. The Complaint does not meet the threshold of demonstrating “reasonable grounds to believe that an ethical violation pertaining to the Vermont Constitution or House Rules has occurred,” which is the standard for continuing with an Ethics Complaint under Section 3 of the House Ethics Panel Procedure.

## **Response to the Complaint and the Materials Submitted**

### **I. Email to My Vermont Legislative Colleagues**

The initial Complaint appears to be based on an email I sent to my legislative colleagues on October 17, 2025, about newly released findings from the Abenaki First Nation at Odanak based on extensive genealogical research into eight prominent leaders within Vermont and New Hampshire’s state-recognized “tribes.” The Complaint itself, however, includes within quotation marks material that does not accurately reflect the language of the message I sent. The second paragraph of the Complaint claims that I said the genealogical research materials “unambiguously prove” that there is “no historically or genealogically defensible connection between the First Nation Abenaki and the Vermont Abenaki.” Both of those are misrepresentations of my actual words. What I actually wrote was that “[t]he findings are unambiguous” and “[t]here are no historically or genealogically defensible connections between these individuals and the legitimate Abenaki communities of Odanak and Wôlinak.” These differences may seem like semantics, but not only are there different connotations between what I said and what the Complainants said I said, but these intentional misrepresentations also raise issues of the Complainants’ credibility and veracity in their allegations against me. In addition, the Complaint erroneously claims that I “accuse[d] Vermont tribal leaders and citizens of fraud,” though a simple reading of my email demonstrates that it neither included any accusations nor claimed that anyone committed fraud. I find it concerning that the Complaint included falsehoods that would not have been known to the Panel without my request for the actual document on which the Complaint was based.

Regarding the email itself, it accurately described the release of third-party genealogical reports and urged legislators to review those materials in the context of evidence-based policymaking. I did not purport to have conducted original genealogical research, nor did I fabricate or misrepresent the existence or substance of the findings referenced. I relied on the work as presented and invited my colleagues to assess it for themselves. I disagree with the assertion that referencing or relying upon these reports violates ethical standards. From my review, the reports appear to be the product of extensive research and are plainly offered as policy-relevant evidence. Other parties’ disagreement with their conclusions or methodology does not convert my reliance on them into unethical conduct.

My position regarding Vermont’s state recognition process has been consistent and longstanding. I do not accept that state recognition, standing alone, resolves the underlying historical and genealogical questions implicated by that process. I have been

equally consistent in expressing my intent to pursue policy reforms that revisit or reverse outcomes produced by processes I view as substantively flawed. That position reflects my assessment of the available evidence and will continue to inform my legislative work.

As I stated in the email at issue, if we legislators are serious about evidence-based policymaking, we must be willing to scrutinize prior decisions, including those grounded primarily in state recognition rather than broader evidentiary review. My request that colleagues examine the referenced reports was made in that spirit. Encouraging legislators to review evidence relevant to public policy is squarely within my role as a member of this body. Nothing in my communication was intended to harass, intimidate, or disparage individuals. It was directed to legislators, addressed a matter of public policy, and reflected my good-faith assessment of materials bearing on that policy. Substantive disagreement with my conclusions is properly resolved through legislative debate, not through an ethics proceeding.

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## **II. Public Statements and Media Coverage**

The Complainants provided links to articles containing statements I made to reporters or published in opinion pieces, and the suggestion seems to be that my speech on these matters constitutes unethical conduct. My statements to the press and in public forums reflect my views on matters of public policy and historical interpretation. Disagreement with those views, even when strongly felt, does not transform public advocacy into ethical misconduct.

Controversy has surrounded Vermont's state recognition process for years, and I have become involved in ongoing efforts to reassess and revise that process. I am entitled to speak about my concerns and my goals in this matter in public and private forums. I did not give up my First Amendment rights when I was elected to the General Assembly. In fact, case law from the U.S. Supreme Court explicitly protects State legislators' freedom of speech and says that states cannot apply stricter First Amendment standards to legislators than to private citizens.

The manifest function of the First Amendment in a representative government requires that legislators be given the widest latitude to express their views on issues of policy. The central commitment of the First Amendment ... is that 'debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open.' ... Just as erroneous statements must be protected to give freedom of expression the breathing space it needs to survive, so statements criticizing public policy and the implementation of it must be similarly protected. ... The interest of the public in hearing all sides of a public issue is hardly advanced by extending more protection to citizen-critics than to legislators. Legislators have an obligation to take positions on controversial political questions so that their constituents can be fully informed by them, and be better able to assess their qualifications for office;

also so they may be represented in governmental debates by the person they have elected to represent them.<sup>1</sup>

My engagement in constitutionally protected speech about matters of public policy, regardless of whether the Complainants or anyone else may agree with my viewpoint on any given matter, is a core aspect of our business in the General Assembly, not an ethical quandary to be resolved by discipline or censorship.

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### **III. Open Letter to the Mayor Regarding the Chief Gray Lock Statue**

I emailed and posted on my campaign website an open letter to the Mayor of Burlington in June 2025 concerning the proposed replacement of the Chief Gray Lock statue in our city. This open letter, which was addressed to municipal leadership, was an expression of my civic and policy-related views on a matter of public art, historical interpretation, and community impact. It did not purport to direct municipal action or exercise control over city decision-making, nor do I believe I have such power. My constituents and I are all residents of Burlington, and I find it particularly appropriate to comment on matters affecting my district and local community. Writing publicly to local officials on matters of public concern is a longstanding and ordinary practice for elected officials and private citizens alike. Nothing in the letter involved misuse of state resources, coercion, or representation beyond my own views. Ethical standards do not prohibit legislators from engaging publicly in local civic discourse, nor do they require legislators to refrain from expressing views outside the formal legislative process.

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### **IV. Legislative Activity and Bill Sponsorship (H.362, H.614)**

The Complainants object to my introduction and advancement of legislation that is critical of Vermont's state recognition process; the insinuation seems to be that my sponsorship of bills on this topic violates my ethical obligations or the constitutional oath of office, or both. But drafting, sponsoring, and advocating for legislation are core legislative functions. The Representatives' oath in the Vermont Constitution does not prohibit legislators from proposing bills that revisit or reverse prior state policy. To the contrary, revisiting past legislation is an essential feature of government accountability. Ethical oversight does not extend to evaluating the substantive merits or perceived impacts of proposed legislation.

I should not be subject to discipline for sponsoring bills that are controversial or unpopular, as long as they do not appear to me injurious to the people. These bills do not appear to me to be injurious to the people; on the contrary, I believe the existing state recognition process is causing harm and must be addressed. The legislative process is designed to allow elected representatives to introduce legislation on issues they wish to pursue. Introduction of a bill is only the first stage of that process, and the will of the people, as represented by their elected representatives, determines whether and how each

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<sup>1</sup> *Bond v. Floyd*, 385 U.S. 116, 135-137 (1966) (internal citations omitted).

bill will or will not move forward toward enactment into law. The Complainants may not like my bills, but the appropriate forum for their displeasure is the legislative process, not the Ethics Panel.

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## V. Email to New Hampshire Legislators

The materials provided refer to an email I sent to three members of the New Hampshire House of Representatives in March 2025. One of the Complainants suggested that communicating with legislators in another state was outside of my authority or otherwise constituted unethical conduct. I disagree. I reached out to the lead sponsors of a bill in a neighboring state that proposed to transform the membership of the New Hampshire Commission on Native American Affairs to permit “[o]nly enrolled tribal citizens who reside in New Hampshire” to be “nominated by the chiefs of the state recognized Abenaki or federally recognized tribes with historic and contemporary connections to, and populations in, New Hampshire. Members of the Abenaki tribes *recognized by the state of Vermont*” and certain federally recognized tribes would be eligible.<sup>2</sup> I wanted to ensure that the New Hampshire sponsors were aware of the issues with Vermont’s state recognition process and urged them to be thoughtful in their approach to avoid making similar mistakes. I encouraged them to engage with the Odanak and Wôlinak First Nations and offered to discuss Vermont’s experience and to collaborate in any way they would find useful. I also shared a link to my own bill, H.362. I did not receive a response, and the New Hampshire bill did not move forward last year.<sup>3</sup>

Intergovernmental communication among legislators in different states is routine and permissible. Legislators frequently engage with our counterparts in other states, as many issues and solutions are repeatable or transcend state lines. My email to the New Hampshire legislators was advisory in nature, disclosed my role transparently, and did not purport to exercise authority over New Hampshire’s legislative process. Sharing Vermont’s experience with state recognition in response to pending legislation elsewhere is neither improper nor unethical.

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## VI. Invitations to Visit Odanak

I invited a group of 21 Vermont legislators to join me in attending the 66<sup>th</sup> Annual Abenaki Pow Wow at Odanak on July 19, though the trip ultimately did not transpire. The Representatives and Senators I reached out to were those who had previously indicated a willingness to engage more thoughtfully with the Abenaki communities at Odanak and Wôlinak and an openness to reconsidering the narratives surrounding Vermont’s state recognition process. I reached out with a separate invitation to House

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<sup>2</sup> See HB161 of the 2025 session of the New Hampshire General Court (emphasis added), [https://gc.nh.gov/bill\\_status/legacy/bs2016/billText.aspx?sy=2025&id=818&txtFormat=html](https://gc.nh.gov/bill_status/legacy/bs2016/billText.aspx?sy=2025&id=818&txtFormat=html).

<sup>3</sup> See bill status page:

[https://www.gc.nh.gov/bill\\_status/legacy/bs2016/bill\\_docket.aspx?lsr=0809&sy=2025&sortoption=&txtsesionyear=2025&txtbillnumber=hb161](https://www.gc.nh.gov/bill_status/legacy/bs2016/bill_docket.aspx?lsr=0809&sy=2025&sortoption=&txtsesionyear=2025&txtbillnumber=hb161)

leadership to attend, as well. I was clear that the intention behind the trip was to create a space for deliberate, thoughtful engagement with members of the Odanak community, away from the legislative pressures and dynamics of the State House. I shared my belief that the setting could offer a more open, relational environment to hear directly from Abenaki leadership, Vermont-based scholars, and allies who have studied the impacts of Vermont's state recognition process and the harm it continues to cause.

One of the Complainants now alleges that my efforts to coordinate this potential visit constituted my acting as an agent of a foreign entity and is an ethical violation. I disagree. Inviting colleagues to engage in educational, cultural, or fact-finding opportunities is a common and appropriate legislative practice. The invitation extended was voluntary, informational, and aimed at fostering understanding through direct engagement. No compensation, inducement, or directive authority was involved. Characterizing such outreach as acting as a "foreign agent" is unfounded, inflammatory, and does not constitute any actual evidence of an ethical violation. And policing my ability to engage with the Odanak and Wôlinak, and to invite legislative colleagues with similar interests to join me at a cultural event, would infringe on my First Amendment right to freedom of association.

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## **VII. Claims of Acting on Behalf of Foreign Nations**

Some of the follow-up material alleges that my conduct seeks to confer legal status, territory, or sovereignty on non-U.S. entities. This is not accurate. I have not asserted any authority to recognize sovereignty, territory, or legal status beyond Vermont statute, nor do I believe I have the authority to do so. My legislative efforts concern state-level recognition processes, educational standards, and advisory frameworks. Assertions that these actions implicate federal recognition or international sovereignty misunderstand both the legislation and the limits of state authority.

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## **VIII. Allegations of Racism, Harassment, or Targeting**

Both the original Complaint and follow-up materials contain allegations that my conduct constitutes racist, inflammatory, or targeted attacks against individuals or communities. I categorically reject this characterization. My critiques have consistently focused on state processes, evidentiary standards, and public policy outcomes—not personal identity. Raising questions about governmental recognition frameworks and historical evidence does not equate to harassment or discrimination. Ethical review must be grounded in conduct, not inferred motive. My attention on the four state-recognized—but not federally recognized—tribes is due entirely to my objections to the governmental processes that led to their recognition. I have not demonstrated malice toward any one or more of these groups, but rather I have committed myself deeply to understanding and rectifying the impacts of Vermont's process on Indigenous communities.

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## **IX. Invocation of the Constitutional Oath**

The follow-up materials include the entirety of the Representatives' oath from the Vermont Constitution. I presume that the Complainants mean to suggest that I have violated my oath. The constitutional oath articulates a general duty of faithful service; it is neither an ideological enforcement mechanism for ethics complaints nor a standard by which the Panel should adjudicate policy disagreements. Legislators routinely disagree on what policies best serve the public good. That disagreement is resolved through legislative process, not ethics adjudication. I do not believe that any bill I have introduced is injurious to the people. I do not believe that my bills or actions have lessened or abridged the people's rights and privileges as declared in the Vermont Constitution. And I believe I have conducted myself in all things as a faithful, honest Representative, according to the best of my judgment and ability. Thus, I do not believe there are grounds to suggest I have violated my constitutional oath.

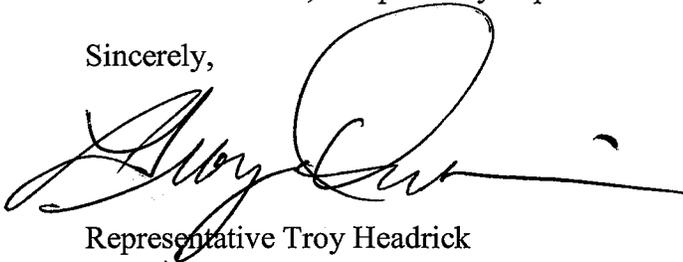
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### **Conclusion and Request for Closure of Complaint**

All of the conduct referenced (communications with colleagues, public advocacy, legislative drafting, and educational outreach) falls within the ordinary and protected scope of legislative activity. While I recognize that these issues are deeply contested and emotionally charged, ethical review must remain grounded in established standards and procedures rather than expanded through accumulation of unrelated grievances. I am mindful that ethics oversight plays an important role, and I also believe care must be taken to avoid conflating substantive policy disagreement with ethical misconduct, particularly where doing so could discourage legislators from engaging with contested evidence in good faith.

I do not believe that I have acted in an unethical manner with respect to any aspect of my work regarding the state recognition process or the Abenaki communities of Odanak and Wôlinak, and the Complaint fails to describe any actual conduct that proves otherwise. Under Sec. 3(A) of the House Ethics Panel Procedure, the Ethics Panel must close a complaint unless there are reasonable grounds to believe that an ethical violation has occurred. Nothing in the Complaint demonstrates "reasonable grounds to believe that an ethical violation pertaining to the Vermont Constitution or House Rules has occurred." For these reasons, I respectfully request that the Complaint be closed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Troy Headrick", written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above the printed name of the representative.

Representative Troy Headrick