



The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

# INDIGENOUS RELATIONS

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INDIGENOUS RELATIONS Policy Briefing

With Indigenous relations taking on an economic lens, consultation will be key, say academics, orgs

Indigenous Peoples have understandable concerns about whether the hunger for natural resources could be used as an excuse by the federal government to circumvent its duty to consult, says professor Gabriel Maracle.

BY JESSE CNOCKAERT

Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Rebecca Alty’s lived experience in the North and with resource development may serve her well in the current Liberal government, which is showing a shift towards a more economic focus when it comes to Indigenous relations, according to political science academics.

“The previous [Justin Trudeau government] was focused on addressing long-standing historic issues—Indian residential schools, and things like that—where the current tone has been more focused on economic reconciliation, economic development, community development, and a lot of that is oriented around resource development,” said Gabriel Maracle, a Carleton University assistant professor of political science with a focus on Indigenous governance in Canada. “I think most First Nations, most Indigenous leaders and Indigenous communities are going



Carleton University professor Gabriel Maracle says the feds’ messaging ‘has been more explicit about focusing on natural resource development ... in part because of the pressures of having a less stable trading partner with the United States.’ Photograph courtesy of Gabriel Maracle

to be interested in seeing what the message and tone is going to be from Crown-Indigenous Relations around resource extraction and resource development.”

Alty (Northwest Territories) took on her current portfolio in the cabinet of Prime Minister Mark Carney (Nepean, Ont.) on May 13. Born and raised in Yellowknife, she previously served as a city councillor for the community between 2012 and 2018, and then as mayor from 2018 to 2025.

Alty is the first federal minister from the Northwest Territories in almost two decades, with the previous being then-Liberal MP Ethel Blondin-Andrew who served as minister of state for northern development between 2004 to 2006. Carney himself was also born in the territory.

Maracle is a member of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, also known as Tyendinaga. His father was born in Tyendinaga, and his non-Indigenous mother is originally from Guelph, Ont.

He told *The Hill Times* that Alty comes to her new role with experience working with First Nations communities around resource development, pointing to her background as manager of communications and community relations for the Diavik Diamond Mines, which she held from 2016 to 2018.

“This government’s messaging has been more explicit about focusing on natural resource development and things of that nature, in part because of the pressures of having a less-stable trading partner with the United States, and the need to be more reliant on the global economy,” said Maracle. “The global markets are really, really hungry for natural resources.”

Indigenous people comprise almost half of the population in the Northwest Territories, and the territory is home to Métis, Inuit, and First Nations people including Dene.

Maracle said that Indigenous Peoples have understandable concerns about whether the current hunger for natural resources could be used as an excuse by the federal government to circumvent its duty to engage in consultations before embarking on major projects.

“Are they willing to push through these economic and resource development opportunities at the expense of Indigenous rights? Historically, the federal government has been very, very comfortable with doing that,” said Maracle. “There’s a very, very small window to be able to build things. I think [Alty’s] going to be bringing in a unique perspective on Indigenous issues and how the federal government interacts with Indigenous Peoples.”

Chadwick Cowie, an assistant professor in the department of political science at the University of Toronto Scarborough, told *The Hill Times* that Alty may under-

stand the diversity in the North, adding that not all Indigenous people are the same.


“They don’t all have the same history, nor do they have the same relationships or allyship with certain parts of Canada because of the history that exists there and because of the approach that some provinces have taken. There’s a lot of work to be done there,” said Cowie. “The Trudeau government ended up focusing on policy administration. They kept trying to do what they thought was the way forward, and if they want to figure out a way to go forward, then there is some potential by having northern representation in that cabinet, because the North is a very unique, specific place.”

To help streamline the federal regulatory processes for major projects, the Carney government’s “One Canadian Economy Act,” or Bill C-5, was tabled on June 6. The bill seeks to accelerate the regulatory process for infrastructure projects that the federal government designates as being in the “national interest.”

Cowie is from the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg community of Pami-taashkodeyong (also referred to as Hiawatha First Nation) and is of the Atik (Caribou) Dodem (Clan). He said that an important concern for Crown-Indigenous relations going forward includes legislation such as Bill C-5, or Ontario’s Bill 5, which also seeks to fast-track project development with the goal of unleashing the province’s economic potential.

Cowie said he understands why major projects could be important, but there needs to be proper duty to consult with Indigenous Peoples.

“We can’t move forward hand in hand and move through reconciliation if it’s going to be a top-down approach, and that’s a concern



UofT Scarborough professor Chadwick Cowie says Indigenous people ‘don’t all have the same history, nor do they have the same relationships or allyship with certain parts of Canada because of the history that exists there and because of the approach that some provinces have taken.’ Photograph courtesy of Chadwick Cowie



Rebecca Alty was sworn in as Crown-Indigenous relations minister at Rideau Hall on May 13. The Hill Times photograph by Sam Garcia

that I have of how they’re going to do this,” he said. “It’s not so much about stopping development ... It’s about making sure that the people who are the stewards of these territories have that ability to voice and be a part of the discussion because that is part of what Crown-Indigenous relations is supposed to be about.”

*The Hill Times* reached out to the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) to ask about Alty’s appointment and about possible priorities for her office going forward, but did not receive a response before deadline. National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak said in a May 13 press release that she and her organization look forward to working with the Carney cabinet to advance priorities put forward by the AFN during the federal election. In the *Prosperity for All* list of election priorities, the AFN included a call for economic reconciliation, which the organization argued begins with ensuring First Nations voices are at the table of national discussions.

Stephanie Scott, executive director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), told *The Hill Times* in an emailed statement on June 11 that Alty will be facing the profound challenge of addressing the enduring legacy of the residential school system.

It is estimated that more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children between the ages of four and 16 years attended federally funded and church-run residential schools in Canada between the late 1800s and the 1990s. Many Indigenous children in these schools spent long periods of time away from their home communities where they received little to no education, suffered from emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse, and experienced poor health care, chronic hunger, and malnutrition,

according to a 2023 report released by the Senate’s Indigenous Peoples Committee. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada found that children at residential schools died at a far higher rate than non-Indigenous children, and about one-third of student deaths were not recorded by government or school administrators, according to the report.

Scott called residential schools “instruments of genocide” designed to destroy Indigenous societies by forcibly assimilating children.

“The trauma and impacts of this system continue to ripple through our families and communities today,” said Scott in the email. “At the NCTR, we confront this difficult and heartbreaking work daily, striving to find missing children amidst increasing demands on our limited resources. We also contend with persistent denialism and those who refuse to acknowledge this country’s past and the truths of Survivors.”

The TRC presented a list of 94 Calls to Action in June 2015, intended to further reconciliation between Canadians and Indigenous Peoples.

Scott said progress on implementing the Calls to Action has been slow, adding that federal leaders need to take concrete, sustained action.

“The minister’s immediate priority should be to secure adequate, enduring funding for vital initiatives dedicated to locating missing and disappeared children and accelerating the fulfillment of the Calls to Action. Without this support, these initiatives risk discontinuation, significantly hindering our collective journey towards healing and reconciliation,” she said in the email. “The minister must demonstrate an unwavering commitment to listening directly to Survivors, their families, and

excluded and we look forward to meaningful dialogue and collaboration,” said Moore in the email.

The challenges ahead for Alty are “significant and urgent,” according to Moore. As an example, he cited the 2016 Supreme Court decision in *Daniels v. Canada*, which affirmed that Métis and non-status Indians are “Indians” for the purpose of section 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867, which establishes federal jurisdiction over First Nations peoples and their traditional lands.

Since that ruling, policy reforms have been “slow, underfunded, and disconnected from the lived realities of the people we represent,” Moore argued. In 2018, the CAP-Canada Political Accord was signed, which promised to build a renewed relationship between CAP and the Crown, but, in the six years since its signing, not a single ministerial-level meeting has taken place, he said.

“Indigenous communities have held up their end of the bargain through detailed policy proposals, national action plans, and continuous engagement, but the government has not,” said Moore. “If Minister Alty is to advance reconciliation, she needs to ensure agreements are followed and actions are taken. We can’t keep being invited to talk while decisions are made without us.”

Catherine Martin, director of Indigenous Community Engagement with Dalhousie University and a member of the Millbrook Mi’kmaq Band, told *The Hill Times* that an important priority for Alty could include address-

ing the issue of Indigenous identity theft.

The issue of Indigenous identity theft was a focus for a two-day summit in Winnipeg in May 2024, co-hosted by the Chiefs of Ontario and the Manitoba Métis Federation. Indigenous identity theft refers to the misappropriation or misrepresentation of Indigenous identity by individuals or groups who do not have legitimate connections to Indigenous communities, often motivated by personal or financial gain, according to the summit’s website.

A Dalhousie University task force released a report in October 2023 that addressed the issue of settler misappropriation of Indigenous identity at the university. The report included recommendations, including that the university should implement a mandatory process for verifying claims to Indigenous identity, membership, and citizenship where material gain could arise.

“There’s been a lot of national efforts to identify those who have falsely made their way up into very high positions. The point is, that means others Indigenous people are not getting those jobs, and other students are not getting the admissions that they should be getting, because we have so much competition,” said Martin. “It’s a contentious issue that does impact every level of society right now, and ... it’s causing an awful lot of problems. I believe that the government has to take that lead seriously and give all of the country some guidelines. Don’t just leave it up in the air.”

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Indigenous Peoples in Canada statistics



The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

- According to the 2021 Census, there were 1.8 million Indigenous people, representing five per cent of the total Canadian population, up from 4.9 per cent in 2016.
- However, this growth was not as fast as in previous years. For example, from 2011 to 2016, the Indigenous population grew by 18.9 per cent, more than double the general 2021 growth rate. For the first time, the Census enumerated more than one million (1,048,405) First Nations people living in Canada.
- Population projections for First Nations people, Métis, and Inuit suggest that the Indigenous population in Canada could reach between 2.5 million and 3.2 million over the next 20 years.
- While more than half (55.5 per cent) of all First Nations people were living in Western Canada in 2021, Ontario (251,030) was the province with the highest number of First Nations people, representing nearly one-quarter (23.9 per cent) of the First Nations population in Canada. Meanwhile, around one in nine (11.1 per cent) First Nations people were living in Quebec, and 7.6 per cent were living in Atlantic Canada. The remaining 1.9 per cent of First Nations people lived in the territories.

—Source: Statistics Canada data released on June 21, 2023

Policy Briefing INDIGENOUS RELATIONS

What do we stand to gain?



The federal and provincial governments stand to gain from traditional knowledge when it comes to mitigating environmental threats from fire, flooding, and growing wind velocity, writes Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux. Unsplash photograph by Kalen Emsley

When Canada stops seeing Indigenous Peoples in the negative and begins to understand and appreciate their strengths, values, cultural knowledge, and ceremonial practices, acceptance and respect can grow.

Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux



Opinion

We, as a country, stand to gain everything and lose nothing if we have the courage to stand together as one nation. Indigenous Peoples are already gaining through social, political, and judicial changes generated over the past several decades. Our women and our youth are rising, our elders are teaching and supporting, and our men are reclaiming their birthright. Even though it may appear to those looking from a distance that systemic challenges are winning, they are not. Those of us who have been incessantly challenging oppressive western systems—where everything given with one hand is taken away with the other—know that despite this unfortunate reality, we are tracking in the positive.

If you flip the script and turn incessantly negative numbers upside down, the picture of disparities shifts, and we begin to see positives. Instead of 60 per cent of something negative, we get 40 per cent of something positive and mindsets will adjust to a different reality. We can call it a mind trick, but when Canada stops seeing Indigenous Peoples in the negative and begins to understand and appreciate their strengths, values, cultural knowledge, and ceremonial practices, acceptance and respect can grow.

The federal government has failed at addressing seemingly intractable issues because it has not directly experienced the very challenges it seeks to resolve. The answers lie firmly in the hands and hearts of the people. Indigenous leaders are standing hard against the violence of benevolence, a societal injustice that feeds upon the guise of helping and only brings “words” without concrete action. Our

leaders are not waiting, they are moving forward with what needs to be done.

Those who have not yet learned to respect and hear the ones who hold answers cannot, and likely will not, until “frontier” fear and disdain dissipates. Until then, we cannot move forward together as an entire country, and impasses will remain impossible to “address” by any government outside of our own unless we can see and hear each other unfettered by dire historic realities. We must clear our eyes and our minds, to truly see each other and begin the necessary work.

Former prime minister Justin Trudeau made a commitment to truth and reconciliation, and current Prime Minister Mark Carney has indicated Indigenous “issues” are on his agenda as well.

However, there is no possibility of change on the horizon without a firm commitment to ensuring seats at every table that contemplates an invasion of traditional territories for development across Canada. Not those postage stamps called “reserves”—we mean the lands and resources held in the hands of Indigenous Peoples from time immemorial. The fear that acknowledging truths and providing those seats for Indigenous leadership will change the face of Canada is correct—the challenge is accepting that this change will be to the benefit of all. The fear Canada will lose something must go; it will gain, and so will Indigenous Peoples and every citizen who calls this country home. Oppression and marginalization have never created a strong society—it takes courage, inclusion, and reciprocity to build a truly thriving nation.

Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the federal and provincial governments stand to gain from traditional knowledge when it comes to mitigating environmental threats from fire, flooding, and growing wind velocity. Blending our sciences is becoming essential to protecting the future health of this country. Blending our strengths is critical to facing down the political quagmire brewing in the United States. Blending our knowledge is the only way we can fully and courageously address the many truths that are holding us back, and build a mutual road leading to a sustainable process of reconciliation.

Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux was appointed in 2016 as the first Indigenous Chair for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada for Lakehead University in Orillia, Ont., and is a TRC honorary witness, and chair of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Governing Circle. She is a member and resident of the Chippewa of Georgina Island First Nation in Ontario, and has dedicated her life to building bridges of understanding between peoples.

*The Hill Times*



# INDIGENOUS RELATIONS Policy Briefing



Making it possible for Indigenous Peoples to take a direct financial interest in resource development and specific projects will require helping them gain access to financing on acceptable terms, writes Glen Hodgson. *Unsplash photograph by Jakub Zerdzicki*

## How to optimize economic reconciliation through natural resource investment and beyond? Create an Indigenous Development Bank

A new pathway is required, shifting away from heavy reliance on budgetary funding and subsidies, and toward more innovative resource mobilization and access to capital.

Glen Hodgson

Opinion



The Carney government has committed to accelerating and strengthening investment across the economy as part of its plan to boost domestic sources

of economic growth, and reduce Canadian economic dependence on the United States. Greater investment in energy and other natural resource development is central to this commitment.

The recent Speech from the Throne indicated the federal government intends to create a new Major Federal Project Office charged with championing projects that build the national economy, with the goal of reducing project approval time from five years to two. The Office is also expected to meet high environmental standards and fully respect the government's constitutional obligations to Indigenous Peoples.

Respecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and ensuring high environmental standards are the minimum necessary conditions today for building public trust, and guiding the successful approval and implementation of major resource investment projects. This means that securing informed, prior consent from

affected Indigenous nations and communities will be a fundamental task for the Office. If projects are treated as a national priority and are actively managed, there is no obvious reason why a final decision could not be reached within a two-year time frame.

But that's just a start. It's time to advance from what is necessary for Indigenous engagement, to exploring what is sufficient—the best way to accelerate direct Indigenous engagement and investment in resource development and other projects that build economic reconciliation. Making Indigenous nations, communities, and people direct stakeholders in sustainable resource development would generate the widest possible economic and social benefits and help to ensure project success. This means making it possible for Indigenous Peoples to take a direct financial interest in resource development and specific projects, which in turn will require helping them gain access to financing on acceptable terms.

Here, the Speech from the Throne emphasized the federal government would uphold its fundamental commitment to advancing reconciliation, which means a commitment to the creation of long-term wealth and prosperity for Indigenous Peoples. The federal government thus plans to double the recently created Indigenous Loan Guarantee Program from \$5-billion to \$10-billion, enabling more Indigenous communities to become owners of major projects.

While this commitment to supporting Indigenous investment in resource projects is important, it still falls well short of the scale and breadth of financing needed to make meaningful progress on sustained economic reconciliation. The overall Indigenous economy faces a significant financing gap—the difference between identified demand, and available financing on commercial terms and conditions comparable to those faced by non-Indigenous borrowers. Our recent research

for the First Nations Financial Management Board estimated the Indigenous financing market gap to be \$50-billion or higher.

There are legal, financial, and cultural barriers to Indigenous access to financing. Restrictions on asset ownership under the Indian Act limit the ability of Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs to leverage on-reserve assets. There are fundamental creditworthiness barriers, such as a limited financial track record for prospective Indigenous borrowers. And historical and cultural barriers translate into Indigenous clients not receiving fair and unbiased treatment from non-Indigenous financial institutions. While there are numerous Indigenous financial institutions scattered across the country, they generally have small capital bases and limited scope of regional and product coverage.

To fill the significant market gap, a new pathway is required, shifting away from heavy reliance on budgetary funding and subsidies, and toward more innovative resource mobilization and access to capital. Loan guarantees are useful, but the best approach would be for the federal government to establish an Indigenous Development Bank (IDB), modelled on effective national development banks in many countries.

The Indigenous economy has financing needs beyond resource development. Indigenous businesses are able to access less than a tenth of market-based financing compared to comparable Canadian non-Indigenous firms. They need better access to basic business financing such as investment funding, working capital, and bonding. Enhanced financial access is also needed for Indigenous nations, communities, on-reserve infrastructure, and housing.

An IDB, operating on broad commercial principles, could mobilize financing for overall Indigenous economic development. It could provide financing for Indigenous investment in resource and infrastructure projects, and for business startups; firm operations and expansion; development of value chains; and financing for Indigenous Nations, communities, infrastructure, and housing. It could provide an array of financing options including loans, loan guarantees, equity investments, and project bonding.

To be credible, the IDB should be an Indigenous-led institution, with Indigenous leaders playing a central role in its governance and within management. Ideally, the Bank would build overall Indigenous financing capacity by working with the existing commercial financial system, complementing and mobilizing other sources of financing through guarantees and other risk-sharing arrangements, and not simply be a lender of last resort or a market competitor.

If Indigenous Peoples are to play a meaningful role in Canada's domestic growth and investment strategy, now is the time for bold action. Establishing an Indigenous Development Bank is the best policy option.

Glen Hodgson is a senior fellow at the C.D. Howe Institute. *The Hill Times*



# Policy Briefing **INDIGENOUS RELATIONS**

## Reconciliation or repetition? Carney's first moves on Indigenous rights face scrutiny

Whether the prime minister's early steps mark a genuine shift or simply another cycle of political performance will define Mark Carney's reconciliation legacy.

Jackson Pind

Opinion



On June 1, just six days after the opening of the 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, Prime Minister Mark Carney issued a statement for National Indigenous History Month reaffirming his government's commitment to reconciliation.

He emphasized that Indigenous leadership would guide federal priorities, including self-determination, modern treaties, and distinctions-based approaches. The statement also announced an expansion of the Indigenous Loan Guarantee Program to \$10-billion, broadening its scope beyond energy to support infrastructure and trade. Carney committed to working in full partnership with Indigenous Peoples on key areas such as health, housing, education, and climate action. Framed as a forward-looking gesture, the statement was positioned as part of a broader "reset" on the federal approach to Indigenous relations.

In many ways, however, this crafted statement ticked all the reconciliation "checkboxes" that have been constantly repeated with little action since the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report in 2015, and the 2019 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Calls for Justice. So far, the record for the federal government is dismal, with only 13 of the 94 Calls to Action completed, and just two of the 231 Calls to Justice implemented. Understandably, Indigenous nations are reluctant to believe the common buzzwords of reconciliation that are often thrown around in June and on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in September.

These doubts are heightened this year as tensions rise between Indigenous Peoples and governments, fuelled by slogans like "nation building" and "national interest." The introduction of Bill C-5, An Act to enact the Free Trade and Labour Mobility in Canada Act and the Building Canada Act, on June 6 again hit the reconciliation checkboxes as the federal government claimed it would follow free, prior, and

informed consent, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982. However, the bill allows for the government to bypass the 2019 Impact Assessment Act on certain projects that it deems to be in the "national interest." This new legislation presents a general statement of respect for Indigenous rights, yet undermines that respect through restrictive provisions embedded in the fine print. The legislation was also introduced the same week that Justice Minister Sean Fraser opined that Indigenous nations' rights stop short of a "veto" on projects with the federal government—a statement that angered Indigenous leaders who view free, prior, and informed consent as a fundamental right, not a conditional privilege, under both Canadian and international law. After a phone call with Assembly of First Nations National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak, Fraser apologized for his comments, saying they could erode "a very precarious trust." Time will tell if this is the last apology the new government must issue over Indigenous rights.

Amid these tensions, there are signs of movement. The Carney-led government is acting quickly on making amendments to the Indian Act regarding enfranchisement and gender discrimination. Bill S-2, introduced in the Senate on May 29, marks a renewed effort by the federal government to address long-standing inequities in the Indian Act's registration and band membership provisions. Replacing the stalled Bill C-38, which had advanced to the committee stage before the dissolution of the last Parliament, this legislation seeks to eliminate forms of gender-based discrimination and enfranchisement that have denied status and rights to many First Nations individuals and their descendants.

Sponsored by Senator Marc Gold and announced by Indigenous Services Minister Mandy Gull-Masty (the first Indigenous person in this role), Bill S-2 proposes changes in enfranchisement, deregistration, band reaffiliation, and outdated language. Responding to Charter challenges like *Nicholas v. Canada*, it was shaped by more than 50 engagement sessions with Indigenous communities and organizations. If passed, an estimated 3,500 people could gain Indigenous status within five years. Introduced early in the session, the bill signals renewed commitment to reconciliation and redress for fragmented Indigenous families and communities.

Whether these early steps mark a genuine shift or simply another cycle of political performance will define Carney's reconciliation legacy. Indigenous nations are watching, engaged, and prepared to uphold their rights.

*Dr. Jackson Pind is an assistant professor of Indigenous methodologies at the Chanie Wenjack School for Indigenous Studies at Trent University.*

*The Hill Times*

## Working with First Nations on an Indigenous fire stewardship protocol could go a long way

Practices like prescribed burns must be incorporated within federal and provincial strategies and leveraged not only for First Nations, but also for land across the country.

Karen Restoule

Opinion



Practices like prescribed burns must be incorporated within federal and provincial strategies and leveraged not only for First Nations, but also for land across the country, writes Karen Restoule. *DND photograph by Corporal Marc-André Leclerc*

What does that look like? It starts with long-term funding for First Nations-led emergency preparedness and response. It means ensuring that federal resources are flowing directly to First Nations who carry the expertise to leverage long-standing climate mitigation and adaptation practices—ones that have proven to deliver results when it comes to reducing fires.

Governments should pass legislation to recognize First Nations jurisdiction on these matters. Practices like prescribed burns must be incorporated within federal and provincial strategies and leveraged not only for First Nations, but also for land across the country. Working with First Nations to develop and implement an Indigenous fire stewardship protocol could go a long way not only towards real reconciliation, but also to safeguarding our lands and resources from these growing wildfires.

Ottawa should also expand climate mitigation and adaptation responsibilities to First Nations through the guardians program, co-ordinated by the Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI). The guardians are known for their work monitoring and managing ecosystems within their respective territories. The ILI trains and supports First Nations experts to leverage both Indigenous knowledge and western science to oversee their territories, and manage and monitor wildlife, ecosystems, plants, cultural sites, and more. Doing so could reposition the climate management approach to one that is proactive, rather than reactive—ensuring that First Nations are leading, or at least a part of, the strategy development rather than being invited to react to climate crises after they've already struck.

After so much talk about resilience in the past five years, this is an opportunity to let those who carry the knowledge and expertise lead the country on land management and emergency response with the jurisdiction, tools, and resources they need to take on these big challenges.

*Karen Restoule is director of Indigenous affairs and a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, strategic adviser on complex public affairs issues, and Ojibwe from Dokis First Nation.*

*The Hill Times*

As wildfires burning across northern Canada reach record-breaking levels, more than 25,000 people—many of whom are First Nations—have been evacuated from their homes. Wildfire emergencies are increasingly becoming a regular occurrence, year after year.

As of June 12, there were 33 First Nations evacuated due to the ongoing risk of wildfires in provinces from British Columbia through to Ontario. Northern Manitoba alone saw more than 17,000 people evacuated, many of whom are from First Nations across the region whose citizens are now far from their homes and placed in crowded hotels, temporary shelters, and the like, waiting to learn more about the degree of impact on their communities. It has been described as one of the largest evacuations in Manitoba's history, a province that has records dating back more than 100 years showing wildfires annually.

Wildfires, and other climate change events like heat, drought, and flooding have severely affected First Nations over the years including impacts to hunting, fishing, and harvesting—a way of life that is constitutionally protected yet increasingly at risk.

First Nations have traditionally managed land and water through methods that served them well for centuries. Practices like prescribed burns, land-based monitoring, and adaptive stewardship are still implemented in many regions today. These methods are well-aligned with climate adaptation science. However, many First Nations are without the jurisdiction and resources to implement these vital strategies.

Many of the resources available to First Nations for climate mitigation and adaptation are still accessed through the federal government's Indigenous Services department based in Gatineau, Que. It's a bureaucracy that struggles to be responsive, and is slow to match policy priorities with actual needs on the ground.

If the federal government is serious about its commitments to both climate and reconciliation, it will reposition itself, and allow First Nations to restore jurisdiction on matters related to climate mitigation and adaptation.



# INDIGENOUS RELATIONS Policy Briefing

## Reconciliation is action, not just words



Indigenous leadership regularly engages with businesses and governments with solutions to infrastructure needs, which are regularly disregarded, writes Michelle Robinson. *Unsplash photograph by Tim Foster*

Closing the infrastructure gap requires more than land acknowledgements that don't address truth, Treaties, or commitments.

Michelle Robinson

Opinion



Indigenous Peoples in Canada have fought for the Crown against Americans since 1812. It seems today, the American threats are pushing Canadians to look towards a new nation-building strategy, yet much is missing on the topic of how Indigenous inclusion—in a time of reconciliation—is part of this new vision for Canada when we know there is a massive gap in infrastructure between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

When John A. Macdonald spoke about nation building, money was invested into the North-West Mounted Police, separating Indigenous people from the railways, creating Indian residential schools, as well as creating settler schools, provincial governments, settler infrastructure, and more. Obviously, these were economies in the form of jobs, for some. The country and



June 3 was the sixth anniversary of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' final report, yet we see demands for action and political accountability as so little has been done, writes Michelle Robinson. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

economy began to grow in Canadian colonies.

Most educated people are very aware of the current infrastructure gaps between Indigenous people and Canadians in this country. However, there have been many assumptions by Canadians about the federal government taking care of the infrastructure gaps.

Many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit live in poverty, and the numbers are startling. Poverty has become a determinant of health for Indigenous people nationally, yet—ironically—Canada is seen internationally as one of the best and safest places to live with human rights. Indigenous people are overrepresented in the worst ways while underserved in ways

most Canadians take for granted. This was done through Macdonald's nation-building vision via the Indian Act of 1876. Today's poverty and segregation was by design, and not one that successive governments have aimed to fix through investment or dollar-for-dollar funding. Canadians need to abandon the assumption the federal government will fix this alone, and look deeper.

June 2 was the 10-year anniversary of the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report. June 3 was the sixth anniversary of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' final report. Yet we see the Native Women's Association of Canada demanding action and political

accountability as so little has been done.

The National Indigenous Economic Strategy created the Pathways to Socioeconomic Parity for Indigenous Peoples in a publicly available document including the very infrastructure investment needed. It contains 107 Calls to Economic Prosperity with numbers 59-82 directly focused on infrastructure investment—or, in other words, the necessary nation-building investment. This report has been given to many orders of government and business just to be met with silence. Why aren't the economic development boards, governments, and businesses working on these

solutions? Like it or not, they are sending a loud, strong message that they don't care about reconciliation or equity. If they did, those very Calls would have been on the premiers' wish lists given to the prime minister as part of this new nation-building 2.0 project. Every municipality would be pushing it, but the word "Indigenous" wasn't even included in the main page for the recent Federation of Canadian Municipalities annual conference and trade show, let alone meaningful action.

Canadians need to be realistic about reconciliation. It's action, not just words in land acknowledgements that don't address truth, Treaties, or commitments. Indigenous leadership regularly engages with businesses and governments with solutions to infrastructure needs, which are regularly disregarded. If we don't invest in the solutions, how can we have equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and, therefore, reconciliation? If businesses look down on diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) and have poor, exclusionary hiring practices, how can we have reconciliation? If the municipalities, provinces, and federal government aren't investing, and are also looking down on DEI, again, how can we have reconciliation? We cannot. We need Canadians—who are starting to learn about the truth of these lands—and their governments to push themselves, in all sectors, on this issue. I want to see everyone working on dismantling the barriers the Indian Act created as part

of meaningful nation building and reconciliation. That should be the task of Prime Minister Mark Carney and all elected MPs without partisan games, as they are supposed to honour the Crown, not the petty parties. Indigenous people signed internationally respected Treaties with the

“  
IF WE DON'T INVEST  
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THEREFORE,  
RECONCILIATION?”

Crown. Honour the Treaties like we did in 1812 to protect ourselves from American overreach.

Michelle Robinson is Sahtu Dene, a member of Yellowknives Dene First Nation, and host of the Native Calgarian podcast. They are a Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal (Alberta) recipient, former for municipal and provincial candidate, public speaker, panellist, advocate for Indigenous Peoples, founder of an Indigenous Book Club, co-founder of the Reconciliation Action Group, volunteer, and a mother.

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