

# TIMELINE OF CANADIAN COLONIALISM & INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

By Tim Kitz



Look kids! Cut these timeline entries into cards, shuffle the cards, and invite your friends to put them in order! It's decolonial fun for the whole family!



Kent Monkman, Miss Chief's Wet Dream, 2018

“Canada doesn't give a fuck about Indigenous rights,” as Romeo Saganash, a Cree MP for the NDP, famously put it. Those who have been paying attention to current Liberal regime shouldn't be surprised by this declaration.

In the 2015 federal election, Justin Trudeau's Liberals attempted to woo Indigenous voters – and sympathetic settlers galvanized by Idle No More – by promising a renewed nation-to-nation relationship. His friendly attitude towards Indigenous grievances was a refreshing change from years of cantankerous Conservative antagonism, contributing significantly to the “sunny ways” said to have won the hearts of Canadian voters.

Political commentators also attributed Trudeau's surprise majority government in part to Indigenous voting support. There is a long tradition of Indigenous people refusing to vote, out of skepticism towards Canada's parliamentary democracy. And for good reason – it being an imposed system of colonial governance, which up until 1960 denied Indigenous people the right to vote unless they relinquished their Indian status.

Yet anyone who put their faith in Liberal promises has to be disappointed – enough to cut loose with a choice cussword or three, perhaps. Trudeau can change the name of a colonial department or building and make Indigenous women members of his Cabinet, but he can't respect these women or Indigenous consent and he can't apply UNDRIP into Canadian law.

“Canada doesn't give a fuck about Indigenous rights.” Those who have been paying attention for the past four years won't be surprised by this statement. But then, those who have been paying attention to the past 400 years wouldn't be surprised either. Canada's imperial parents never cared for Indigenous rights and they birthed the nation out of that active indifference.

After all, Canada's parliamentary democracy and capitalist economy are systems imposed on the land and its original peoples, just like the 1867 Constitution Act was unilaterally imposed as Canada's founding document, giving European settlers exclusive control over Indigenous lives, lands, and resources.

What is remarkable about this colonial project is how often it speaks in a benevolent voice – with words that sound good, but actions that undermine Indigenous nationhood and rights. The vocabulary may evolve, but the impulse to ‘improve’ the lot of First Nations by assimilating them into the Canadian economic and political order is tenacious.

Since Contact, then, Euro-Canadian governments seem to have found it difficult to recognize Indigenous peoples as equal partners so long as they retain their cultural identity and Indigenous status. Assimilation would also conveniently eliminate the government's ‘Indian problem’ – and this is as true today as it was for early colonial governments.

But, as this timeline will show, Indigenous resistance to assimilatory efforts is also nothing new.

## 1600s

### INDIGENOUS WELCOME

Indigenous nations are generally welcoming when Europeans arrive on their territory. They trade with the strange newcomers from a position of strength and prosperity, having developed cultural, political, and ecological systems that have grown and flourished over the course of millennia.

Europeans view Indigenous lands with amazement and envy, having degraded and destroyed most of their natural resources and ecological systems.

### TERRA NULLIUS & THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

To justify the appropriation and exploitation of the riches of Indigenous Nations' land in Africa and the ‘New World,’ European governments develop the Doctrine of Discovery and the legal concept of *terra nullius*.

These legal doctrines say that Turtle Island is ‘empty land’ that belongs to no one. According to this reasoning, Indigenous nations and the ownership or title that they exercise can be ignored because they do not have permanent settlements, farms, Christianity, state governments, or ‘real’ culture, economy or civilization.

Colonial governments grant themselves absolute title to the land by virtue of ‘discovery.’ They say that Indigenous peoples only have subservient usage rights, not having used the land to its ‘full potential,’ but cannot genuinely own land or exercise sovereignty any more than the ‘beasts in the forest.’

## 1700s

### RESISTANCE TO SETTLEMENT

European governments have defined the land as legally ‘empty,’ but when waves of settlers begin arriving, Indigenous communities resist the theft and destruction of their land through diplomatic and military means.

### ROYAL PROCLAMATION OF 1763

Settlers and colonial governments have to contend with the presence and resistance of First Nations on territories that they want to exploit. So the British Crown releases a Proclamation acknowledging ‘Indian title,’ but also creating a process by which this title can be extinguished – treaties.

Earlier treaties are largely concerned with establishing a peaceful relationship between the Crown and First Nations, one where they will share the land. The Proclamation of 1763 envisioned treaties as a way for settling land ownership. It outlaws individual land transfers, putting a check on American expansionism in particular. (This antagonizes the American colonies and contributes to their revolt in 1776). The right to acquire Indigenous land is reserved for the Crown – affirming nation-to-nation diplomacy, but mostly so the Crown can acquire First Nations' land.

## 1800s

### TREATIES

Indigenous nations continue to make treaties – some willingly, some under pressure or outright coercion – with colonial governments in order to safeguard their land and way of life. They see the treaties as agreements to share the land that initiate mutual relationships that must be maintained and renewed; colonial governments see them as one-time transactions by which they acquire land. The written, English version of the treaties often include language where First Nations recognize Crown sovereignty and cede Indigenous territory. Such concepts are often difficult if not impossible to express in a First Nation's language and culture, but then Crown negotiators are also rarely open and honest.

In return for accepting existing white settlements, First Nations are generally promised an inalienable ‘reserve’ of their traditional territory to live on and are told that they can continue their traditional use of the rest of their territory. Allen G. Harper, an Indian Affairs official, later describes reserves as “the cradle of the Indian civilizing effort – and the means of securing the white man's freedom to exploit the vast riches of a young dominion.”

### INDIAN ACT

With Indigenous nations asserting their treaty rights and still trying to use their territories and reserves in traditional ways, colonial governments turn to assimilation as a way of eliminating their ‘Indian problem.’ In Canada, efforts to assimilate natives center on the Indian Act.

The Act defines who is ‘Indian’ without any consultation, excluding many individuals that Indigenous communities consider members. The Act states that Indigenous women who marry settlers lose their status, as well as their children. Nations are broken up into smaller ‘bands’ and existing leaders are not recognized. A Western electoral system is imposed on most bands, ignoring traditional selection processes and excluding Indigenous women.

The overall goal is to ‘civilize’ Indigenous people by Christianizing them and forcing them into permanent agricultural settlements. ‘Civilizing’ programs are to be funded by the sale of reserve land. Processes are created for individuals to be enfranchised as Canadian citizens and individual property owners, and for Indigenous nations to be assimilated into the bottom of the governmental order as municipalities. Enfranchised individuals would lose their legal status as ‘Indians,’ while municipalized communities would cease to exist as distinct nations.

Canadian politicians like John A. Macdonald assume this assimilation is inevitable and will be seen as desirable by Indigenous peoples, remarking that “the great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects.”

## LATE 1800s - EARLY 1900s

### RESISTANCE TO ‘CIVILIZING’ EFFORTS

Many elected band councils refuse to use the limited authority granted to them by the Indian Act. Almost no individuals choose to become enfranchised and most nations refuse to recognize individual deeds granted to those who do. Nations also resist attempts to alienate more of their land, often successfully. Farming programs, meant to replace Indigenous subsistence practices, are deemed a failure. Missionaries struggle to make progress and they become frustrated by their inability to halt traditional ceremonies. On the prairies, the Métis and Cree launch an armed ‘rebellion.’

### CULTURAL REPRESSION AND RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Since Indigenous Peoples will not voluntarily ‘civilize’ themselves (i.e. assimilate), the Canadian government decides to force them. It bans spiritual and cultural practices. Indian Affairs and its on-reserve agents exercise totalitarian control over the lives of Indigenous people, forcing them to adopt European norms. Agents control band finances, direct band council meetings, and cast the deciding vote in the event of a tie. Without agents' permission, individuals cannot, for example, legally write a will, sell crops, slaughter livestock, or leave the reserve.

Indian Affairs is granted the power to override councils and chiefs, and depose them at will. Bands lose control of the disposal of reserve land, their land is leased without permission, and ‘surplus’ reserve land is sold to waves of new settlers.

Most importantly, Indigenous children are taken away from their families, homes, and cultures for schooling in settler culture. Attendance in residential schools is mandatory, and children are punished for speaking their language, or engaging in spiritual and cultural practices. Conditions are deplorable: thousands die from malnutrition and disease. Death rates reach as high as 69% in some institutions. Thousands of students are physically and sexually abused; traumatized survivors return home years later to family they barely know.

With land loss and ecological destruction making most Indigenous communities destitute, they have little means to resist the colonial clampdown. Bands are also isolated by the fragmentation and trauma they have suffered, and the restrictions placed on travelling off-reserve. They tend to initially hope that residential schools will help their children adjust to new realities and flourish – and in turn, help their communities do the same.

## LATE '40s - EARLY '70s

### INDIGENOUS ACTIVISM

Ironically, residential schools help foster a consciousness of being ‘Indian’ rather than simply members of particular bands and nations. ‘Pan-Indian’ organizing and resistance begins in earnest with the formation of groups like the National Indian Brotherhood, a forerunner of today's Assembly of First Nations. Campaigns to improve the lot of Indigenous peoples find support among settler civil society. This pressure forces the Canadian legislature to consult Indigenous people on the Indian Act for the first time. The Act is reformed, and some of its more draconian aspects are softened.

### WHITE PAPER & COLONIAL MEGAPROJECTS

Trudeau's Liberal government introduce the ‘White Paper on Indian Policy’ in 1969. It uses a rhetoric of individual rights reminiscent of that used by the Civil Rights Movement in order to justify assimilation. It envisions eliminating reserves, the Indian Act, and any recognition of individual ‘Indian status’ or collective aboriginal rights. The existence of aboriginal title is denied, and treaties are dismissed as irrelevant in the context of modern Canada.

Meanwhile, the Canadian state and corporations plan huge development projects – the James Bay Hydro Project and Mackenzie Valley pipeline – on Indigenous territory in Northern Canada. There is no consultation with the Dene, Inuit, Cree, and Métis who would be dramatically affected by these projects.

THE HISTORY CONTINUES ON PAGE 11.

## 1970s - 80s

### RED POWER, PUBLIC OPINION, AND COURT BATTLES

Fuelled by outrage at Liberal arrogance, the Red Power movement asserts Indigenous sovereignty and calls for treaties to be honoured. Its emphasis on pride in Indigenous identity also births a cultural and spiritual renaissance.

Meanwhile, Indigenous resistance to Northern megaprojects gains significant press coverage and public support, forcing the government to stop ignoring and start negotiating with the Cree, Inuit, Dené, and Métis. The Native Peoples' Caravan and the Constitution Express – both grassroots-organized cross-country treks from B.C. to Ottawa – raises awareness about broken treaties, Indigenous grievances, and the need to recognize Indigenous rights.

Having regained access to the courts and control of band finances, Indigenous groups challenge government control of hunting, fishing, and land in the courts. Eventually the Supreme Court acknowledges the continued existence of aboriginal title, to the chagrin of Trudeau's Liberals.

### MODERN-DAY TREATIES AND THE CANADIAN CONSTITUTION

Trudeau's Liberals abandon the White Paper and its most egregious principles. While they refuse to call it a treaty, they sign the James Bay Agreement with the Cree and Inuit of Québec, who win a say in resource development and significant territorial and financial settlements – but only in return for the surrender of aboriginal title over other portions of their territories.

Later, bowing to the pressure from the courts, First Nations leadership, and grassroots Indigenous activists, Section 35 of the newly-created Canadian Constitution does recognize the "aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada." It leaves these rights undefined.

## MID-80s

### INDIAN ACT AMENDMENT

After a century of pushing back against the feds, Indigenous advocates win an amendment to the Indian Act, Bill C-31, which eliminates sexist provisions which meant that women lost their Indian status and band membership if they married non-status men. Affected women (and their children) could apply to restore their status, but only if they lost it after 1951. This "Act to Amend the Indian Act" also finally eliminates enfranchisement and grants bands greater powers – but only to make bylaws, a kind of municipal and subservient self-government.

### BUFFALO JUMP REPORT

This leaked cabinet memo from Mulroney's Conservative government reveals their desire to return to many of the White Paper's goals. It calls for the extinguishment of aboriginal title, the establishment of Indigenous governments as municipalities, and the devolution of Indian Affairs' responsibilities and spending to provinces and municipalities. This policy provides the model for the government's land claims negotiations with First Nations and the one agreement Canada signs during Conservative rule with the Sechelt First Nation. Mulroney also reopens constitutional negotiations with Québec and the other provinces – leading to the Meech Lake Accord – but do not bother to include First Nations.

## EARLY 1990s

### MORE CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM AND THE OKA CRISIS

The Meech Lake Accord fails when Elijah Harper, a Cree member of the Manitoba legislature, refuses to grant the unanimous vote needed for approval. He criticizes the accord for not consulting with First Nations. In response, Indigenous groups are consulted in the next round of constitutional talks. This leads to the Charlottetown Accord's recognition of aboriginal self-government; while the accord is vague, it promises aboriginal governments would be constitutionally autonomous of federal and provincial governments. Yet the accord is rejected in a nation-wide referendum.

Meanwhile, Mohawks at Kanesatake erect a barricade to prevent the town of Oka, QC, from clearing pines to expand a golf course and build 60 condos. Since Louis XV granted the land to Sulpician missionaries in 1717 on behalf of First Nations, every colonial government has agreed the land in question can't possibly belong to the Mohawks themselves. With solidarity blockades springing up around the country, the Mohawks repel a raid by the Sûreté du Québec and stare down the Canadian military. The crisis shocks Canadian society and leads to some significant soul-searching.

### THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON ABORIGINAL PEOPLES (RCAP)

In the wake of Oka and Meech Lake, the Conservatives' Buffalo Jump policy is in tatters and they desperately need to respond to Indigenous grievances and assertions of power. They set up a Royal Commission. Five years later, its report calls for sweeping changes to Canadian-Indigenous relations and recommends self-government for First Nations.

Chrétien's Liberals dismiss the report and its recommendations as too costly, having swept to power promising "a new partnership with aboriginal peoples that is based on trust, mutual respect and participation in the decision making process."

Eight years later, Paul Martin's new Liberal government trumpets the signing of the Kelowna Accord with Indigenous leaders and provincial premiers. The accord ignores self-government and any challenging RCAP recommendations, but designates \$5 billion for Indigenous education, housing, health services, and economic development. When the Liberals are defeated, the incoming Conservatives jettison the deal.

## LATE 90s - 2000s

### THE BIRTH OF NUNAVUT

Ever since opposition to the James Bay Hydro Project coalesced among the Inuit, Inuit Tapirisat ('Inuit United') pushed the concept of an Inuit territorial government. Almost forty years later, the largest land-claim and self-governance agreement in Canadian history creates the territory of Nunavut ('Our Land') for the Inuit people. The territory's justice and political system incorporate traditional Inuit governance principles; its legislative assembly, for example, does not have political parties and works by consensus. The territory has four official languages: English, French, Inuktitut, and Inuinnaqtu. The self-government and territorial and financial concessions of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement also come at a price – the surrender of aboriginal title and acknowledgement of underlying Crown title by the Inuit.

### COMPREHENSIVE LAND CLAIMS PROCESS

Successive Liberal and Conservative governments entrench a comprehensive land claims process along the lines of the James Bay Agreement and the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement. The Canadian government continue to insist that the extinguishment of aboriginal title and rights is a prerequisite to the negotiation of land claims and self-determination. Many First Nations feel forced to come to the table, in order to halt or moderate devastating resource development on their land. In order to take part in the negotiation process, Indigenous groups must also borrow large sums of money from the government. These debts give the government significant leverage and will be subtracted from future settlements.

On-reserve living standards can be desperate, and government services will only be brought up to settler standards (or something like it) through the signing of these 'self-termination' deals, as Mohawk policy analyst Russell Diabo has called them. These final agreements would convert First Nations into municipalities and their reserves into fee simple (i.e. individually-owned) lands. No compensation for past crimes, injustices, or mismanagement is allowed, and First Nations must release the Crown from any future compensation claims.

As it continues, the Land Claims Process basically ignores a growing body of Supreme Court decisions affirming aboriginal title – and then provisions in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), as it is developed then passed.

## 2000s

### ADOPTION OF UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (UNDRIP)

In the works for more than 25 years and created by Indigenous representatives in negotiation with UN state actors, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is finally passed by the UN's General Assembly. UNDRIP affirms Indigenous Peoples right to self-determination and self-government; to their traditional lands and means of subsistence; to redress for land theft, forced assimilation, and economic deprivation; and to FPIC – free, prior, and informed consent for development projects affecting their lands and resources.

### FOOT-DRAGGING ON UNDRIP AND LEGISLATING FOR FIRST NATIONS

Canada is one of only four nations to oppose the UNDRIP, which includes recognition of Indigenous territorial rights and their right to self-government. After other holdout nations indicate they will adopt the declaration, Harper's Conservative government finally endorses it. But it calls the UNDRIP 'aspirational' and refuses to examine or change Canadian laws and practices that might contradict it, such as the comprehensive land claims process.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives introduce several omnibus bills changing environmental protections (to clear the way for resource development generally and pipelines specifically) and the administration of First Nations, without consulting Indigenous communities.

## 2010s

### IDLE NO MORE

Three Indigenous women activists in Saskatoon lead a teach-in on the omnibus Conservative bills affecting First Nations, which births the largest Indigenous mass movement in Canadian history. Idle No More sparks teach-ins, protests, blockades, and round dances in public places across Turtle Island and beyond. It is often organized and propagated through social media. Idle No More calls for a renewal of the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples on a nation to nation basis, environmental protection, honouring the treaties, and cultural revitalization. The diffuse movement tends to be led by grassroots, urban-based Indigenous women and sometimes criticizes official Assembly of First Nations leadership, which is often reserve-based men. Idle No More generates significant settler sympathy and participation, along with a backlash in some quarters.

### CHEAP LIBERAL TALK

Trudeau Liberals sweep to power, echoing Idle No More rhetoric and promising a new nation-to-nation relationship based on the recognition of Indigenous rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership. However, his government continues making unilateral decisions regarding pipelines and other resource-extracting and development projects on Indigenous territories, without proper consultation or consent, stating that Indigenous communities do not have veto power.

The government also puts together the Indigenous Rights, Recognition and Implementation Framework, which expresses a clear and coherent set of goals revolving around domesticating Indigenous self-determination within Canadian Confederation. These goals have been ordered into legislation and policy in a manner that guides First Nations towards a narrow model of "self-government" outside of the Indian Act. Indigenous critics call it the new White Paper.

With the next election approaching the Liberals back away from Indigenous rights. Trudeau launches the election campaign without even mentioning Indigenous Peoples, a far cry from four years ago. Maybe the Liberals realize his glib Indigenous-friendly rhetoric was no longer credible; maybe they think the recent rightward political current and continuing popularity of pipelines make talk of respect for Indigenous rights a political liability.

## NOW

### INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' STRATEGIC POSITION

Indigenous communities have been damaged by centuries of colonialism, but continue to exist on their traditional territories – often in more remote and relatively untouched areas, but also as a significant and growing population in urban centres. A cultural revival continues, and some form of aboriginal title can no longer be denied.

Meanwhile, hundreds of land claims negotiations, many going back decades, drag on. Colonial governments and corporations still dream of new and never-ending cycles of resource exploitation on Indigenous land, often with catastrophic ecological implications. Indigenous Nations are generally the biggest challenge to these plans for economic 'development,' from Secwepemc Tiny House Warriors and Wet'suwet'en camps blocking pipelines, to Grassy Narrows Anishnaabeg and Barriere Lake Algonquin logging opposition, Innu and Inuit resistance the Muskrat Falls dam, and much more.



Based on a two-part article that appeared in *The Leveller* 5.4 and 5.5 in 2013 to put Idle No More in context. Developed into a game by Indigenous Solidarity Ottawa, for use in their Introduction to Anti-Colonialism & Indigenous Solidarity workshop.