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Commentary

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From Tortured Past to a Movement of Hope for Aboriginal People

In 2012, the Idle No More movement brought Aboriginal people together in a way that has transformed Canada. In an excerpt from his powerful new book *#IdleNoMore and the remaking of Canada*, MLI Senior Fellow Ken Coates examines how a history of discrimination and abuse gave way to an optimistic, powerful and forward-looking new beginning.

Ken S. Coates

However important to understand, the social geography of the Aboriginal– non-Aboriginal relationship in Canada does not alone explain the roots of Idle No More. Wrestling with the challenge of connecting historical processes to a widespread contemporary event leads to the temptation to offer a history lesson, following the now well-known stepping stones of the transition of Aboriginal people from valued military and diplomatic allies to wards of the state, through the creation of reserves that kept First Nations apart, to residential schools that tried to assimilate them into the Canadian mainstream.

There are many events, processes, rules, and regulations that could be canvassed in detail as a way of laying an explanatory framework for the passionate outbursts of 2012, including: the Indian Act that controlled and limited the freedoms of First Nations people; notions of cultural and religious superiority that convinced governments to regulate such crucial Aboriginal traditions as the potlatch; Indian Agents, who selectively doled out passes that controlled who could leave the reserves; regulations that prohibited First Nations from hiring lawyers to press their claims and, for a time, refused to allow First Nations to meet for the purposes of lobbying or protesting government policy; treaties that were signed with ceremony and seeming commitment by all but that lay unfulfilled and poorly implemented. And so it goes, step by difficult and discriminatory step: not having the right to vote in elections until well after the Second World War; women losing their Indian status if they married a non-Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal women gaining status if they

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married an Indian man); requirements that First Nations surrender their Indian status through enfranchisement if they entered a profession or wanted to start a business or own land; the list of injustices is long.

The unfair treatment poured forth with numbing familiarity. Forty years ago, one might complain that few Canadians knew of the pattern of mistreatment. That ignorance no longer holds, thanks in part to the presentation of new perspectives and interpretations of Aboriginal history in the schools and broad coverage in the media and popular culture of the impact of government actions on Indigenous peoples. Despite its shortcomings, the federal government's apology for the residential schools was a potent symbol to Canadians that the Government of Canada had acted in a profoundly destructive way in imposing its will and its culture on Indigenous peoples. Several generations of Aboriginal leaders have articulated the grievances and frustrations of their people to the point that only the deliberately uninformed do not know about the pattern of discrimination and dominance that governed Aboriginal affairs in this country from the mid-nineteenth century on. Indeed, a history lesson is not needed here (although, one is always useful) to make the obvious point that Indigenous people in Canada have good reasons to be angry and are justified in their unleashing of forty years of political protests and legal challenges against the status quo.

These same culturally destructive processes, exacerbated by the consistent gap between the quality of life of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, also point to one of the most demoralizing realities of Canadian life — namely, that Indigenous peoples have internalized much of the despair and anger by engaging in self-destructive and community-damaging behaviour. Rampant drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, and other such prominent social pathologies are an outgrowth of historical processes, not Indigenous cultural norms. Whatever pain and inconvenience non-Aboriginal Canadians have felt through Indigenous protests, including Idle No More, pales in comparison to the costs of historic injustices to Indigenous communities.

Non-Aboriginal Canadians are slowly and uneasily coming to terms with the historical injustices, closing the last residential schools in 1996 and many years, lawsuits, and settlement agreements later, apologizing for them. Indeed, the last four decades have seen the Government of Canada and, latterly, provincial and territorial governments spend billions of dollars to address historical grievances, support Indigenous efforts to overcome historical legacies, and, in the process, perhaps expiate non-Aboriginal guilt about the past. The effort has, in my view, been administratively extensive but collectively more than a little insincere. A growing number of Canadians are angry about rising government expenditures related to Aboriginal communities (most of which go to providing Aboriginal people with services that only occasionally match the standard and quality of those available to other Canadians) and Indigenous legal victories. Canadians, it seems, were more comfortable with Aboriginal rights in the abstract when they were being claimed and contested in the courts, rather than in reality, as they are implemented by governments and enforced by the courts. Put more bluntly, the growing Canadian interest in Aboriginal culture and art does not appear to be matched by widespread support for Indigenous rights, self-government, and autonomy.

Somewhere in the convoluted and too-often destructive history of government intrusions in Aboriginal communities, in the post-1970s efforts to rebalance unfair relationships and persistent discrimination against Indigenous peoples, lies the roots of Idle No More. It is the total impact of government actions — not the specific government programs — that are of greatest importance when considering the roots of the movement. Consider it this way. Not all students at residential schools suffered mistreatment and abuse. Not all Indian Agents used the pass system to control movements of Aboriginal peoples on and off reserve. Not all Aboriginal peoples went without jobs or incomes. Not all non-Indigenous peoples approached Aboriginals with hatred or discriminatory thoughts. Not all Christian missionaries set out to destroy Indigenous cultures. There was no symmetry across Canada, no simple, comprehensive, and uniform approach to Aboriginal rights, policy, and programming.

Instead, what matters most is the cumulative and systematic effect of government policy and racist attitudes on the Indigenous peoples of Canada. The specific policies and government initiatives, or efforts to control an individual First Nation, however damaging these actions may be, cannot explain the full impact of all of the policies, the historical experiences, the daily effects of being marginalized. To be Aboriginal in Canada was to live in a racist system that implied and threatened total control. It meant to be defined, regulated, restricted, limited, and otherwise under the influence of policy documents (the Indian Act), government officials (Indian Agents), efforts to eradicate Indigenous cultures (residential schools), intrusive attempts to change spiritual beliefs (Christian missionaries and residential schools), major limits to freedom of movement (reserves), and routine illustrations of legal and civic inferiority (controls over Indian lands, trust funds, professional participation). However powerful and destructive each initiative might have been or currently is, it is the total impact of all of these forces, actions, and policies that weighs on Indigenous peoples.

Non-Aboriginal people in Canada, working primarily through their federal government, gave themselves the resources, tools, power, and ability to control all aspects of Indigenous life, if and when they wanted. Some Aboriginal peoples, like those in the mid- and far North until after the Second World War, were largely left alone. For many other Aboriginal peoples, particularly those living in settlement areas, more controls were applied earlier in the nation's history. But all First Nations came to realize the power of government and the even more ominous authority of the citizenry at large that stood behind the policies and the bureaucracy.

Non-Aboriginal people have trouble comprehending — because so few have experienced anything remotely like this — what Aboriginal people have lived with for generations and experience in a slightly lesser form through to the present. Discrimination is not unheard of for other Canadians, particularly those new to the country and who have non-European backgrounds, but rarely do they experience the discrimination with the intensity and persistence of that focused on Aboriginal people. Few know the pervasive effect of knowing that others tend to see you through a lens distorted by stereotypes. Few have lived with parents and grandparents whose lives were defined by government intrusions and official oversight, many of whom were robbed of parenting skills by residential schooling. Few have had many basic freedoms — such as the ability to own a home in one's community — denied to them by government legislation. Few have had to work their way through life knowing that a legal document — the Indian Act — defines them almost as much as their personality and family history. Living with hatred, racism, and condescension is demoralizing and oppressive, and tragically it is this reality that has had both immediate and long-term effects on Aboriginal people.

It would seem to make sense to see Idle No More emerging out of poverty and despair, but some of the movement's strength came from the reality that conditions are improving for some Aboriginal people and some Indigenous communities. The power to stand up and defend one's interest, it seems, comes in part from the empowerment of individuals and the people at large. The situation in Canada facing Indigenous people is not entirely grim, as analyses of educational outcomes, post-secondary participation rates, employment, income, health outcomes, and the like suggest. There are more than enough serious socio-economic and cultural problems to go around, but aspects of Aboriginal life are improving. First Nations are doing better, and significant changes appear to keep coming. Having lived through generations of marginalization and subjugation, Aboriginal peoples are experiencing significant gains: major Supreme Court victories from the *Calder* decision in 1973 to the William (*Tsilhqot'in*) judgment of 2014, the entrenchment of Aboriginal and treaty rights in the Constitution in 1982, the creation of development corporations (many of which have tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars in investable assets), cultural revitalization, numerous self-governing communities, modern treaties across the territorial North and in the northern provinces, and many other achievements and gains. Complex forces, it seems, have fueled Aboriginal protest across the country.

Emotions have flared, typically at a local or regional level, through blockades and stand-offs, intensifying dramatically throughout the 1980s and onward: there have been incidents at Burnt Church, New Brunswick; Caledonia, Ontario; Gustafsen Lake, British Columbia; the Oldman River, Alberta; Oka, Quebec; Ipperwash

Provincial Park, Ontario; and Rexton, New Brunswick. Each of these conflicts has slipped into the national lexicon as a symbol of the realities of Indigenous–newcomer relations. The media and non-Aboriginal people in general fixate on these confrontations, seeing them as the inevitable outcome of the history and politics of First Nations’ living conditions in Canada. However important these conflicts may be — each arising out of intense local debates and unresolved legal and historical conflicts — what is, in fact, remarkable is that there are so few of them.

For the past two hundred years, Aboriginal peoples have been marginalized, mistreated, controlled, manipulated, and impoverished. They lost control of their traditional territories, suffered grievous population losses, and watched the non-Aboriginal population use their lands and resources to produce one of the wealthiest nations. The surprise is not that there are occasional protests and conflicts — and there are many small confrontations, typically over land and resource matters. It is, instead, remarkable that there are so few. Indigenous peoples have often internalized their anger, taking it out on themselves, their families, and their communities. This misdirection of Aboriginal protest is one of the most confounding elements in the history of Indigenous–newcomer relations in Canada.

First Nations in Canada rarely take to the barricades; they eschew the surprisingly easy tactic of closing down highways and rail traffic and almost never engage in acts of violence or civil disobedience. There have been protests on Parliament Hill, marches in front of courthouses and legislatures, and various street gatherings. Political leaders speak loudly, often with real anger, about the injustices of Aboriginal life and the inaction of governments. Aboriginal people in Canada have a finely honed critique of Canadian history and policy, and there are few political groups that do a better job of combining passion, legal and historical understanding, and deep frustration with Canadian realities. But Aboriginal recourse has been to public assemblies, political rhetoric, and the courts. There have been threats of much worse. Former Chief Terry Nelson of Manitoba (as of 2014, the new grand chief of the Southern Chiefs Organization) has repeatedly threatened to shut down the country, but he has not done it. Shawn Brant, a Mohawk activist, has blockaded roads and railways in Ontario several times, but he rarely brings a large number of other Aboriginal people along with him.

Despite the lack of demonstrations and violent outbursts, Aboriginal frustrations are real and deeply entrenched. The pain is substantial, pervasive, and has been directed towards themselves and their communities, rather than to the country at large. The harm of history has rested overwhelmingly on the psyche of Indigenous peoples across the country. There has been an absence of outlets, processes, mechanisms, and leaders that speak to the essence of Indigenous values, aspirations, angers, and needs — that provide a means of drawing Aboriginal peoples together to express their beliefs and dreams, to present a strong and constructive alternative vision for Indigenous futures.

A convergence of social and cultural forces continues to recast the realities of Aboriginal life in Canada. Contrary to what doomsayers have been asserting for years, Aboriginal identity remains strong. While statistical evidence of the decline of Aboriginal language use is compelling — and frightening for the communities involved — he values, traditions, reliance on Elders, and other cultural characteristics remain much stronger than outsiders assume. Forecasts of the demise of Indigenous cultures continue to be overstated. Resilience is grossly underestimated. Take, for example, the movement of Aboriginal people off their reserves, into towns and cities. Geographically, it appears that Indigenous communities are coming unglued. In reality, family and community networks remain strong, with routine sharing of resources, cultural events, and family responsibilities between on- and off-reserve people.

There are other reasons for optimism on the Aboriginal front. Indigenous women have emerged again as a formidable political force, both locally (where they play crucial roles in health, education, and on community boards) and, increasingly, in electoral politics at the regional and national levels. Given that such a large number of Aboriginal people at post-secondary institutions are female, it is likely that the prominent role

of women will continue. Several decades of government programming in Aboriginal life and services, from health care to cultural revitalization and local economic development, have generated significant achievements. Add to this the re-empowerment of Aboriginal communities and governments through modern treaties, self-government agreements, special claims settlements, and duty to consult and accommodate requirements, and one sees clearly that Indigenous communities today have greater authority, more autonomy, some freedom from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, significant financial and political resources, and levels of confidence in the collective ability of Aboriginal people to use Canadian legal and political processes to their benefit.

The combination of deeply entrenched grievances, sustained prejudice, and serious community difficulties, with the recent significant achievements and important victories of real re-empowerment has proven to be an extremely powerful mix. Aboriginal peoples in Canada, in these early years of the twenty-first century, can glimpse a very different future for themselves, their children, and their grandchildren. Dreams of Indigenous renewal in the post-Second World War decades have, bit-by-bit, transformed into incremental accomplishments. Improvements in Aboriginal conditions have added to the overall collective Aboriginal confidence in the country, as well as to the growing impatience. Goals that seemed unattainable are now within grasp. It is a potent mixture: anger about the past; profound alienation from the Canadian mainstream; a growing foundation of educational and professional achievements; legal power; and frustration with both Aboriginal leadership and persistent government influence over Indigenous affairs. Then add in: the legal and political victories, mostly over the Government of Canada; growing economic independence; cultural achievements; and the international recognition of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Out of this emerges Idle No More, a movement born out of this matrix of crisis and empowerment, despair and accomplishment, historical legacies and contemporary achievements.

The desire, quite simply, was to shift the pain and the focus from self-abuse and community frustration to a proper and sustained demonstration of Aboriginal culture, identity, and determination. The collective desire for a different path was overwhelming. Aboriginal people in Canada did not need a reason to be angry; what they needed was an outlet.

They found it in November 2012.

About the Author



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Kenneth Coates is MLI's Senior Fellow in Aboriginal and Northern Canadian Issues. He is the Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation in the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan. He has served at universities across Canada and at the University of Waikato (New Zealand), an institution known internationally for its work on Indigenous affairs. He has also worked as a consultant for Indigenous groups and governments in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia as well as for the United Nations, companies, and think tanks. He has previously published on such topics as Arctic sovereignty, Aboriginal rights in the Maritimes, northern treaty and land claims processes, regional economic development, and government strategies for working with Indigenous peoples in Canada. His book, *A Global History of Indigenous Peoples: Struggle and Survival*, offered a world history perspective on the issues facing Indigenous communities and governments. He was co-author of the Donner Prize winner for the best book on public policy in Canada, *Arctic Front: Defending Canada in the Far North*, and was short-listed for the same award for his earlier work, *The Marshall Decision and Aboriginal Rights in the Maritimes*. Ken contributes regularly, through newspaper pieces and radio and television interviews, to contemporary discussions on northern, Indigenous, and technology-related issues.



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