



True North in  
Canadian public policy

# Straight Talk

December 2018

## *Straight Talk:* Julie Ann Wriston

Major resource projects in oil, gas and mining have brought increased prosperity and economic opportunities to many Indigenous communities across Canada. For this edition of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute's *Straight Talk*, we spoke with Julie Ann Wriston, former CEO of Pinehouse Business North and currently a Strategist at Creative Fire. Wriston discusses her experience of embracing her Métis identity while also describing the importance of creating opportunities for Indigenous businesses.



Julie Ann Wriston, a proud Métis woman from Saskatchewan, is the founder and CEO of Evolution Management Consulting and the former CEO of Pinehouse Business North, a Northern-owned and operated company specializing in construction and labour services for the mining industry. Julie Ann's past experience including Westcap Mgt. Ltd. and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, developing effective governance structures, strategic planning, and information sharing and inclusion at the community level make for a powerful set of skills.

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**MLI:** We're delighted to be joined here today by Julie Ann Wriston from Creative Fire, an Indigenous-owned organization based in Saskatoon. To begin, could you provide some background about yourself.

**Julie Ann Wriston:** I'm a Métis woman from Saskatchewan. I was actually born and raised in Lloydminster on the Alberta side. As an Indigenous woman, my journey started at the age of 15 when I was learning about my roots. I was part of the families that were involved in the Battle of Batoche in the North-West Rebellion, and as a result of that, my family actually hid our Indigenous roots for many decades.

Learning of my Indigenous roots at the young age of 15 sparked a real interest in trying to understand how that should shape my experience in Saskatchewan and in Canada, and also just personally for myself and my family. I made it my business to learn a lot of the true story of the relationship between Canada and the Métis people and Indigenous people. So, that was enlightening to me. And it's set a path and a tone for my life and for my education and career that was heavily linked to this notion of economic reconciliation for Indigenous people in our country.

**MLI:** I'm really interested in the process by which you educated yourself. How much of this was sort of your personal reading, talking to community leaders and Elders, political involvement? How do you go about sort of overcoming what was clearly a very long family history of pushing your own heritage to the background?

**Julie Ann Wriston:** It involved becoming enlightened on the relevant authors of the time – Maria Campbell being one – reading books like *Clearing the Plains*, *Prison of Grass*, and *Prairie Fire*, really looking at actual historical accounts of what happened in Canada. That had to be self-led, so it was a lot of research on my own. And this was, if you can imagine, before the Internet. So, it was speaking to Elders, speaking to family members who weren't too concerned about our history being out in the open. And again, that was hard. My family did take quite a stand on that: "This is not something that we are comfortable speaking about." So, I really was on my own for a lot of this.

And then, as the Internet came into play, it became easier for me to connect with people, to find family members who in fact did document our history and that's when I was really able to uncover a lot more of my own personal history, as well as Saskatchewan's history and Canada's history.

**MLI:** Reconnecting with your Indigenous roots is a fabulous story and I appreciate you sharing it with us. Connecting with business is a very different sort of puzzle. If you don't mind, could you tell us a bit about how you became involved in the business community.

**Julie Ann Wriston:** I have an entrepreneurial family. I've worked for my mother and owned my first business at the age of 18. It was an ice cream shop in a municipal park in Lloydminster. That helped me put myself through my first run of university, which was in psychology. During the three years in that business, I did learn what I was comfortable doing and where my focus was and so ended up going back to university to obtain a business administration degree through Saskatchewan Polytechnic (SIAST) at the time.

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My first real job out of SIAST was through the Métis Nation in Saskatchewan in 2007, though I had a couple of other jobs before that. And, if you recall, there was a political shift at that time. I was exposed heavily to the political landscape for the Métis people in Saskatchewan and in Canada. And, over nearly four years, I learned that one of our biggest barriers was lack of access to funding – that often our funding was tied to government initiatives and those initiatives didn't always align with what the communities at the grassroots needed or were saying they needed. It was readily apparent to me through that experience that the best way for our communities to thrive and have a healthy lifestyle and a healthy outcome was to have our own wealth.

It just so happened that in 2009 Westcap Management created the Business Ready Investment Development Gateway (BRIDG) program. The premise behind that program was fascinating: A private sector venture capital company here in Saskatchewan saw the need to build stable, economic entities to engage in energy and resource deals in the province that could use venture capital dollars to leverage some of those deals. What they found over a couple of years was it was difficult to do those businesses, because often, they were run by the political leadership. With two-year election terms, or even four-year election terms, often some of the business deals would only go so far before they stalled, due to a leadership change or a change in the political will of a community.

So, the BRIDG program was set up to create legal entities; elect good, diverse and skills-based boards; hire dedicated business management; and create strategic plans for those companies. It was really serendipitous in the way that I had kind of made that connection in my mind between wealth-creating and quality of life, and then this program came about, and I was very fortunate to be involved in that.

**MLI: What was your role within the organization? Were you writing grant proposals and writing business plans? Were you actually the entrepreneur yourself?**

**Julie Ann Wriston:** We were a two-person team in the BRIDG program. We worked with 17 communities over four years and my role was program development and government reporting. I was often what you would call almost an interim CEO while they searched for and found their CEO. I provided governance, development and strategic planning services – you name it. And everything I did was at the grassroots level, often physically in the communities with the community leadership. I learned an awful lot about what was happening economically for First Nations and Métis communities in Saskatchewan.

**MLI: You started off by saying that wealth creation would create independence and autonomy, and basically give more freedom from government and the political process. You've been at it for a while now; did it work?**

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Yes. We're really fortunate. We aligned our BRIDG program after the Harvard University and Native Nations' Institute theory that the separation of business and politics was what separated successful communities from not-successful communities. We certainly didn't come at this without some research and instinct behind it. It was a 25-year study done by Harvard University and the Native Nations' Institute. And we applied that model. And part of that was holding true to the core values of each individual community that we worked with and lacing those core values into their

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business desires and the kind of rules of engagement on how to do business with the communities. The separation of business and politics we felt was extremely important.

An interesting note about Saskatchewan. Other communities and areas really looked at a complete separation between the community and business, but here in Saskatchewan we have a hybrid. Often, there would be the desire from the community to have political representation on their corporate boards. But they are there based on skill and help provide that link back to core values while also ensuring accountability back to the community. And it's a pleasure to be able to say that all 17 of those development corporations are still in operation in one form or another today.

The BRIDG program had tremendous impact on the local economy here in Saskatchewan, bringing First Nations and Métis businesses from a handful to upwards of 20. Really, really happy about that and really proud of those communities.

**MLI: Among those 17, can you give me a success story? There is an unfortunate stereotype about Indigenous business: they rely on government subsidies, they're on government support, etc. And I know that's simply not true. In fact, Indigenous business is growing faster than almost any other part of the Canadian economy. Can you give me an example or two?**

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Absolutely. I did go on from my position with the BRIDG program to become the CEO for Pinehouse Business North, which was a tremendous opportunity and experience for me. If you can imagine, I was 35 years old and responsible for a multimillion-dollar mining services company in northern Saskatchewan. And their story alone is one that I think everyone needs to know. They started out as a community in the uranium sector in remote northern Saskatchewan. They had on-and off-again relationship with Cameco, but they were not going to sit back and allow an opportunity to pass them by. And they really did build their own future. They drove guys up to the mine sites in a truck, with brooms and paintbrushes and tools, and said, "Put us to work." And they did this relentlessly until finally, they were able to secure a couple of contracts.

From there they grew to a company where their revenues are upwards of \$12 million. That's a phenomenal story. They entered the BRIDG program at a time when they very humbly accepted that they didn't understand the structure they needed to grow. Ultimately, they had taken the company as far as they could but knew that in order to be ready for any kind of growth, they needed corporate structure, governance structure, safety policies, human resources policies, and they just did not have that kind of bench strength at that time.

I was fortunate to come on from the BRIDG program and enter into their community and their company and help them build those structures and those processes over the course of three years. And they're still growing. They have adapted many of the processes from governance and structure to their other agencies within the community. You see their housing corporation and social programs, they're all emulating the structure and process of good governance, good business, and best practice. As a result, they're creating a local economy. It's something that I would hope would be case-studied in the future, because it is a tremendous story of success. Of course, I am biased.

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**MLI:** You deserve the right to sort of brag on behalf of the community. If you don't mind me saying as well, one of the things that you didn't mention was that Pinehouse was a hurting community before this started. They were a community that was really suffering from marginalisation, endemic poverty and other social challenges. It seems to me that the development corporation has been a huge part of that transformation toward community health.

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Absolutely. And make no mistake, the dedication of their leadership and their just-do-it attitude – you've got to hand it to them, they just would not accept their current status as appropriate for their future and for their children. And they are passionate – they eat, breathe, and sleep changing their economic outcome and the outcome for the future. For me, that was a 10-year learning curve in three. I was also a young woman leading an organization in the mining sector in Saskatchewan; that was a learning curve in and of itself, so the passion and drive and spirit that I learned from in that community will stay with me always.

**MLI:** You raised the question of being an Indigenous woman working in the mining sector and the business community at large. Indigenous women are really creeping up in terms of impact, aren't they?

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Yes, it's wonderful to see. And I apologize, I don't know the exact statistics, but in terms of post-secondary graduation rates, Indigenous women are coming full-force. You go back again to the core values of community and what you see are women who are the keepers of culture. They're the ones that raise the children to understand their language and to know where they come from. If you can take some of those character traits and build them into business development, agency development, that spirit will carry the day. Again, I've been very fortunate to know and work with a number of female leaders who've mentored me over the years. And I tell you, the grace by which they own their space is something not to be trifled with. And I can only hope to have half of that as I continue into my career.

It was a hard transition for myself. If I can take the liberty to give advice to any young woman out there, what I would say is this: Don't allow yourself to change your characteristics based on your environment; you know who you are, and you know the strengths that you bring, so use that voice. And that was my challenge and there were times when I forgot that. That's what I would say to young women out there who are getting into leadership positions.

**MLI:** Are you finding it easier to get more young women into the business world?

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Yes, this upcoming generation is knocking my socks off. For me, I feel a tremendous responsibility to pave the way to open those doors and make those roads wider for these young women to come and take control. They have some fantastic ideas and some huge drive. As we evolved as a society, when we talk about diversity and inclusion and reconciliation, it is getting better. There's still a long way to go from my perspective, but there are some very strong women out there that have paved a path. And I think that these young women coming up the ranks are going to be incredible leaders.

**MLI:** If you could fix two things in terms of Indigenous business in Canada that would allow those young women and young men to sort of capitalize on opportunities, what would they be? What's missing right now or what's in short supply?

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**Julie Ann Wriston:** I think policy-driven procurement opportunities in major industry in Canada need to be redeveloped and redesigned. We've talked for so many years about capacity building at the community level and at the Indigenous business level. And I guess coming from Saskatchewan, my perspective is we need to move beyond capacity building and start recognizing competencies and allowing space for these communities to engage in procurement on equal footing. Often, what we see in the procurement space is there's the major capital spending for industry and the big players are in there submitting their proposals for work. And then there's the carve out for the Indigenous business community, and often it's nominal. Then you have some really quite relevant business entities all vying for the same dollars.

It's not what the free economy should look like. And if you believe that the economy kind of maintains itself, I believe that it's time for us to open that economy up to Indigenous business. I believe Indigenous businesses are ready. And then, often in cases, they're actually better structured for the future. That's one thing I would change, absolutely, without question.

The second thing is the reality in capital gap. When we look at getting involved in large-scale energy and resource projects, access to capital is a barrier for any business. What we have in Canada are trust funds for First Nations and Métis communities – more so First Nations – for Treaty Land Entitlement and other such things that could be used to really support, promote, and leverage real business decision-making and being able to be partners on an equal footing. How can communities access the money that they actually have in trust for them to determine their future going forward? There's still a lot of work to be done, certainly.

**MLI:** In Ottawa, there's discussion about establishing a five percent minimum threshold for all government departments in terms of procurement from Indigenous business. And if that were to happen, it would be more than a two-billion-dollar a year infusion into Indigenous organizations from coast to coast to coast. And the interesting point about that: it's not a gift, you have to earn it and compete for it, with the right price, right quality, right delivery times, etc. It's also something that should have been done all along. And what a great foundation for growth.

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Yes, absolutely. And what I can say about businesses here in Saskatchewan, we've been through a business renaissance, we've had some real shifts in our leadership, in our thinking, and in our structure. And so, we're ready. I would say to Canada, government and industry, bring it because we are absolutely ready to take it.

**MLI:** I expect you are. Tell me about Creative Fire. How long have you been with Creative Fire and what's your role there?

**Julie Ann Wriston:** I'm a senior strategist with Creative Fire. I've been here nearly a year. It's a wonderful company. The story behind Creative Fire is about three years ago, they actually started to walk the talk. They were 51 percent acquired by Des Nedhe Development, which is owned by English River First Nation. In doing so, they recognized an opportunity and a market that really requires support from a communications and marketing point of view, and that's what Creative Fire does – it's about marketing and communications. And they didn't just create a joint venture or a sidearm that might have something to do with the Indigenous business sector; they went all in and gave up 51 percent ownership of their

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company. So, if you want to see what it means when you really put yourself out there, that's what the partners at Creative Fire did.

I've been here for a little more than a year. And my role is to help do the things that they would do in this sector. So, working with Indigenous communities on consultation and strategic planning, working with non-Indigenous companies to build strategic plans for diversity and inclusion, helping change language in communication and marketing so that it appeals to the Indigenous marketplace. So, they're really building themselves a competitive advantage that no one else, really, in the industry has right now. It's an exciting time for sure.

**MLI: It really is. I've been a huge fan of Creative Fire and of Sean Willy for quite some time. If you were to look at Creative Fire five to 10 years from now, what would it look like?**

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Well, if we keep the same pace, I would see this company heavily staffed with Indigenous talent, and that's happening right now. I would see absolute parity if not shifting into a majority Indigenous client base. I think that they're looking at the national scene as their playground. So, the sky's the limit for this company. And anybody who can help advance the relationship business-wise between Canada and Indigenous people, to me, is on the right track. That is what the future looks like to me. And so, I think they're well-positioned to be a real heavy hitter in this marketplace.

**MLI: I think that the growth of Indigenous business has become the frontlines of reconciliation. It's where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are doing what Creative Fire is doing, which is figuring out how to work together and turning the strengths of both into strengths for each other. Why does the country not know more about this?**

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Well, it's a good question. And I think that it's starting to come out of organizations like the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business; it's becoming a story that's being told. But I think that it's all very new. Creative Fire is an example of where the companies that are doing the most are the ones that are being quiet, keeping their heads down, and making inroads. There's still time needed to really tell that story.

I think it's going to take leadership from Indigenous people at the management level of companies to start singing those songs. And again, that's something that we're only building towards now. If you look at any of the statistics around large industry, Canadian-based large industry, it's a dismal number in terms of percentage of senior management in those organizations. That's a step in the right direction, but it's taking time. That voice will come, but clearly, we have a long road ahead of us still.

And I would encourage industry, for one, to look at your talent pool. And if you have talented Indigenous skilled people, give them management positions, give them a voice, give them a foghorn, so to speak. Because this is what's happening for the future in Canada.

**MLI: I'm going to give you one last question. You walk into a room and the prime minister of Canada is sitting there, the premier of Saskatchewan is sitting, and John Manley, the president of the Business Council of Canada is sitting there – so, you've got government at the provincial**

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**and federal level and industry of Canada, and you've got maybe one minute to tell them what has to be done to make sure that Indigenous business succeeds more than ever. Use your minute wisely – what are you going to tell them?**

**Julie Ann Wriston:** Change policy, make it absolutely a requirement to address and include Indigenous business in all things considered. Industry: when you look at procurement, do more than the nominal amount. We're out there and we're ready to do work. The Government of Canada: allow us to access our own dollars, the money that's in trust, so that we can look at our future and provide good plans in a business capacity to build and gain wealth on our own. Change policy, change policy, change policy.

**MLI:** This has been a wonderful conversation. I've been delighted to have been speaking with Julie Ann Wriston, Creative Fire, an Indigenous-owned company here in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Thank you Julie for the wonderful conversation, and congratulations on all your accomplishments.





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