**2020 Was the Year of Indigenous Activism in Canada**

It’s time for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to become a more ardent defender of Indigenous interests.

**BY**[**TAYLOR C. NOAKES**](https://foreignpolicy.com/author/taylor-noakes/)

**| DECEMBER 17, 2020, 5:41 AM**

First Nations activists and allies blocked an intersection in Toronto on Oct. 23, calling on the Canadian government to uphold treaty rights, respect Indigenous sovereignty across the nation, and protect Indigenous land defenders. NICK LACHANCE/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

In late March, just after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, a couple from Quebec, fearing the end was nigh, sold everything they owned and flew to the remote Indigenous community of Old Crow in the Yukon territory. When the couple arrived in the fly-in-only village of about 250 people, they sought temporary accommodations and offered to work. But they were astounded to [discover](https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/quebec-couples-covid-19-escape-to-old-crow-yukon-short-lived-says-chief) the community didn’t have sufficient housing or jobs available for its own residents, let alone pandemic refugees from Quebec.

The peculiar story was quickly forgotten as coronavirus cases spiked, but it speaks to the uneasy coexistence of two Canadas: one Indigenous, one not. The non-Indigenous Quebecers were so ill-prepared for life in the Arctic, they were an immediate imposition, the village’s chief [said](https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/quebec-couples-covid-19-escape-to-old-crow-yukon-short-lived-says-chief). The thoughtless couple put the entire community at risk of infection, since, like many Indigenous communities, Old Crow has [no doctor](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/quebec-couple-old-crow-yukon-covid-19-1.5514429) or resources to handle a deadly outbreak.

The relative isolation of Indigenous communities has been both a blessing and a curse. It has preserved languages and customs the Canadian government once tried to eliminate, but it’s also kept the lived experiences of more than 1.6 million Indigenous people and the issues they face largely out of Canadians’ sight and mind for most of the country’s history.

For all that was unexpected about 2020, few analysts could have anticipated the wave of [Indigenous-led protests](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/14/wetsuweten-coastal-gaslink-pipeline-allies) that swept across Canada this year. Since [protests](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/15/canada-wetsuweten-historic-deal-land-rights-pipeline) against the construction of a natural gas pipeline through Wetʼsuwetʼen territory began in January, demonstrations have erupted countrywide on a variety of Indigenous issues, from [lobster fishing](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/mi-kmaq-lobster-fishery-palmater-1.5735653) in New Brunswick to [trophy hunting](https://ricochet.media/en/3285/anishinaabe-block-roads-to-stop-trophy-hunting-in-northern-quebec) in Quebec wildlife reserves. The largest and most significant since the Wet’suwet’en protests are the ongoing demonstrations over a [residential subdivision](https://globalnews.ca/news/7421333/six-nations-caledonia-land-claim-dispute/) proposed to be built on Indigenous territory in Southwestern Ontario.

**The federal government needs to take a more active role in conflict resolution.**In the past, Canadian prime ministers have too often relied on arm’s-length government agencies or provincial governments to address such complaints. But as the protests have shown, the federal government needs to take a more active role in conflict resolution. Indigenous people may make up only about 5 percent of Canada’s population, but vast swathes of the country are 25 to 90 percent Indigenous. And the Indigenous population is growing rapidly, at roughly [four times](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-659-x/89-659-x2018001-eng.htm) the speed of the rest of the population.

Since more than 600 recognized Indigenous governments are spread out across the country, the Indigenous in Canada are hardly a homogenous voting bloc. Yet while this may have made coordinated action hard in the past, their collective issues, over 150 years in the making, have become increasingly difficult for Canada’s leaders to ignore. Not only is Indigenous participation in federal elections increasing, but so has the number of Indigenous people elected to parliament in recent years. In close races, the Indigenous vote may be the deciding factor.

Amid these shifts in Canadian politics, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promoted himself as a pro-Indigenous candidate, but has, for the most part, shied away from direct federal government intervention in conflict resolution and failed to deliver on campaign promises. Trudeau and his government have publicly committed to reconciliation, the sustained improvement of relations between Canada’s federal government and the country’s Indigenous communities based on the recommendations of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. **It would be difficult for Trudeau to continue to sideline Indigenous issues.**But despite this commitment—and his campaign sloganeering that promised a brighter day for Indigenous people in Canada—Trudeau has underdelivered.

He has [failed to ratify](https://www.mapleridgenews.com/news/undrip-a-top-priority-says-miller-but-wont-rule-out-delay-due-to-covid-19/) the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), a long-standing campaign promise, and has been [accused](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/newsroom/updates/trudeau-disappoints-generation-betrays-rights-and-title-indigenous-people-kinder) of prioritizing the needs of a moribund oil and gas sector over Indigenous land rights. That’s no longer enough for Canadians. It would be difficult, if not inopportune, for Trudeau to continue to sideline Indigenous issues. The prime minister, who built his political reputation as a centrist who can appeal to leftists and progressives—and doubtless more than a few Indigenous voters at one time or another—must become a more ardent defender of Indigenous interests.

Solidarity with Indigenous communities is growing among voters, but it’s also a key[platform](https://www.ndp.ca/reconciliation) of the New Democratic Party (NDP), whose support Trudeau desperately needs. Since Trudeau’s Liberal party became a minority government in 2019, Trudeau has generally needed to work with the NDP to pass legislation, such as annual budgets. Without the NDP, he’d lose the confidence of Canada’s parliament and Canadians would likely head back to the polls.

Trudeau can reasonably depend on NDP support for the foreseeable future, especially through the pandemic, since it’s the major federal party that’s most closely aligned with the Liberals. But he’ll likely have to cater more to NDP desires, and NDP’s strong advocacy for Indigenous rights may finally push Trudeau from his middle-of-the-road approach.

The influence of the NDP on Trudeau is promising, but in order to enact change, the stumbling block Trudeau is facing isn’t so much Canada’s parliament, but rather the relationship between its federal and provincial governments.

**Despite its history, provincial governments continue to routinely call upon the RCMP for Indigenous policing.**One of the main reasons Trudeau’s government has not made sufficient progress on Indigenous affairs is because they often throw the federal government into conflict with provincial ones over jurisdictional power—and particularly over resource management. In addition, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is responsible for law enforcement in rural areas in seven out of ten provinces, where most Indigenous people live. The RCMP is the [direct descendant](https://globalnews.ca/news/5381480/rcmp-indigenous-relationship/) of the North-West Mounted Police, which was created in 1873 to police Indigenous peoples and force them from their land.

Thereafter, “Mounties” were used to remove Indigenous children from their parents and place them in Canada’s infamous residential schools, in a scandal that’s been [called](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-canada-aboriginal/canada-aboriginal-schools-were-cultural-genocide-report-idUSKBN0OI1Z420150603) a [cultural genocide](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/thousands-of-canadas-indigenous-children-died-in-church-run-boarding-schools-where-are-they-buried/2018/10/19/afd35060-cb25-11e8-ad0a-0e01efba3cc1_story.html). More recently, the force has [come under fire](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-police-overhaul-urged-by-mmiw-recommendations/) for its systemic inaction (and in some cases possible involvement) in the [unsolved disappearances](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/) of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Indigenous women and girls. Despite its history, provincial governments continue to routinely call upon the RCMP for Indigenous policing. Throughout 2020, Trudeau’s strategy has been to not cross these jurisdictional lines, even when provincial governments have instigated crises or fumbled their responses.

Trudeau’s reluctance to act is at least partly due to the shadow of his father, former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Because Pierre Trudeau promoted a strong central government, in some parts of the country, the Trudeau name is synonymous with federal overreach. And since Trudeau’s election in 2015, several of the more powerful provinces have elected populist premiers who have vowed to protect provincial interests against a perceived return of “Trudeauism.”

In practice, this has left Indigenous people caught between a rock and a hard place—their interests are often at odds with provinces keen to develop natural resources and too “politically sensitive” to warrant federal government assistance much of the time. This dynamic played out amid the Wet’suwet’en protests, and it’s partly what has left negotiations there so unsatisfying.

Widespread protests began in in Wet’suwet’en Territory in January after the British Columbia government called on the RCMP to enforce a court injunction and [dismantle](https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7j78b/the-raid-on-wetsuweten-the-rcmp-couldnt-finish) a largely symbolic Indigenous barricade. Indigenous land defenders and water protectors from the Wetʼsuwetʼen First Nation hereditary government opposed the construction of a natural gas pipeline through their unceded territory, as they had not been consulted and have legitimate concerns about potential environmental degradation.

Soon enough, photographs of heavily armed police in tactical gear pointing submachine guns at elderly protesters made the rounds. Those images, along with the [detention](https://ricochet.media/en/2919/ricochet-journalist-detained-for-eight-hours-while-covering-rcmp-raid) and [arrest](https://rsf.org/en/news/canadian-police-arrest-american-journalist-covering-indigenous-protest) of journalists, reminded the Canadian public of police brutality in the United States—even as Canadian politicians have been quick to [dismiss](https://globalnews.ca/news/7020609/experts-slam-premiers-comments-racism-canada/) police violence and systemic racism as an American problem.

Indigenous communities across Canada responded with solidarity protests targeting key pieces of infrastructure—namely railways that were deliberately built through Indigenous territories so that they wouldn’t disrupt non-Indigenous communities. These actions, in turn, sparked non-Indigenous solidarity protests in major cities across the country.

**The Wet’suwet’en crisis exposed the public to the interconnectedness of several long-standing problems in Canada.**The Wet’suwet’en crisis exposed the public, perhaps for the first time, to the interconnectedness of several long-standing problems in Canada, such as excessive force used by police against Indigenous people; the government’s failure to consult with Indigenous communities over energy projects that are potentially harmful to the environmental sanctity of both their territory and the planet; and the expansion of natural gas and oil pipelines despite global warming and Trudeau’s commitments to reaching Paris Accord carbon-reduction targets of net-zero emissions by 2050.

As the blockades and street protests gained steam—and were accused of affecting the economy—Trudeau was forced to intervene. Conservative politicians and pundits blamed the demonstrations for shuttering two major energy projects, although proof of these claims was less than compelling. Regardless, the national perception of political and economic instability was sufficient enough to merit direct federal intervention.

For now, the issue has been patched over: Though the pipeline remains controversial—and its construction is still opposed by Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs—after three days of negotiations in May between the chiefs, the provincial authorities, and the federal government, the Canadian government recognized land-title rights that set clear protocols to a court decision reached 23 years ago. Though hereditary chiefs and Indigenous councils are now recognized as parties who need to be consulted—which may avoid issues of Indigenous consent in the future—the decision is not retroactive to ongoing projects such as the Coastal GasLink pipeline project at the center of the dispute.

So while the [negotiations](https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/03/03/analysis/draft-deal-between-wetsuweten-and-government-explained) were productive, the central tension in Wet’suwet’en remains: The hereditary chiefs are still opposed to the pipeline, while the British Columbia government is committed to seeing it completed. And while both the pandemic and successful negotiations in March and April curtailed the protest movement, work on the pipeline slowed but never came to a full halt. Protests [recommenced](https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/10/15/members-of-wetsuweten-tribe-occupy-pipeline-drillsite-in-canada-as-protests-reignite/) in mid-October at the drill site as pipeline developer TC Energy resumed construction.

This year’s unrest is a far cry from the Indigenous protests of the 1990s, nearly all of which involved violent—and occasionally fatal—clashes instigated by the police. The [Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) resistance](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/oka-crisis%22%20%5Ct%20%22) outside Montreal in July 1990, for instance, began with a botched Quebec provincial police raid over Mohawk protests about the planned expansion of a golf course into their territory, and continued throughout the summer with blocked bridges and anti-Indigenous counterprotests. A police officer was likely killed by friendly fire in the initial raid, and an elderly Indigenous man was struck and killed by a brick during an evacuation. The 78-day-long standoff culminated in the Canadian army’s occupation of Indigenous territory.

What sets this year apart is both the relative restraint of the police and provincial governments, and how widespread the protests have been. It’s clear that it’s no longer politically tenable for provincial governments and their police forces to take a tough “law and order” approach to Indigenous concerns. Now, more Canadians are refusing to ignore the abuse suffered by generations of Indigenous people for more than four centuries at the hands of French and British colonial officials, and then Canada’s federal, provincial, and territorial governments—as well as police forces and religious organizations.

**Whether Trudeau’s election-season**[**commitments**](https://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/here-are-all-of-justin-trudeaus-promises-in-federal-election-2019/#indigenous)**were sincere or merely more lip service may not to matter anymore.**Whether Trudeau’s election-season [commitments](https://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/here-are-all-of-justin-trudeaus-promises-in-federal-election-2019/#indigenous)—including implementing UNDRIP, bringing safe drinking water to all Indigenous reserves, and reducing the number of Indigenous children in foster care—were sincere or merely more lip service may not to matter anymore: Protests, blockades, and other forms of direct action secured negotiations with the government. And, because of the protests this year, Canada’s non-Indigenous population may be slightly more aware of the systematic racism Indigenous communities face and have started to support them in their demands for change.

That Indigenous people in Canada can appeal to—and possibly count on—non-Indigenous support is a hopeful sign that Canada has passed an important milestone. Now, official reconciliation efforts may not be limited to initiatives by the federal government alone. The clear racism suffered by Indigenous people in Canada—such as the verbal and physical abuse [recorded](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-atikamekw-joliette-1.5743449) by an Atikamekw woman as she lay dying in a Quebec hospital in September—has pushed even the most obstinate of Canadians to reconsider their adamant belief that racism doesn’t exist in their country. In some cases, major Canadian cities are even pushing forward on their own [reconciliation initiatives](https://ricochet.media/en/3359/montreal-unveils-sweeping-reconciliation-strategy), such as Montreal, when provincial or federal support is lacking.

Canada is a nation built on unceded Indigenous territory. This historical truth is finally making its way into public discourse—whether that’s in town hall meetings or university lectures. If Trudeau wishes to leave his mark as the prime minister who pushed the needle forward on reconciliation and raising Indigenous [quality of life](https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/reconciliation-indigenous-engagement-in-question-ahead-of-election-1.5319899), he will have to accept this fully. That means preparing himself—and the country he leads—to acknowledge that many of the nation’s future power brokers won’t be found in the skyscrapers of Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, or Calgary, but in remote corners of the world’s second largest country.

Many will be women, some will be elders, and most likely won’t be too interested in building pipelines or logging old-growth forests. Indigenous people in Canada have always been the rightful stewards of the land. If Trudeau is serious about his commitment to reform a post-pandemic Canada into a greener, cleaner, and more equitable and just version of its former self, he’ll need to recognize that the balance of power is beginning to shift towards those who have been denied it for so long.