

Forcing New Directions in Government Policy

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For the past two months, Canadians have experienced unprecedented attention to Aboriginal affairs. The combination of three elements – the long and controversial fast of Chief Theresa Spence in Ottawa, dozens and dozens of events across the country under the banner of Idle No More, and intense debates within the Assembly of First Nations about the appropriate strategy for negotiating with the Government of Canada – kept Indigenous issues in the headlines for two months straight. The combined protests and the often-heated rhetoric generated both sympathy and frustration from non-Aboriginal Canadians, although hardly in equal measure. By the end of January, opinion polls showed that support for Chief Spence had plummeted and that non-Indigenous sympathy for Aboriginal demands had likewise eroded.

The short-term tensions and frustrations masks the likelihood that these activities have probably reshaped the agenda around Aboriginal aspirations, policies and commitments rather

dramatically. The specific demands from Chief Spence, which changed over time, will not form the basis of the new approach. Nor will many specific elements of the amorphous and uncoordinated Idle No More statements form the cornerstone of negotiations with Government. And dissension within the ranks of the Assembly of First Nations would seem, at first glance, an impediment to further negotiations, and hardly a strengthening of the position of National Chief Shawn Atleo. To focus on the details, however, is to misunderstand the transformative power of what has been going on in Canada.

For several decades, the battlegrounds between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians have largely been in the negotiating halls and courtrooms. Canada is a peaceful, conciliatory nation, adept at talking things out, seeking compromise and finding solutions that worked for all parties to the discussions. This worked for a long time. Modern land claims treaties, Aboriginal victories in court case after court case, constitutional recognition for Aboriginal and treaty rights, the extension of Aboriginal self-government, improved funding for community-based social programs all came out of this process. Throughout, Canadians appeared to feel quite good about the approach, patting themselves collectively on the back for avoid confrontation and moving step-wise on the Indigenous agenda.

The power of Idle No More, and the somewhat related activities by Chief Spence and the Assembly of First Nations, lies in its ability to change the national conversation.

There were protests, to be sure, but largely of a localized nature. The most famous confrontations – Oka, Gustafsen Lake, Burnt Church, Ipperwash and Caledonia – focused on very specific issues, generating interest across the country but little in the way of coordinated Aboriginal action. In each of these instances, Canadians recoiled at the violence – and in two instances, the deaths that occurred – but none of them generated national change in political processes. They showed the extent of Indigenous anger, but non-Aboriginal Canadians attributed the conflicts to specific leaders or to the mishandling of local affairs.

This did not happen in 2012-2013, particularly as the Idle No More movement spread across the country. The events were completely peaceful. Thousands of people, mostly Aboriginal but with many supporters, gathered in hundreds of events without a single instance of physical harm to bystanders, participants or even property. Indeed, characterizing the events as “protests” misses the reality that the gatherings were also affirmations of Aboriginal identity, an outpouring of

activism by Indigenous youth, and public displays of Indigenous culture that the country had not before witnessed. Commentators critiqued the movement for the lack of a sharp focus, the absence of specific and realistic demands, and the loose organizations structure when, in fact, the open nature of Idle No More was precisely its strength. Even though the protest started over the Government of Canada's controversial omnibus legislation (Bill C-45), the power of the gatherings rested in large measure on the fact that they were a blank slate, on which local organizers and participants could draw their own portrait of Canadian problems and possible solutions.

What has happened in Canada in the past two months is not unique. In many countries, what seemed like quixotic Aboriginal protests became turning points in Indigenous policy. In 1972, a handful of Aborigines opened an "Aboriginal Embassy" in tents on the grounds in front of Australia's Parliament House in Canberra, launching an ongoing campaign for land and resource rights. The occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay by Indigenous rights activists in 1969 – an event that last 19 months -- likewise drew national attention in the USA to the plight of Aboriginal people. In Norway, conflict over the Alta Dam led, in 1979, to the Saami Action Group setting up tents and launching a hunger strike in front of the Norwegian Parliament, an act of defiance that generated widespread support for Saami rights, forced the scaling down of the planned dam, and galvanized Saami protest in general. Protests in less liberal and democratic nations, from Brazil to Malaysia, were often met with greater government resistance, but many nonetheless attracted international media attention and, often, national policy changes.

The power of Idle No More, and the somewhat related activities by Chief Spence and the Assembly of First Nations, lies in its ability to change the national conversation. That appears to have happened. These protests and gatherings have drawn unprecedented attention to several things: the grinding poverty of many Aboriginal communities, the continued economic marginalization of Indigenous peoples, the presence of numerous well-educated, articulate and committed young Aboriginal leaders of the future, mounting Indigenous anger with both injustice and the shortcomings of current policy, recognition of the failures of the Indian Act and the need for systematic change, the willingness of governments, under pressure admittedly, to listen and shift course, and the capacity of Aboriginal people to organize in their collective interests.

Canadians are less aware of two of the most crucial elements in the protests: the remarkable peacefulness of the gatherings and the degree to which Aboriginal people have adhered to the spirit of the treaties, which call for co-existence with other Canadians. Idle No More and, indeed, the often-angry rhetoric of some of the First Nations Chiefs during the protests are not, at root, challenges to the integrity of the nation state and are not revolutionary in tone and purpose.

Instead, they call on the Government and people of Canada to share national wealth more appropriately, to adhere to well-articulated Canadian law, to negotiate new arrangements for Aboriginal peoples for whom existing treaties or circumstances are insufficient, and to adjust national policy to better suit needs and aspirations. These are not attacks on the nation-state, as they have often been described. Instead, they are requests that Canada honour its own laws and its national commitment to equality of opportunity.

The past two months have been remarkable times in Canada, and they foreshadow significant changes to come. The Government of Canada and, even more importantly, the people of Canada will have to move beyond their discomfort with the protests – marked by systematic peacefulness and affirmations of Aboriginal identity – and realize that the country has been offered an outstretched hand. Aboriginal Canadians want to be partners in Canada, not outsiders. Like other Aboriginal protests around the world, these events reveal deep dissatisfaction with the status quo but a willingness to work with governments and the people at large to create a better future. Idle No More spoke initially to Indigenous peoples and called on them to come together to state their case, articulate their demands and demonstrate a commitment to their Aboriginal heritage. That worked, much better than most people realized. Idle No More is not a challenge to governments and all Canadians. Canada, not just Aboriginal people, cannot be idle no more. The work is not over. It is just begun.

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