

COMMENTARY

The “Idle No More” movement and global indifference to Indigenous nationalism

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Abstract

Not since the summer of 1990 have Canadians seen such a widespread resurgence of Indigenous nationalism. The recent “Idle No More” movement, which began in late 2012 as a campaign against specific federal legislation affecting lands and waters, has led to renewed calls for Canadians to honour the treaty relationship with Indigenous peoples. This piece considers the movement from a more global perspective. It studies the benefits and risks associated with the seemingly natural linkages between the environmental movement and the more fundamental demands of Idle No More for the restoration of the nation-to-nation relationship. Ties to the environmental movement might help, particularly given apathy on the part of dominant global players, namely state leaders. Indigenous nationalists nevertheless need to proceed cautiously to prevent trading one form of domination for another.

Keywords

Idle No More, Indigenous nationalism, colonialism, media, environmentalism, Canada

Introduction

Not since the summer of 1990 have Canadians witnessed the full force of widespread Indigenous nationalism. That summer saw the deadly Oka Crisis between the Canadian military and

Mohawk warriors over yet another encroachment on their traditional lands. It also saw Elijah Harper initiate countrywide resistance against the Meech Lake Accord. Today, a new generation of Indigenous leaders, combining the wisdom of their elders with new social media, is

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promising to organize peaceful round dances in shopping malls, stoppages on major transportation routes, hunger strikes, and marches on Canada's legislatures until their voices are heard and the nation-to-nation spirit of the original treaties is honoured.

The grassroots "Idle No More" movement began as a response to federal legislation introduced in November 2012 that reduced environmental protection of important lands and waters within traditional Indigenous territories. Indigenous peoples were excluded from the legislative process. In December, as the legislation was being debated, Assembly of First Nation leaders decided to march on Parliament. Several chiefs led the way holding the 1764 Niagara Treaty Wampum Belt signifying the original agreement of peace, friendship and respect between the British Crown and Indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes and Saint Lawrence River regions. Though allowed into the Parliament buildings, they were barred from entering the House of Commons. Instead, Joe Oliver, a Minister of the Crown, stepped outside the lower chamber to listen to the chiefs' concerns. During the brief exchange, Chief Wallace Fox of Onion Lake Cree Nation asked, "Why is government policy and legislation always wanting us to surrender the land? To cede and surrender." The Minister gave the following non-reply: "What we are looking for is equal partnership ... We are going to continue to work on behalf of all the people of Canada" (Barrera & Jackson, 2012, paras. 14–15). To sensitive ears, working on behalf of all Canadians euphemizes the continued trampling of Indigenous rights. Chief Fox summarized the day's events by saying,

We tried to enter into the house in order to deliver our message to all Members of Parliament and Prime Minister Stephen Harper in a peaceful way that our Inherent and Treaty Rights aren't negotiable. We weren't consulted on C-45, which outlines a new legislation on land surrender and wanted to be included in

these discussions. These actions have strained a [*sic*] already fragile relationship. We have no other choice now but to take a course that will have impacts on all Canadians. (Barrera & Jackson, 2012, para. 18)

Indigenous political action has not stopped. While Indigenous nationalism has always existed, the events of this past winter have rejuvenated Indigenous peoples all across Canada. Beginning as political action against specific federal legislation, Idle No More added fuel to the ever-burning fires of Indigenous nationalism and its more fundamental demands for equal self-determination and the re-establishment of a nation-to-nation relationship with non-Indigenous Canadians. But is the world watching? If so, what does it mean for the Indigenous nationalism movement in Canada?

Global media, environmental politics, and the risk to Indigenous nationhood

On 11 January 2013, an Idle No More Global Day of Action included events in over a dozen countries including a one-man protest outside the Canadian embassy in Sri Lanka and events in Cairo, London, and even Warsaw. Given their Indigenous populations, many larger rallies were organized in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Chile. Organizers explicitly sought global support for the unjust treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world. Yet, global media seems fixated on two dimensions that downplay and even jeopardize the main message of self-determination.

First, global media initially showed interest in the sensationalism of protests and hunger strikes. A prominent example of this is a story that ran in France's *Le Monde* (Jacot, 2013). The article focused on the government's inability to cope with widespread political unrest among a supposedly newly unified Indigenous peoples. The article makes erroneous claims, suggesting that for the first time in history Indigenous

peoples are united and being led by women. One need only recall the unifying effect Elijah Harper had in 1990 (Turpel & Monture, 1990) and women's unique traditional leadership role in many, if not all, Indigenous nations (for one example, see Alfred, 1999, pp. 113–115). The *Le Monde* article makes no mention of the more fundamental violation of treaties or Indigenous rights more generally. One BBC story at least mentioned these fundamental issues, citing “treaty and land rights signed with the British Crown in the 19th century”, though it too focused almost exclusively on the inconvenience protests have had on the government and the lives of the Canadian majority (BBC News, 2013). Such stories leave an impression that Indigenous peoples are pursuing a weak, even unjustified, politics of grievance. It reads as self-interested lobbying whereby Indigenous peoples raise a history that the rest of the world has left behind as colonialism declined and presumably ended over the course of the 20th century. I return to this misplaced conception later.

A second worrisome trend is primarily or even simply equating Idle No More with the environmental movement. One article from the *Guardian* mentions that the Canadian government ignores its treaty obligations, but still concludes by emphasizing the fact that both Indigenous peoples and environmental activists should work together to increase their overall effectiveness (Lukacs, 2012). The article fails to consider challenges that might arise given Idle No More is not simply or most fundamentally about environmental protection. As an Indigenous person wrote in the same paper, Idle No More's “goals are to build indigenous sovereignty, to repair the relationship between indigenous peoples of Canada (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit), the crown [*sic*], and the government [*sic*] of Canada from a grassroots framework, and to protect the environment for all Canadians to enjoy for generations to come” (Charleyboy, 2013, para. 2). The Indigenous claim to sovereignty and

national self-determination is much broader than, though certainly inclusive of, environmental protection.

Indigenous nationalists and environmentalists may share a common enemy in the unsustainable development brought on by global economic forces supported by the world's powerful industrialized states. There have even been cases of successful cooperation. In the 1970s and 1980s, environmentalists supported Sámi efforts—including hunger strikes and civil disobedience—to stop the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Alta River in Norway's northernmost county of Finnmark. Despite failing to stop the dam, some Sámi villages were saved from flooding and the issue of Sámi nationhood took a more fitting place in public debates. The Alta Affair, as it became known, played a significant role in the events that led to the establishment of Sámi parliaments in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, as well as the passing of Norway's Finnmark Act (2005), giving the Sámi much greater say in managing their traditional waters and lands (Overland & Berg-Nordlie, 2012, pp. 14–15). Indigenous nationalists should nevertheless resist the conclusion that the environmentalist movement intrinsically values or supports Indigenous nationhood. For instance, environmentalists fight hard to stop Indigenous peoples from whaling, despite its extreme cultural significance and Indigenous claims that their practices are sustainable. Environmentalists played a key role in the 1977 decision by the International Whaling Commission to impose a whaling moratorium, which included bowhead whales hunted by Alaskan Inuit. Based on detailed local knowledge passed down from generation to generation, the Alaskan Inuit insisted that the bowhead hunt was sustainable. It was only 20 years later that “modern science” concluded that the Alaskan Inuit were right (Ford, 2000). While the environmental movement shares affinities with Indigenous environmental knowledge, it all too often cannot resist unilaterally imposing its scientific

views on Indigenous peoples when it has the power to do so. This is particularly concerning given the fact that Indigenous knowledge deserves tremendous respect as it has been built up over generations of passing down information about the local landscape, flora, and fauna (for a comprehensive treatment of the subject, see Simpson, 2001).

The general lack of global concern

There was a time when global events promoted ever-greater respect for Indigenous peoples. Twenty years ago, a leading Cree scholar felt that

the claims of indigenous peoples have been vigorously advanced in the post-war era internationally and within nation states in key regions throughout the world, including the Americas, the Pacific, and Northern Europe. The unique character of these claims has challenged domestic and international legal and political regimes. (Turpel, 1992, p. 579)

The global collapse of colonialism and its racist views of Indigenous peoples saw dramatic developments in many parts of the world starting mostly in the 1960s and 1970s. The past 40 years of Canadian history has seen modern treaties successfully negotiated in British Columbia, the Inuit-majority territory of Nunavut created, and Aboriginal rights recognized in the Canadian Constitution. The same period saw Sámi parliaments established in Northern Europe, as well as the Mabo legal decision in Australia recognizing Aboriginal title. These are only highlights from a selection of countries and do not include developments in many others around the world. Despite significant progress, not a single country goes far enough in granting Indigenous peoples the full right to self-determination enjoyed by national communities who control modern states. It is even more concerning that, despite such progress,

the global movement had arguably lost steam by the turn of the century.

It seems that global support for change has run its course. Colonialism's collapse saw world powers without Indigenous minorities leave the problems to their former colonies. The global stigma against assimilationist policies only pressured the governments in Canada and elsewhere to adopt culturally sensitive measures that may ultimately fail as the tremendous pressure of economic assimilation takes its toll on Indigenous communities. This seems to be the case despite the United Nations adopting the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 (herein UN Declaration). The document includes important language. It asks signatories to "affirm the fundamental importance of the right to self-determination of all peoples, by virtue of which they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Indigenous people understandably celebrated when important laggards like the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada eventually signed. Even Shawn Atleo, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, felt Canada's signing of the UN Declaration signified "a real shift, a move forward toward real partnership between first nations and the government" (Ibbitson, 2010, para. 4). Two years later, Idle No More showed the moment's limited impact.

So where is the global pressure on states like Canada? When world leaders visit China or other states clearly violating human rights, the subject often seems to come up. When the Canadian Prime Minister visits with his global counterparts, respect for the UN Declaration or Indigenous rights more generally never comes up. If anything, the opposite is occurring. In line with the hands-off, or withdrawal, approach adopted by former colonial powers in the 20th century, even European states are renegeing on their treaty relationships. Both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have recently refused to recognize Haudenosaunee passports despite

formal nation-to-nation relationships between the two states and the Haudenosaunee dating as far back as the Two Row Wampum Treaty of 1613 (see Kaplan, 2010; Wiemers, 2013). A recent article in the Dutch daily *de Volkskrant* cited Dutch support for the Haudenosaunee at the League of Nations in 1923 and again at the UN in 1977; the existence of a Haudenosaunee embassy in the Hague in the 1990s; and the honouring of the passport until just a few years ago. The author calls on the Dutch government to commemorate the Treaty's 400th anniversary by living up to its support of the UN Declaration and its commitment to all of its valid treaties by renewing the Two Row Wampum's intent (Wiemers, 2013). European states in particular have simply washed their hands of the issue, foregoing opportunities to act as a positive influence for implementing a UN Declaration supported by the vast majority of world states. It is hard not to be cynical given that world powers benefit from remaining silent as Indigenous lands are used in the service of the global economy.

Concluding remarks

Canada clearly has a long way to go in restoring a just relationship with Indigenous peoples. A critical question facing Indigenous

peoples and sympathetic Canadians involves the road that will take us there. In considering this, two related issues should not be avoided. Starting with the last one raised, it is unclear why Indigenous issues should be relegated to the domestic sphere. World leaders should be engaging in meaningful conversations on how to implement Indigenous self-determination. Global Indigenous organizations of course have a large role to play in stimulating this debate, but it seems the state-centric global order refuses to self-assess its treatment of stateless nations, particularly when territory is being disputed. The second issue is raised more in the spirit of stimulating greater respect and cooperation between Indigenous peoples and environmentalists (and other possible allies). Despite even the best of intentions, allies can quickly become foes if they fail to consider the nature of the relationship. Environmentalists often promote a universal moralism that sometimes clashes with Indigenous worldviews and their practical cultural needs. When such clashes occur, the powerful are often tempted to override the wishes of others. It would make no sense for Indigenous peoples to exchange one relationship of domination for another. It becomes a question of how much the environmental movement can accept Indigenous perspectives and their justifiable claims for greater self-determination.

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