

Idle No More arose with scant planning—using social media and tapping into the deep sense of unfairness and the political abandonment of their voice felt by educated Aboriginal women. It has resonated with many others, including men, and generations young and old, because it speaks a bitter truth about Canada—it has failed to deliver on human rights and equal opportunity for Aboriginal peoples.

This brings us back to the key point about the Indian Act. Why hasn't it changed or transitioned into a more meaningful government regime designed to be effective or responsive to the needs of First Nations citizens, especially those in crisis? I reflect back on the failed constitutional renewal process that followed the conclusion of the Charlottetown Accord. This accord offered a transition process out of the Indian Act to a new arrangement that preferred an obligation for a negotiated settlement but clearly recognized a legally enforceable and existing inherent right of self-government, as well as a fiscal arrangement to support that transition. Those provisions, and the protocols that supported them, would have represented a new path forward, but it was quickly put to rest when constitutional reform politics was shut down.

Some First Nations women had deep suspicions about the Charlottetown Accord at the time and felt they were mistreated when the Native Women's Association of Canada was not represented at the discussion table. They worried self-government might not address issues such as caregiving support and equality, or redress their grievances about their treatment at the hands of band leadership. They were right to be worried. Twenty years later there is still no improvement in meaningful government services or policies to make caregiving and raising children easier than it was then.

I'm not advocating a new constitutional round. The constitutional discussions ended because of the unworkable amending formula and a lack of public appetite for them. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* recommended a nonconstitutional reconciliation approach with a negotiated process for change. Its recommendations have merit and deserve thoughtful consideration, but it too has been ignored, either because of the scope of change required or a lack of political will at the national level. Crucial issues about the scale and viability of First Nations communities and economies require a broad and pragmatic discussion in an appropriate political forum.

So where does that leave us? The Prime Minister and his government do not appear to have suffered any major setback in popular opinion from Idle No More and other protests. But not even the most Machiavellian of strategists can be sanguine about the uncertainty that now characterizes the relationship between Aboriginal leaders and their grassroots. We are in uncertain terrain and a state of stasis, and the system that maintained it can no longer be counted on to keep the peace. The failed policy of the Indian Act era has run its course, and no one can make a deal without the support of the people.

The glimmer of hope lies with the women. They understand that solutions lie in forging relationships that respect the rights of all and that address the social and economic issues that blight the lives of so many of our most vulnerable. With Idle No More, they have shown they are prepared to make noise. Canadians would be unwise to think the drumming and celebratory atmosphere of Idle No More has no substance or will soon subside. Aboriginal politics will never be the same.

*Originally appeared in Policy Options/Options Politiques, February 2013.*

## **IDLE NO MORE:**

### **Strong Hearts of Indigenous Women's Leadership**

*Wanda Nambush*

On January 26, 2012, I found myself marching down a busy Toronto street beside grandmother Pauline Shirt and a number of Indigenous women in front of hundreds of marchers. As a water carrier, I was holding a part of lake Ontario in my hands. This water walk and ceremony was called together to bring attention to the Idle No More movement and the fight against the changes to the Navigational Waters Protection Act under Bill C-45 that legalized resource development's precedence over environmental protection. We weren't protesting—we were speaking the spirit of the water. We were attempting to heal her from the pollution choking her life force, which in turn chokes our own.

The actions under the Idle No More banner have largely been peaceful and ceremonial in nature, thus markedly different from any other massive international Indigenous-led movement in history. It is a movement led largely by grassroots Indigenous women. The movement exhibits a post-Cartesian Indigenous ethos where the mind, body, spirit, and emotions are engaged together. Like the drum at the centre of the round dances is the heart of the mother earth, the women maintain the heart at the centre of the movement. It's a rare feeling to go to a political action and want to hug every stranger around you, to feel vulnerability at the centre of life and a desire to protect it.

Indigenous women's leadership has always been at the grassroots level, having historically been shut out of Indian Act-based leadership until 1952. Many have forged their leadership skills in ceremonial spaces where pre-contact cultural values around the roles of women have allowed us significant influence and power. The teachings gathered at the skirts of our grandmothers have also required a different set of principles for working cross-culturally. While a return to and education about the Nation-to-Nation relationship that exists between Canada and the many Indigenous nations on whose soil this country was birthed has been the centre of the movement, it has also required understanding how we are to work together now and in the future. When the relationship is not defined from thought alone but also includes the spirit and the heart the work takes on a different character. Wampum belts hold the history of our treaties with other Nations and speak of these Nation to Nation relationships being based on peace and friendship with the values of trust, integrity, honesty, and truth as the basis for interaction. This is not a written contract to be analyzed and assessed but a contract of spirit and heart to be lived together.

Women who have worked at the ground level healing their communities from historical trauma, who deal with large socio-economic disparities and have counteracted cultural discontinuity—all brought on by colonialism and racism—bring a considerable knowledge base to the movement. Cross-cultural conflicts that are quite common in Canada come to the fore in an Indigenous-led movement like Idle No More. Canadians have been denied access to an education, which leads to deep mistrust and misunderstanding between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous participants in a struggle to protect the earth and water.

Unity has been stressed and yet unity in difference is the goal. For this movement to work we must remain unified. This means no behind-the-back talk against each other. It means putting aside petty jealousies, envy, dislikes, and old grudges. It means not having an ego. Indigenous concepts of the human that are non-ego based become important. It means true humility that listens before speaking, and that understands before judging, it means letting go of negativity and holding the fragility and dignity of fellow humans close.

It does not mean that we will all agree but the way we disagree is the main question. If I disagree I choose to disagree openly in front of the person, without anger or passive aggression as a form of peacocking towards understanding. I choose to ask questions and seek understanding, to deliberate before forming opinion. I choose to care for strangers. I choose to set aside my own desires for the larger picture. I choose to step forward and share my knowledge and skills for others. I choose to take the heat. I choose peaceful disobedience. I choose to obey ancient laws of respect. These tenets, if you will, are women's teachings that they bring to the movement and affect how it operates. The earth, for us, is considered a mother; mothering and creation is foregrounded for our identity. This does not mean that women cannot choose men's roles or have sexual relations with women. It does mean that there are specific knowledges within the acts of creation for both earth and women that are essential to the sustenance of our world and humanity. Creation is also an act of futural imagining which is what is at the heart of women's work. The creativity of the actions and the focus on our children's children's etc. future is part of what is expected of a woman living in a good way. Humanity is the weakest link in all of creation because it relies on all of creation to exist—that is why they must ultimately protect it. The focus on male leadership under colonial rule has not quieted the voices of Indigenous women leaders. There is a strength derived from the attempted silencing in their closeness to the community, ceremony, children, and creativity.

*Originally appeared in Women in a Globalizing World: Transforming Equality, Development, Diversity & Peace. Ed. Angela Miles. Toronto: Inanna, 2013.*

## WE ARE FREE HUMAN BEINGS, PART TWO

*Lori M. Mainville*

"We do this for our future generations" are words describing legacies. It suggests presence and, depending on the tone and inflection, it suggests action. These words are sounds of life, of choice, of freedom.

I was privileged to listen to the late elder Peter O'Chiese, who spoke of such things as the power of sound. Our original language had this built right within it, it was co-relational to the vibration of sound of the land. Our words not only sound like the world around us, but so did the spaces between the words. One need only sit in silence near water or trees to understand the deep sense of connection we carry in sound.

Our voices are sacred binds with one another. The oral tradition demonstrates that to us, it is a relational reciprocity of speaking, listening, and witnessing as a group. It also demonstrates how a nation can interact with another nation. Language connects us, it teaches us to maintain our social connections with living beings from all over the world, and the universe. Sometimes we speak different words, but we must keep trying to communicate. We can close that gap of understanding with action.

Part of this is found in Idle No More, an awakening of this very opportunity. The past months have been challenging. This may have been by the leaderless nature of the movement, which made it at times tough to negotiate and communicate widely. It may have been the challenging nature of bringing so many nations into a complex discussion involving so many key issues. Another might have been some of the concerns around "copyrighting" the movement. It's impossible to control energy and harness it under a couple sets of fingers. Our original governance resided with clans, societies, and collectivities, not a few.

It is now that we have opportunities to make sounds of our own, and explain these to others. They must understand too. It is time to think of what will happen next to ensure that we do this for our future generations. It is my prediction that in the coming months we will:

- Reflect and discover the lessons learned from the movement.



Khelisiem Rivers, an Idle No More Vancouver organizer, cracks up the crowd during the January 11 Day of Action, 2013. (STEPHEN HUI)