

Top stories of 2016 for Indigenous peoples in Canada

Reflecting on last year's conflicts and movements

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For Indigenous peoples, 2016 was quite the year.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report in 2015 and the Idle No More movement fighting Harper's agenda in 2013 have drawn media and political attention—attention that has continued to grow ever since.

Election of the Liberals in 2015 with an explicit agenda for reconciliation with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people raised expectations, and Canadian public attitudes shifted remarkably.

Across Canada, you can sense the shifting attitudes among non-Indigenous people, and polls confirm more understanding and empathy in regards to Indigenous peoples—but these hopeful shifts do not negate the pervasive racism.

An explosion of interest in

Indigenous arts, books, music, and theatre is sweeping the country. Gord Downie's film, book, and recording of "Secret Path" gave even more profile to Indian Residential Schools.

Communities are making small steps to bring First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples and cultures into the mainstream. Even in Guelph this trend was evident in small ways with City Hall sponsoring its largest Aboriginal Day celebration yet, the council's new territorial acknowledgement, The Bookshelf events highlighting Indigenous authors, and the University of Guelph's hiring of new Indigenous professors to address a known shortcoming.

Pipelines and resource projects were great sources of conflict in 2016; a legacy of Harper's weakening of environmental laws. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's denial of the Northern Gateway and approval of Trans-mountain and Line 3 pipelines brought anger—and in other cases mixed reviews. It also laid groundwork for confrontations in 2017.

The Chippewas of the Thames First Nation took their grievance with Line 9 pipeline to the Supreme

Court. Similarly, federal approval of the gigantic Site C dam in northern British Columbia was met with court challenges and protest.

The national inquiry on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls was put into effect in 2016—a key deliverable in the Liberal Indigenous agenda. Significant time and care was taken to consult the families and Indigenous organizations. Marion Buller and the other inquiry commissioners have solid credentials and backgrounds to undertake this work. Now the hard work begins. However, a recent report card on the inquiry raised concerns about lack of information and communication, especially to families.

Closing the gap between the quality of education for Indigenous children and other kids is a must for real change. Lack of action to improve education was a flashpoint under Harper. Yet the federal budget of April 2016 offered only modest change in the short term, with significant increases only by 2020.

Indigenous children make up almost half of those in child welfare throughout the country. Over 14,000

Indigenous children are in foster care. This is three times higher than the number affected at the height of the residential school system. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that the federal government broke the law by funding care for on-reserve First Nations' children at lower funding levels than children in the rest of Canada. Yet, the federal budget does not propose funding children equally until 2020, leading to an opposition motion to embarrass the Liberals into action.

Suicide in Indigenous children, youth, and adults in northern Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Nunavut was sadly prominent in news coverage in 2016. There is still so much more to do.

The Liberal government's progress on a true reconciliation agenda got mixed reviews as 2016 drew to a close.

Prime Minister Trudeau often says, "No relationship is more important to our government and to Canada than the one with Indigenous peoples."

Yet, approvals of controversial energy projects and waffling on the

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples caused many to question the commitment. However, at a December meeting to set up a national council for reconciliation, Métis leader David Chartrand, Inuit leader Natan Obed, and First Nations national chief Perry Bellegarde praised the progress made in one short year.

The courts continue to push the government to act in 2016. The Supreme Court ruled the federal government does have responsibility for Métis and non-status "Indians," ending countless federal efforts to dodge responsibility. The courts also overturned Northern Gateway pipeline approval due to an inadequate consultation with First Nations communities.

Remarkable change has occurred in the last couple of years, but after centuries of colonialism, so much more will be needed. Reconciliation is a long term, multi-generational process needing sustained commitment. Indigenous peoples are empowered and will not relent, and signs are that Canadian people are ready for change as well.