

Balancing the Budget at Indigenous People's Expense

by Riley Yesno

THE CONSENSUS ANALYSIS of Budget 2022 seems to revolve around the term “centrist.” Mainstream Canadian media has emphasized the Trudeau Liberals’ plans to lower the national deficit while highlighting investments in policy areas like housing and dental care. But centrist can also be a euphemism for big cuts. While there are investments in areas meant to prove a commitment to a progressive agenda, there are also definitely causes for concern.

What does this underfunding and the budget approach more generally mean for those like Indigenous people, who have been consistently underfunded even when the Canadian government has made its largest investments?

I think, chiefly, it means two things:

1. Indigenous people will continue to be insufficiently invested in — left to try and make do with scraps of what is truly necessary to improve well-being.
2. It solidifies what the government values when it comes to Indigenous futures. In the case of Budget 2022, those values revolve around resource development and economic partnerships rather than Indigenous climate action or Indigenous-led self-determination.

These conclusions can be hard to see at first. Budget 2022 includes a number of details that, on its surface, make it seem like the government is investing more than they truly are. Parsing through the platitudes, however, reveals the truth:

This budget is not so different from those before it, preferring to continue upholding Canada’s colonial fiscal approach rather than radically transforming it.

GENERATING GAPS: HOUSING, EDUCATION, COVID-19, AND MORE

In 2021, the Canadian government touted “historic” investments in reconciliation after promising \$18 billion over five years to Indigenous communities — quadrupling the amount from Budget 2019.¹ This year, \$11 billion was committed overall.²

\$7 billion less from one budget to the next is a substantial reduction in the rate of investment. The gaps between *necessary and actual* funding resulting from this reduction are apparent. In terms of housing, for example, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) surveyed needs in First Nations communities and requested a commitment of \$44 billion over ten years to adequately address infrastructural insufficiencies.³ In total, however, Budget 2022 allocated only \$6.3 billion over seven years “towards improving and expanding Indigenous housing in Canada.”⁴ This is a significant gap, when broken down between First Nations, Metis, and Inuit, on reserve and urban, and rural communities. While a seemingly large figure, this is actually limited funding compared to what is actually necessary to meet needs.

In education, too, the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) found in their 2021 Indigenous Education Analysis that Budget 2021's commitment of \$150.6 million over two years to the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), as well as the Inuit and Métis Post Secondary Education Strategies, was "an inadequate amount to account for the roughly 32,000 Indigenous students currently attending post-secondary education."⁵ This year, there were no additional commitments made to post-secondary funding or any other level of education. For regionally-based commitments, there was only money allocated to some First Nations communities in Quebec.⁶

As for COVID-related spending, the government has spent over \$20 billion on COVID response funding as of late 2021.⁷ This budget allocation for Indigenous-specific COVID relief represents less than 0.01% of that overall amount, even though, as the United Nations notes, Indigenous people "are at disproportionate risk in public health emergencies, becoming even more vulnerable during this global pandemic."⁸

We can find gaps like these throughout Budget 2022. Practically, this means the chronic underfunding of Indigenous people will remain, at least for the time being — and when you're talking about basic needs like housing, clean water, education, and healthcare, as Indigenous people are — this translates to serious restrictions to prosperity. As the Yellowhead Institute identified in their 2021 report, *Cash Back*, "the policy of 'enough to keep them alive' has been the backbone of the fiscal approach since Confederation."⁹ Budget 2022 does not break significantly from this pattern.

Just as stark as the understanding of where the government *didn't* choose to put money is where they *did*.

RCMP, RESOURCE EXTRACTION & NON-JURISDICTION

In a budget like this one, where underfunding is abundant, where the money goes says something especially profound about the Liberals' Indigenous affairs agenda.

Indigenous commenters have highlighted the absurdity of \$5.1 million over five years being allocated to "Public Safety Canada to ensure the Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP] can support community-led responses to unmarked burial sites."¹⁰ Somehow, despite the RCMP's well-documented violent relationship with Indigenous people and their critical role in residential school enforcement, the federal government has chosen to put money into that same institution that helped cause and perpetuate harm rather than into the hands of affected communities.

Likewise, regarding the funding of harmful institutions, I note that between all of their budget items, the government has committed a total of \$384.1 million to various initiatives relating to resource extraction.¹¹ This is more money than they have put into housing for Metis people, addressing the legacy of residential schools, Indigenous climate leadership, mental health and wellness, jurisdictional negotiations over child welfare, or education.

As for self-determination, if we work off of a broad definition that requires Indigenous people to be able to exercise authority and jurisdiction in their territories, there is only one budget item that speaks to that. Budget 2022 allocates "\$340.8 million over ten years to support Wabaseemoong Independent Nations' exercise of jurisdiction."¹²

Beyond this, despite having a whole section dedicated to advancing self-determination, there are very limited additional dollars committed to that objective. For example, there is \$29.6 being allocated over three years meant to "support self-determined action in addressing Indigenous peoples' climate priorities."¹³ However, that money is being allocated to Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada rather than Indigenous communities or land defenders themselves. In effect, Indigenous people receive this money only at the pleasure of the branch. This is the case for several other budget items.

Other commitments to self-determination come in the form of stated goals for legislative changes. These goals, without material resources or timelines behind them, are simply promises we are expected to assume will come to fruition — this is not guaranteed. Further, legislative commitments are dependent on confidence in the House. These types of promises can be fickle and do not amount to the scope of self-determination that Indigenous people demand.

MANDATED MONEY

Perhaps the point of the Indigenous-focused portion of the budget that made people most pleased was a commitment of “\$4 billion over six years, starting in 2021-22, to ensure First Nations children continue to receive the support they need through Jordan’s Principle.”¹⁴

Important to remember, however, is that the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal has ordered Canada to implement the full and proper scope of the principle since 2016 — having to issue several non-compliance orders to successive Liberal governments for failing to meet this commitment since then. (Interestingly, there are two mentions of an already committed “\$40 billion to compensate for past harms experienced through the child and family services system and to support long-term program reforms.”¹⁵)

It is critical that these commitments have been made, certainly — it provides a tangible number that the government can be held to account to pay. However, I am hesitant to view these commitments as new or exciting ones; rather, they are tribunal mandated, years delayed dollars that *should already have been in the hands of Indigenous families*.

Indeed, if it weren’t for the tireless advocacy of Indigenous leaders like Cindy Blackstock, I am unconvinced this would have been a budget commitment, even though the phrasing in this budget may leave the impression this was always a priority or inevitability.

CONCLUSION: LESS AND LESS

In sum, Budget 2022’s commitments to Indigenous people are insufficient but unsurprising. Given the waning attention to reconciliation over the past two years, it is not shocking that Indigenous people had 40% of investments reduced from one budget to the next.

While it isn’t shocking, it does have serious consequences for the ability of Indigenous people in this country to prosper. As we know, existing gaps in funding will take a substantial amount of resources to bridge, likely over several years. Each insufficient budget that is announced only deepens those gaps — effectively working to keep Indigenous people in a fiscal relationship where, despite having clear needs and demands, they are left to work with pennies of what is actually owed.

As we see less and less support for education, healthcare, and various other key policy areas, we note that the Trudeau government’s commitment to resource extraction and policing remains.

Where we do see positive investments, we recognize that this is because of the immense labour of Indigenous leaders to make it so, rather than any willing generosity of the government of the day.

ENDNOTES

¹<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2021/04/budget-2021-strong-indigenous-communities.html>

²<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2022/04/moving-forward-on-reconciliation.html>

³<https://www.afn.ca/assembly-of-first-nations-bulletin-federal-budget-2022/>

⁴<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf> p. 174

⁵https://cfsontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Indigenous-Education_Factsheets_2021_EN.pdf (para. 3)

⁶<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf>

⁷<https://www.cihi.ca/en/covid-19-expected-to-push-canadas-health-spending-beyond-300-billion-in-2021#:~:text=But%20a%20new%20spending%20category,treatment%2C%20contact%20tracing%20and%20vaccinations.>

⁸<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html#:~:text=Indigenous%20peoples%20experience%20a%20high,systems%2C%20and%20adequate%20health%20and> (para. 4)

⁹<https://cashback.yellowheadinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Cash-Back-A-Yellowhead-Institute-Red-Paper.pdf> (p. 35)

¹⁰<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf> (p. 170)

¹¹<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf> (p. 65)

¹²<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf> (p. 169)

¹³<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf> (p. 176)

¹⁴<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf> (p. 168)

¹⁵<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf> (p xi)

¹⁶<https://budget.gc.ca/2022/pdf/budget-2022-en.pdf> (p xi)

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