

# Resource Development and Indigenous Rights in Northern B.C.: A New Divide and Conquer



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**AS THE LAND BACK MOVEMENT** in Canada grows, political officials have worked to co-opt and distort the aims of Indigenous people from restitution towards “economic reconciliation.” Meanwhile, the duty to consult and the principle of free, prior and informed consent have also been channelled into the discourse of economic partnerships with industry, which is most clearly seen in the resource economy.

**The emerging common sense pathway to Indigenous self-determination is oil and gas. Some communities are also subscribing to the narrative, resulting in division with their neighbours and erasing the colonial context.**

This is the case for the Haida Nation and liquified natural gas (LNG) projects.

## **LNG and Rights to the Ocean**

Amid the B.C. push for LNG, the provincial government is promoting partnership agreements with First Nations to get deals done. Two Nations backing LNG projects neighbouring the Haida include the Nisga’a (Ksi Lisims LNG) and Haisla Nations (Cedar LNG). The Cedar LNG project will involve a floating LNG vessel and an LNG carrier. The Haida oppose these projects, given our precarity as an Island surrounded by the ocean on all sides. The potential impact of a shipping incident, earthquake, tsunami, or increased marine traffic on wildlife, including ocean species, food sources, and our homelands,

is incredibly unsettling. In addition, more LNG projects in Northern B.C. will increase marine shipping through our shared waters. This shipping poses a threat not only to ocean health but also to communities on the coast.

Premier David Eby expressed his support for the “positive financial investment decision” of Cedar LNG. In previous statements, Eby deemed the Cedar LNG project as a “significant milestone that honours our government’s commitment to respect self-determination and the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” (British Columbia, 2023, para. 2). Given the potential impact of the Cedar and other LNG projects on the Haida Nation, the premier’s comments and support are concerning.

Even more so considering they are couched in the language of rights and because B.C. recently recognized Haida title to the land under the Gaayhllxid Gíihlagalgang Haida Title Lands Agreement (2024). In April 2024, B.C. Premier Eby travelled to Haida Gwaii to celebrate the Haida Title Lands Agreement, which was recently the subject of a profile in the New York Times. But, of course, one of the most contested issues in the Haida Nations Title case remains marine Title (Haida Laas, Spring 2023).

In light of the approval of projects that could impact Haida Gwaii and its surrounding waters, I have been left confused. The Haida Nation have long been strong stewards of the ocean — developing co-management agreements, working with Canada and B.C. to protect species at risk, and with other Nations on protecting our

shared waters (see, for example, CHN Marine, the Haida Gwaii Marine Plan, and the Gwaii Haanas Agreement). However, there is limited legal precedence relating to marine title — and as the Haida Laas (2023, April) outlines the Haida are “creating a new path again” (p. 18).

With Haida title to the ocean space unresolved, why is the B.C. government approving these projects?

### **The Hazards (and Hypocrisy) of LNG**

This isn't merely an issue of rights.

The environmental impacts of liquefied natural gas (LNG) or fracked gas include climate change, ocean acidification, methane emissions, carbon monoxide and nitrogen dioxide pollution, water usage, water contamination, air quality concerns, and wastewater. The risk of marine accidents and spills in shipping adds to the threat of environmental and social harm. The building of LNG facilities entails additional ecological destruction. These impacts are particularly concerning given the increase in LNG projects, specifically in B.C. (Garvie, Lowe, and Shaw, 2014).

In addition to the well-documented environmental and health impacts of extractive industries (Caron-Beaudoin and Armstrong, 2019; Gaydos, Thixton, and Donatuto, 2015; Jonasson, 2019), they also pose disproportionate risks to Indigenous women and girls. In Northern B.C., deaths and disappearances along the Highway of Tears (Highway 16) continue to haunt Indigenous women, girls, and their families. Increased extractive industrial projects and workers camps put Indigenous women at further risk of harm (National Inquiry, 2019; House of Commons, 2022). The expansion of such projects is particularly distressing considering these risks to health and well-being.

These trends are linked. But also expose hypocrisy.

On environmental stewardship, in particular, the Canadian government promotes itself as a climate change leader focused on green energy. Canada simultaneously approves projects with negative environmental, social, and health impacts (Jonasson et al., 2019). For example, the transmountain pipeline expansion project (TMX) is a source of resistance and division among Indigenous Nations (Jonasson et al., 2019, p. 506). Despite resistance, Canada purchased the TMX project (Jara and Bruns,

2022). Similarly, resistance continues along the B.C. Coast to the Coastal Gaslink Pipeline (CGP). Colonial divide and conquer tactics continue as Wet'suwet'en hereditary leadership has resisted CGP, while other communities have consented to CGP in exchange for equity shares (The Narwhal, 2024).

**The billions of dollars extracted from our territories remain outstanding debts when we willingly sign our rights and futures away for a paycheck.**

Predatory companies and often colonial governments shift their methods to secure access to our territories.

### **The Colonial Context**

How can we grapple with the turn towards Indigenous rights and title with the ongoing exploitation of our lands? The context is important here.

Colonialism includes dispossession, dependence, and oppression (Manuel, 2017). That has been achieved, historically, by forcing Indigenous people onto land “reserved” for our limited use, severing relationships with our ancestors and cultural, hunting, fishing, and gathering places, and oppressive laws and policies limiting our capacity to sustain ourselves. This removal makes way for “settlement and resource extraction purposes” (Simpson, 2017, p. 42) and results in dependence on the state while colonial governments and companies profit off our territories (Manuel, 2017). Dependence is a mechanism of control, securing capitalist development through our oppression.

The “regime of racial capitalism” (Pasternak, 2020, p. 301) to which colonialism in Canada gave rise occurs when physical, political, and legal barriers limit Indigenous participation in the economy. Indigenous people then experience criticism over this forced dependency if they cannot overcome these structural barriers. The poverty impacting Indigenous peoples in Canada “is intentional and systematic” (Manuel, 2017, p. 21).

The Nations and communities that now sign on to extractive projects cite jobs, economic growth, and a way out of poverty as their rationale (Nowlin, 2021). We

have been convinced this is the only option to address colonialism – and that these are now the rights that matter in a “reconciliatory” Canada. But are we not consenting to our continued colonization as we do so? Of course, this is a challenging conversation. But, in B.C., the context is increasingly lost in the debate.

**It is counterintuitive and short-sighted to seek economic self-sufficiency within industries that cause physical, emotional, and environmental harm. Instead, we need to hold colonial governance accountable for reparations owed.**

Such reparations should include the billions of dollars extracted from our territories, often without our consent. Together, we can work towards a future in which generations to come can harvest the foods of our ancestors, access clean water, survive climate change, capitalism, and the Canadian government’s continued denial of our inherent rights.

#### CITATION

McGuire, Michaela M. “Resource Development and Indigenous Rights in Northern B.C.” *Yellowhead Institute*. 16 July 2024, <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2024/07/16/resource-development-indigenous-rights-northern-bc/>

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