

Sovereignty and The Indigenous Screen Office: A Proposal to Reshape Canada's International Cultural Strategy

by Anton Clark

IT IS NO SECRET that Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) raised critical questions about the relationship between Indigenous and Canadian cultural sovereignty. While those TRC Calls to Action focused on media and culture (notably numbers 83 to 89) do not explicitly frame sovereignty in constitutional terms, they do establish a general framework which correlates reconciliation with Indigenous authority. For example, Call to Action 83 led the Canada Council for the Arts to establish commitments explicitly acknowledging "the cultural sovereignty of Indigenous peoples" and respecting Indigenous "self-determination."

Jesse Wentze's appointment as Canada Council Chair in 2020 represented a direct implementation of this principle in the organization's leadership. More fundamentally, faithful implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (UNDRIP) would, as political scientist Liam Midzain-Gobin argues, "give Indigenous Peoples greater authority and decision-making power." However, as Anishinaabe scholar Sheryl Lightfoot observes, Canada practices what she calls "selective endorsement" — accepting UNDRIP in principle while resisting the structural changes it requires.

While the TRC does not explicitly redefine the constitutional relationship between Indigenous and Canadian sovereignty, the logic of these calls (notably the repudiation of doctrines that justified European claims to sovereignty over lands already inhabited by indigenous peoples) reveals a fundamental truism:

Canada's claim to sovereignty is inextricably bound up in a complex relationship with unceded Indigenous lands. If this fact is slowly being metabolized domestically, its implications must increasingly be considered internationally.

What is the Indigenous Screen Office?

At present, the Indigenous Screen Office (ISO) has shown significant progress in supporting Indigenous creators internationally. However, while Heritage Minister Mélanie Joly's formal announcement of the ISO in 2017 may give the impression of state innovation, the ISO's creation was, "the result of decades of advocacy from Indigenous industry professionals and creators." While the organization's history can arguably be traced as far back as controversies surrounding the National Film Board's Challenge for Change program, the ISO's immediate history emerged from more recent reports like Jeff Bear's At The Crossroads (2004), Danis Goulet and Kerry Swanson's Indigenous Feature Film Production in Canada: A National and International Perspective (2013), and Marcia Nickerson's Supporting & Developing the Indigenous Screen-based Media Industry in Canada (2016), each of which made the case for a dedicated screen institution which centers Indigenous Sovereignty both domestically and internationally.

To this end, the ISO's official mandate is a product of these longer histories, with "narrative sovereignty and cultural revitalization," a framework outlined by founding director Jesse Wentze, ensuring that "it is

Indigenous peoples who should be telling our stories, and it should be Indigenous peoples describing how that is done and by whom. Anything less ensures that media creation remains a colonial practice.”

By 2025, ISO controls about 42 percent of all funding in the Indigenous screen sector and receives mandated contributions from streaming platforms under CRTC regulations. The Office has partnered “with the Canada Media Fund, Telefilm Canada and CMPA to deliver activities under the ISO’s international market development strategy,” including hosting the first-ever international Indigenous Co-production forum at Cannes in May 2023, bringing together 18 providers from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Greenland, and Northern Europe, organizing the Indigenous Screen Summit at Banff connecting producers with international buyers.

The impact is undeniable, but the implications of the Office — particularly when centred within the longer history of Indigenous advocacy for international representation — has wider ranging consequences. Telefilm Canada, the federal film finance agency responsible for promoting Canadian audiovisual content internationally, currently administers 60 co-production treaties and international promotion programs, none of which were designed with Indigenous sovereignty as a core organizing principle. And ISO’s authority over international pathways is still emerging. The question we might consider is: to what degree do the wider implications of the TRC affect Canada’s international cultural products, and how might emerging institutions like the ISO further facilitate Indigenous cultural agency?

To address this question, a phased approach could build on the initial successes of the ISO within one possible trajectory of the TRC. As a settler researcher working in Canadian media history, I approach this question recognizing that Indigenous nations will ultimately determine their own international cultural strategies. My focus here is on how existing Canadian institutions might remove barriers and redistribute decision-making authority.

In this way, this proposal aligns with both longstanding Indigenous advocacy for screen sovereignty and more recent and redoubled calls for international cultural governance.

Expanding the ISO’s Authority: A Step-by-Step Guide

At a TIFFF 2024 panel, “Indigenous Creators Look Beyond Borders,” ISO CEO Kerry Swanson directly critiqued existing co-production treaty structures, suggesting that “these treaties were established between the nations without any consideration of Indigenous content because at that time Indigenous people were excluded from the industry and so there was not an Indigenous perspective at the table when negotiating these nationalistic treaties.” Panellist Anne Laja Utsi, CEO of the International Sámi Film Institute, illustrated this with reference to the Canada-Norway Treaty, which requires audio tracks in Norwegian, English, or French, excluding Sámi and Indigenous Canadian languages, offering a concrete example of how colonial frameworks structurally limit Indigenous cultural circulation.

While the ISO has not explicitly demanded co-decision authority over Telefilm’s international programs, this critique — combined with ISO’s active international engagement and the broader narrative sovereignty framework established in the 2019 ImagineNATIVE report On-Screen Protocols & Pathways (“Gone is the era of consultants and consultations...sovereign nations must have control over their own stories”), and the logical implications of the longer history of direct action which generated the ISO — suggests the groundwork exists for expanded international authority.

ISO representatives could, for example, be formally integrated into decisions about which Indigenous-led productions receive international promotion funding, ensuring Canada’s cultural footprint abroad reflects Indigenous priorities. Over time, the ISO could take on more direct responsibilities: leading co-production treaties and guiding distribution strategies so Indigenous creators claim partial authority over global circulation. This approach leverages existing programming while expanding Indigenous leadership, recognizing that,

Canadian cultural exports depend not only on which stories are told, but also on which institutions ultimately hold decision-making authority.

For settlers in Canadian cultural industries (including myself), this matters because our own agency is governed by how these questions are (or are not) institutionally addressed.

The transition could begin through incremental adjustment to existing programs. Currently, Telefilm’s International Promotion Program assesses applications through its standard evaluation criteria, with ISO involvement limited to partnership activities under the International Market Development Strategy rather than decision-making authority over funding allocations. The Black Screen Office’s “Being Seen” report (supported by Telefilm Canada) on inclusive content in Canadian screen industries demonstrates growing institutional recognition of the need for equity-seeking communities to have authority over their own representation, a groundswell which could be leveraged to impact international governance. As a first phase, Telefilm and ISO could, for example, formalize a consultation protocol whereby ISO reviews applications to Telefilm’s International Promotion Program before funding decisions are finalized for any Indigenous-led projects. This would ensure that international promotion strategies align with Indigenous priorities without disrupting Telefilm’s assessment process.

In a subsequent phase, ISO could be granted co-decision authority over a dedicated subset of international promotion funding for Indigenous productions. Over time, this authority could expand to encompass broader aspects of international strategy, including a more substantial role in shaping Heritage’s international priorities in alignment with its evolving reconciliation commitments. Similarly, co-production treaty negotiations could include ISO representatives with advisory roles that transition to co-signatory status on treaty provisions.

Indigenous Cultural Diplomacy

Of course, this approach focuses on further reforming Canada’s cultural apparatus, recognizing that Indigenous nations will simultaneously pursue independent international cultural relationships outside this structure. The goal is simply removing barriers within existing institutions, not circumscribing Indigenous nations’ broader diplomacy initiatives.

South Korea’s cultural-diplomatic success offers useful lessons. The Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) operates 25 overseas business centres that don’t simply react to content producers’ existing work, but proactively build distribution networks. Canada could adopt this logic, but with a key distinction. Rather than projecting a unified “Canadian” brand, Canadian cultural centres could facilitate Indigenous-led diplomacy, positioning Canada as a convenor of global Indigenous knowledge. Overseas cultural offices could serve as nodes in Indigenous-controlled distribution networks, enabling relationships between Indigenous creators across settler states. It could, for instance, connect Inuk artists with Greenlandic festivals, Anishinaabe storytellers with Māori communities — a logical extension of the Indigenous Co-production forum at Cannes ISO already led in 2023. This would not simply be symbolic: it would provide infrastructure for Indigenous nations to further conduct their own diplomacy, using Canadian resources to build transnational networks that operate outside settler control. What’s required is a reorientation of existing systems around Indigenous authority.

If Canada’s sovereignty rests on its relationship with Indigenous nations, then state resources derived from unceded territories carry obligations, not opportunities. This doesn’t reconcile Canada with nations that reject its authority (nothing short of land back and genuine self-determination can do that). But it does remove some of the mechanisms through which Canada limits Indigenous cultural sovereignty, whether nations choose to use reformed infrastructure or build independent pathways. Telefilm’s administrative capacity, ISO’s demonstrated impact, and international precedents via institutions like Canadian Heritage provide a practical platform for addressing many of these questions.

What remains to be seen is whether this matrix of Canadian institutions will redouble its efforts to empower the ISO to lead this transition — legitimating decades of advocacy for new forms of Canadian international-cultural exports.

This Brief was reviewed by an Indigenous expert on the ISO and Canada's Cultural Strategy.

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