

The Narrow National Interest: Sacrificing Reconciliation & Climate to "Build Canada Strong"

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"Our job is to move together as far and as fast down the path as we can ..."

– Prime Minister Mark Carney, Sept. 30, 2026

TIMES ARE CHANGING. This week, this month, the signals are there for Indigenous people: the terrain on which we discuss reconciliation is shifting.

This week, in our home province of British Columbia (B.C.), a Conservative government, which campaigned on expediting resource development, repealing the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA), and a host of other anti-Indigenous commitments — including prohibiting land acknowledgements — was overwhelmingly elected to a majority government. In other words, a party that ran, and won, based largely on anti-Indigenous policies, will govern for the next four years and inevitably fuel the flames of anti-Indigenous racism.

Meanwhile, in advance of the First Ministers' meeting, also this week, First Nations had an opportunity to discuss reconciliation. Grassroots organizations, angry at the Federal Government's new approach to the "nation-to-nation" relationship, called for protests. And what is that new approach?

Late last month, on the sixth annual National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Prime Minister Mark Carney's address laid out the national agenda. The language of a shared path toward reconciliation sits uneasily alongside a political and economic plan built on accelerating resource extraction, no matter the socio-ecological impacts.

There is a familiar logic here: land becomes commodity, resources become opportunities, and speed becomes a measure of progress.

For Indigenous Peoples whose rights, territories, and relationships to land and waters are at stake, the question is not simply how fast Canada can move down the path, but at what cost?

These recent signals of the change have a contemporary context. Since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Final Report (2015) only 15 of 94 Calls to Action have been completed. Progress on these actions is further jeopardized by the Supreme Court of Canada's looming destruction of the largest and most comprehensive body of Indian Residential School records, which is set to take place in September 2027. Multiple reports, inquiries, and investigations outline the ongoing harms caused by residential schools, colonization, genocide, and racism (RCAP, 1996; TRC, 2015; National Inquiry, 2019; Report on Missing Children and Unmarked Graves, 2024). On September 30th of this year, the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal released its finding that Canada "committed the international crimes of genocide... and crimes against humanity" (para. 7). This ruling's release coincides with increased residential school denialism, including the white nationalist gathering that took place on Tk' emlúps te Secwépemc territory where the first unmarked graves were confirmed.

Days after this year's National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, on October 1st, Carney announced the

Pacific Link Pipeline (formerly the West Coast Oil Pipeline), which is set to become the first “national interest” project under Bill C-5’s *Building Canada Act*. This follows the introduction of *Bill C-39, the Building Canada Strong Act*, and the September 29th support for LNG Canada’s Phase 2 project. In the days surrounding September 30th, these announcements demonstrate that Canada is only interested in reconciliation that sustains its access to our territories, lands, and waters. Such tactics constitute “feigned redress... an inclusion that is nothing more than thinly veiled assimilation” (George 2017, 49).

How will this new approach to “reconciliation” shape Indigenous-Crown relations?

Building Canada or Bypassing Process? Reconciliation as Compliance

Aside from the troubling trends above, the clearest evidence we have of the new landscape is Bill C-39. This is the most recent omnibus bill using the purported urgency of the political moment to expedite environmental assessment and permitting processes. It will streamline consultation, increasing pressure on governments and communities to respond to proposed projects quickly. No one yet knows how consultation will unfold under the legislation.

But by constraining the time available for cultural continuity, harvesting, visiting, and collective decision-making, this dynamic contributes to the “politics of distraction,” which serves to further “separate us from our homelands, cultures, and communities” (Corntassel 2012, 91). This expediting demonstrates a similar strategy: community consultations for Pacific Link held to a two-month timeline, despite concerns due to overlapping community, cultural, and harvesting practices (Passafiume 2026). Rather than assessing projects individually, Bill C-39 creates mechanisms through which entire regions and categories of development can be pre-designated in the national interest. Unsurprisingly, given the Carney government’s deprioritization of climate change in favor of “economic advantages,” the Pacific Link pipeline has been greenlit.

Ottawa maintains that Indigenous communities will be offered 10% ownership in Pacific Link, but offering communities an opportunity to invest in a pipeline does

not equate to securing their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). Indigenous opposition to Pacific Link is mounting, with many groups considering court action, noting a violation of the Crown’s duty to consult. The Union of BC Indian Chiefs (2026) released a statement in opposition of the project’s “national interest” designation, with Grand Chief Stewart Phillip noting, “We have a duty and an obligation to protect our rights to the fullest extent of the law and we have every intention of doing that. This is not a cake walk, this is not a ‘gimme,’ this will be hard-fought in the court rooms, and if necessary, with boots on the ground” (para. 2).

Carney’s brand of reconciliation depends on a predatory economy built on the extraction and export of natural resources. In essence, the Canadian government seems to be happy to reconcile with Indigenous Nations who say yes to development, while those who say no, or simply need more time, are left to question whether “reconciliation” really means “compliance.”

The Costs We Count, and the Costs We Don’t

The Pacific Link will cost Canadians between \$35.2 billion and \$43.7 billion. While counter-intuitive in light of recent global politics, the outlook for global oil demand actually remains poor, and is projected to reach a “plateau followed by a permanent decline within the next 5-10 years.” This already expensive infrastructure could become another energy-transition related stranded asset. In light of this, the designation of “national interest” does not resolve the underlying question of whether it is, in fact, a sound public investment.

The promotion of economic reconciliation through resource development also raises questions about what this framing looks like in practice. While Indigenous ownership and participation in major projects may be presented as economic opportunities, it does not necessarily translate into meaningful decision-making power, recognition of Indigenous jurisdiction, or consent. Potential financial benefits do not resolve the broader question of who will bear the long-term economic, environmental, and social costs of continued

resource extraction amid increasingly volatile environmental and geopolitical conditions.

Canada is already 20 years behind schedule in achieving its international climate commitments, and is on track to be five degrees Celsius warmer by 2100. The Pacific Link pipeline would carry “approximately one million barrels of crude oil a day along roughly 1,250 kilometres,” impacting over 100 Indigenous communities. In recent years, public support for climate action has slipped, while the impacts of climate change are accelerating. In 2026, drought and wildfire devastated river levels in B.C., affecting keystone species like salmon (Pacific Salmon Foundation 2026, para. 8). These watershed impacts are far-reaching, impacting food security, culture, and relationality — costs often not captured within standard risk assessment processes. These impacts also extend beyond human communities, affecting the non-human relations with whom these ecosystems are shared.

The Pacific Link project includes a “sacrifice zone,” which overlaps with the Southern Resident Killer Whale (SRKW) habitat, a unique population of orca that live in the Salish Sea, whose diet consists entirely of pacific salmon. Despite the \$1.2 billion dollar pledge for ocean protection announced on September 29th, experts remain skeptical that the increased spending will reduce the “suite of threats” facing the SRKW (para 7). The pledge is “pennies” (Owen 2026, para. 24) compared with Ottawa’s \$10-billion contribution to the proposed Roberts Bank expansion,” a major marine container terminal expansion in Delta, B.C., which will grow the port’s capacity by approximately 50%, adding further pressures on the SRKW. The environmental impacts under C-39 will further strain this at-risk population through increased tanker traffic, climate change, noise pollution, and declining salmon stocks. This risk is exacerbated by the proposed weakening of legislation designed to protect the SRKW.

In 2018 and 2025, a mother orca named Tahlequah (J-35) made international headlines by carrying her stillborn calf for 17 days. Tahlequah’s response makes visible a form of care, grief, and relational connection that is deeply recognizable: what is important cannot be reduced to economics. Nor should it be.

Hard numbers aside, the “national interest” test tends to make project-by-project economic benefits visible, while making cumulative, long-term, geographically distributed harms, and harms to non-human worlds much harder to account for.

What is *Actually* in the National Interest?

There is an urgent need to reconsider the “national interest” narrative. A framework that privileges economic returns above all else undermines the future it promises to build. If reconciliation is meant to transform the Crown–Indigenous relationship, why does the Crown continue to hold the ultimate authority in determining what constitutes a single vision of our shared future?

We can no longer afford to be shortsighted. Climate change is already here; our plans need to be made for future generations, rather than the gains of a short-term economic boom. B.C.’s newly elected Conservative government is a symbol of troubling times ahead. Combined with residential school and climate change denialism, late-stage capitalism, and support for Carney’s “national interest,” we are preparing ourselves, once again, to stand up for what matters and to protect our territories for future generations.

Whether on the frontlines or in the courts, Indigenous Peoples will continue to challenge visions of our futures that erode our rights and our responsibilities to the life around us. Indigenous rights, jurisdiction, and sovereignty are not political bargaining chips, and our territories are still not for sale at the cost of a vision of national interest.

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