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In the Valley of Reconciliation: Yellowhead Institute & Crown-Indigenous Relations, 2018-2026

by Hayden King

IN THE SUMMER of 2018, Yellowhead Institute was just a baby.

We launched earlier that year and found ourselves in the midst of a political crisis in Indian Country. Justin Trudeau had been elected and sought sweeping changes to Indigenous policy, including a proposal for an alternative to the *Indian Act*. We wanted to understand the shape of this alternative to help communities prepare and intervene. Our small 2-3 person team poured over ministerial statements, budgets, new laws and policy; we spoke to dozens of First Nation leaders and activists; and slowly pieced together the vision for the "Rights Framework," which we then went on to critique in our first ever Special Report in October 2018. It landed. We presented the findings to First Nation political organizations around the country. Then, at the 2018 Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Special Chiefs Assembly, a young Delaware leader named Megan Logan took the stage on behalf of First Nation youth opposed to the Rights Framework, citing our report. Chiefs in Assembly passed a resolution against the Framework.

That was the moment we knew Yellowhead had a place in the national dialogue on Indigenous issues; that we could produce rigorous, independent, and critical research and analysis that would support communities in their efforts to make change.

Over eight years later, we are still doing that work. In fact, this is the 200th publication of the Yellowhead Brief. Our short-form, argumentative or descriptive research and writing has endured. 200 publications. Of course, Yellowhead does many things: on the research side, we publish four Special Reports every year, multiple special features, and our multi-year Red Paper projects. We run the Yellowhead School with two non-credit programs (the Misko Aki Knowledge Exchange, or MAKE, and Yellowhead Online), AND a degree program, the Public Administration and Indigenous Governance B.A. All of which are designed to provide critical tools, quality research, and transformational education designed to build solidarity and/or practice Native sovereignty.

But the Brief is the gate-way for most people into the Yellowhead galaxy. So, reaching this milestone is important for our team and it marks an occasion to reflect. As we do, it feels like so much has changed over our near ten-year run, and so much remains the same. There is a new Liberal Government, new proposals to change the collective relationship, and a new generation of young people telling their leaders that something is not quite right. Okiniwak, Walking Forward Together, and Here We Stand are just a few of the Indigenous youth groups based in Ontario organizing across the country, building community, taking stands on contemporary political issues in thoughtful ways, and challenging the rest of us to pay attention. There are many others.

These groups' primary concerns revolve around the Carney Government's Building Canada Strong(er) agenda and the related economic reconciliation framework that seeks to bring Indigenous communities along. Yellowhead has used the Brief to understand and explain the infrastructure being established to "Build Canada Strong" in pieces on Special Economics Zones, Cooperation Agreements, the climate costs of Bill C-39, But there is clearly more work to be done around the new consultation regime, the role of the Major Projects Office, environmental management, the proposed sovereign wealth fund, implementation of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and Indigenous rights more generally.

Still, we know that Carney is not Trudeau.

Where Trudeau sought to overhaul the machinery of government, was open to restitution, and created bilateral negotiations frameworks – all to build trust for a comprehensive approach to a new relationship – Carney is focused on a narrower set of priorities. Trudeau clearly had his critics (myself included), yet he makes Carney look like John A. MacDonald: a Prime Minister set on nation-building where Indigenous people are, more or less, in the way. Carney rarely speaks on Indigenous issues, and when he does, betrays his lack of interest or knowledge. As Cree Minister of Indigenous Services, Mandy Gull-Masty, reports on the Indian Act's slow death, Carney is apparently unaware and makes a renewed pitch to scrap the legislation. His approach is decidedly unilateral and obtuse.

Meanwhile, we have hostile provinces. The young people of Here We Stand are pointing to Ontario's Bills 5 and 140, designed to fast-track development and strip environmental protections in that province. Treaty 8 Chiefs have told Alberta their consultation framework is so weak they'll meet soon in court (again). Saskatchewan is selling off First Nation lands, Quebec is erasing Indigenous languages through Bill 96, and B.C. just elected a party that campaigned on scrapping the provincial UNDRIP law.

'Round we go. Reconciliation arrives, does a few laps, and then quietly jogs off – a pattern seen throughout the highs and lows of Canadian history. We see the shift in our day-to-day: reconciliation is no longer an institutional focus, funders are shifting resources to other areas, and renewed racism creeps into our social media pages.

Still, in our near-decade of work we know that it's in these times of confrontation that public education and *useful,* accessible research and analysis matters most. So, as we enter another valley in our collective relationship, Yellowhead will be there.

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