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Orange Chinook: Politics in the New Alberta

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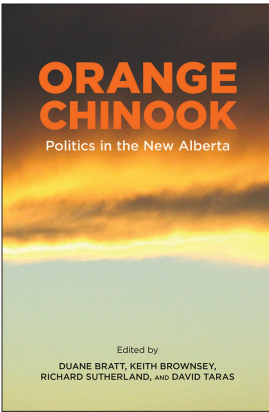
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ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta

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Beyond the “Lovey-Dovey Talk”: The Orange Chinook and Indigenous Activism

Brad Clark

Until we have “walked in the Indian’s moccasins” we have little chance of gaining his confidence or influencing him in any way. It seems to me that the integration of the Indian into the social and economic life of Saskatchewan is the desirable goal and this will become more acceptable to him if we can put across our socialist idea of “sharing” and “production for use” . . .

—John Sturdy, special assistant to Tommy Douglas,
Co-operative Commonwealth Federation premier of
Saskatchewan, in a 1960 election document¹

The socially progressive New Democratic Party, through the policy pronouncements of its forebear, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), has had a sympathetic eye on Indigenous peoples for more than half a century. Federally, CCF MP Frank Howard introduced a private member’s bill to grant the franchise to “Indians” in 1957, three years before the Diefenbaker Progressive Conservatives would make the necessary amendments to the Canada Elections Act² The patronizing sentiment expressed by John Sturdy (quoted above) captures colonial governments’ failure to understand and reform what Tommy Douglas’s provincial administration

referred to as the “Indian problem” and the struggle to find a socially just, well-meaning argument for assimilation. At the same time it belies the pragmatism political parties embrace to appeal to different segments of the electorate. Sturdy’s nod to the sizeable Indigenous population in Saskatchewan came at a time when Indians in that province were about to vote in a provincial election for the first time, and it expressed a desire to win their support, if not a concern that they might cast their ballots for other parties.

Fifty-five years later, in the territories of Treaty 6, 7, and 8 First Nations, as well as the Métis Nations of Alberta and Métis settlements, Rachel Notley’s New Democrats won the Alberta legislature on a typically progressive platform of “major changes to tax and social policy; an aggressive climate-change plan . . . gender balance in politics and society; a higher minimum wage; [and] *a new and more respectful relationship with First Nations*” (emphasis added).³ This chapter explores this “relationship” between Indigenous peoples in Alberta and the Notley NDP almost exclusively from the perspective of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit voters and leaders. It examines how the New Democrats’ policies and decisions are perceived in Indigenous media from the day the writ was dropped by Jim Prentice and the Progressive Conservatives through the NDP’s first nineteen months in office.

The analysis demonstrates the diversity of perspectives brought to bear by Indigenous people in Alberta on a range of issues, but it also underscores a growing sense of empowerment, activism, and influence in effecting political change in this province and beyond. While highlighting the actions and concerns of their communities, Indigenous media have consistently framed the Notley administration as agents of change, protectors of the environment, and more respectful of Aboriginal viewpoints than their Progressive Conservative predecessors.

These themes are also captured in this chapter by a detailed examination of voting data captured by Elections Alberta. That analysis suggests that higher rates of participation among Indigenous peoples had an impact on the 2015 election’s outcome, and it indicates much wider support for the New Democrats among voters in First Nations and Métis communities than in the general population. In fact, votes from Indigenous communities appear to have propelled NDP candidates to victory in at least two ridings.

For Indigenous leaders across Canada, the Alberta provincial election was a sign that real political change is possible, and that First Peoples can

work to bring such change about. Moreover, the role that Aboriginal communities played in the Orange Chinook set the stage for Indigenous voter mobilization in the federal election six months later. Calls for change reverberated through the federal campaign, with the result that another long-standing Conservative regime tumbled.

Election Night Delight and Indigenous Support

The unprecedented demise of a forty-four-year political dynasty will always warrant considerable interrogation and analysis in the mainstream media, which might explain why the *Calgary Herald* took several days before finding space to comment on the connection between Alberta's Indigenous communities and the rise to power of the New Democrats. An article that ran on page A21 noted the incoming New Democrats had made "sweeping promises to aboriginals during the campaign" and that Premier-Elect Rachel Notley had specifically referenced Alberta's First Nations and Métis in her victory speech.⁴ Amid the pumping of orange placards and chants from ecstatic supporters, Notley pledged the following: "To Alberta's Indigenous peoples: the trust we have been given tonight is a call to be better neighbours and partners. I'm looking forward to consulting with you and learning from you."⁵ Even the *Herald* noted that, though this brief reference took only about a minute to deliver, it was a minute more than PC premier Alison Redford devoted to Indigenous issues in her acceptance speech just over three years earlier.⁶ The *Herald* story went on to quote a few First Nation leaders who expressed optimism about both the election results and Notley's speech. While this might have been a revelation for the mainstream consumers of Post Media's Calgary publication, Indigenous news organizations had already devoted considerable coverage to the NDP's unexpected rise to power and its commitment to First Peoples. A number of First Nations chiefs and commentators issued statements or told reporters of their belief that they could work with the New Democrats in ways they had not with previous Progressive Conservative governments. Despite a premier with a substantial history in Indigenous issues (Jim Prentice), and Alberta's longest-serving Indigenous MLA (Pearl Calahasen), it was the NDP rather than the PCs who garnered the support of many Métis and First Nations voters.

It is important to note that there is no uniform “Indigenous vote,” and that the First Peoples of Alberta are made up of distinct linguistic and cultural groups, with different economic interests and governance structures. The “Aboriginal Identity Population” in Alberta, according to Statistics Canada, numbers more than 220,000 and represents 6 per cent of the provincial population, consisting of “116,670 First Nations people, 96,870 Métis, and 1,985 Inuit, with the rest reporting other Aboriginal identities (3,300) or more than one Aboriginal identity (1,875).”⁷ The same report notes the significant urban Indigenous population, with 28 per cent living in Edmonton and 15 per cent in Calgary; moreover, 40 per cent of First Nations people in Alberta (46,600) make their homes on reserves. There are 140 reserves in the province and 45 First Nations in the three Treaty areas; the most commonly spoken Indigenous languages are Blackfoot, Cree, Chipewyan, Dene Sarcee, and Stoney (Nakoda Sioux).⁸ Alberta is the only province in Canada to recognize Métis land rights, having signed the Alberta-Métis Settlements Accord in 1989, which granted local autonomy to eight settlements and about 5,000 residents in the “east-central and northern areas of the province.”⁹

However, as the NDP took office, the challenge of following through on its election promises were significant. Government data show that Indigenous people, especially those living on reserve, trail non-Indigenous Albertans in virtually every measure of well-being. Life expectancy for First Nations individuals is 72.5 years, 10 years less than for non-natives and comparable to rates in “Guatemala, Paraguay and Cambodia.”¹⁰ Compared to non-Indigenous Albertans, First Nations people experience double the rate of infant mortality, triple the suicide rate, twice the prevalence of diabetes, and five times the rate of narcotic- and opioid-related trips to the emergency room.¹¹ Health studies of Métis show better outcomes generally than among First Nations, “but [they] tend to experience slightly worse health results in many areas compared to the non-Aboriginal population of the province,” including “elevated levels” of the same diseases affecting First Nations, such as diabetes and circulatory ailments.¹² As in other parts of the country, the colonial legacy of racism, the Indian Act, the reserve system, and the legacy of residential schools have taken a terrible toll. Against this backdrop, many First Nation and Métis people looked to the 2015 Alberta election for change.

Heading into the campaign PC leader Jim Prentice had a long track record on Indigenous issues, having worked as a commissioner for the Indian Land Claims Commission, serving as the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development in the Harper cabinet, and taking on the Aboriginal relations portfolio as premier in 2014. Nonetheless, the PC government took certain actions that rankled many in the Indigenous communities across the province. Prentice opposed calls for an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW); there was ongoing frustration over persistent Métis and First Nation calls for resource revenue sharing; and controversial Bill 22, the Aboriginal Consultation Levy Act, had drawn heavy criticism, to the point where it was boycotted by many First Nations.¹³ That legislation “allowed the province to regulate consultation with industry over development on Aboriginal land,” but Indigenous leaders said they were never consulted before it was introduced.¹⁴ Simmering disdain for federal Conservatives might also have extended to the Prentice Tories, particularly over the demise of the Kelowna Accord and the refusal to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Moreover, the provincial PCs focused very little of their election platform on Aboriginal issues, beyond plans to “improve the First Nations Engagement Strategy to strengthen relationships with Aboriginal leaders and communities,” according to an analysis by the Parkland Institute.¹⁵

In sharp contrast, the NDP targeted several issues of concern brought on by the policies of two levels of conservative government. In fact, the New Democrats offered a comprehensive “Aboriginal Platform” that sought to do the following:

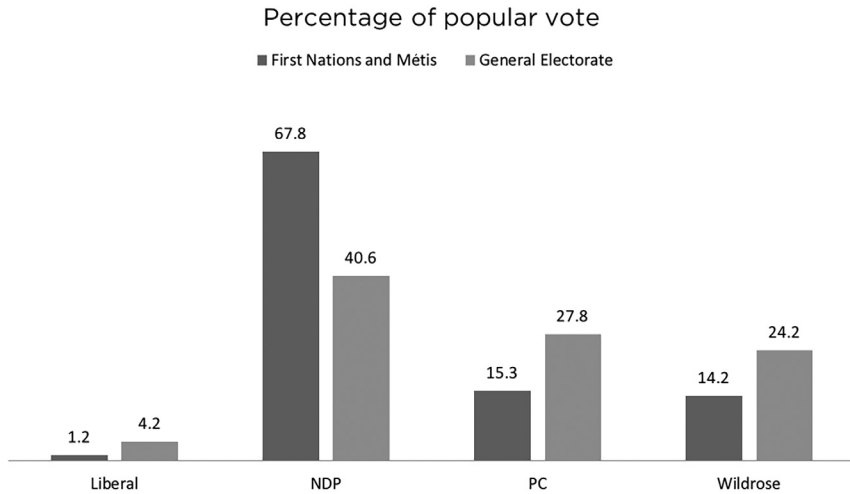
- We will implement the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and build it into provincial law.
- We will support a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, which will have at its centre Indigenous women and the families of the missing and murdered women.
- We will work with Alberta Indigenous Peoples to build a relationship of trust and ensure respectful consultation.

- We will work with the federal government to ensure Indigenous communities have reliable access to clean and safe drinking water.
- We will improve the representation of Indigenous culture and history in Alberta’s school curriculum in consultation with Indigenous leaders and Elders, and improve availability of First Nations language programs.
- We will repeal Bill 22, which was passed without consulting First Nation groups and imposes requirements on First Nations Bands not required of other business arrangements.¹⁶

At 57 per cent, voter turnout on election day was the highest it had been in twenty-two years, since former big city mayors Ralph Klein (Calgary) and Laurence Decore (Edmonton) led the Progressive Conservatives and Liberals, respectively, on platforms of “massive cuts” versus “brutal cuts” to provincial spending.¹⁷ At least three media outlets (*First Nations Drum*, *Alberta Native News*, and The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network [APTN] News) reported Indigenous peoples lined up at the polls in record numbers; as *Alberta Native News* put it, “perhaps for the first time ever, [these voters] helped to sway the numbers in favour of the NDP.”¹⁸ APTN attributed the higher turnout among Aboriginal voters to social media, where election and campaign information was distributed widely according to Lova Beebe, a Calgary-based social media blogger and First Nations activist: “This is now a tool in our history. Our communities always worked together and were stronger together, well on social media we are now together. . . . It’s us talking and having discussions on this new medium that’s here to stay.”¹⁹ Foreshadowing a social media phenomenon of the 2015 federal election campaign, the hashtag #RockTheIndigenousVote—a rallying call for voter participation—was shared in the context of an election campaign for the first time.²⁰

Based on Elections Alberta data,²¹ the Indigenous vote very much “rocked” in favour of the New Democrats. Using provincial electoral maps,

Figure 11.1. Percentage of vote in First Nation and Métis communities and in the general population.



Sources: “Election Results,” Elections Alberta, 5 May 2015, <http://officialresults.elections.ab.ca/orResultsPGE.cfm?EventId=31> (accessed 8 January 2017). Statistics on Indigenous and Métis voters compiled by author from that website.

Table 11.1. Provincial ridings where First Nations and Métis votes had a significant impact on the outcome.

RIDING	NDP MARGIN OF VICTORY	TOTAL FIRST NATIONS AND MÉTIS VOTES
Lesser Slave Lake	717	1,434
Peace River	292	751
Wetaskiwin-Camrose	1,580	840

Sources: Data compiled by author from “Election Results,” Elections Alberta, 5 May 2015, <http://officialresults.elections.ab.ca/orResultsPGE.cfm?EventId=31> (accessed 8 January 2017).

eighty poll locations were identified on or near First Nation reserves and communities and Métis settlements. A spreadsheet was then used to collate the voting data by party. As Figure 11.1 shows, the New Democrats captured a high proportion of these votes, almost 68 per cent, which amounts to more than four times the total for the nearest major party, the Progressive Conservatives.

It is important to point out that in the eighty polls included in this analysis non-Indigenous voters would have contributed to the results as well. Similarly, Indigenous voters living in urban ridings would fall outside the data set. Nonetheless, votes from First Nations/Métis communities contributed to NDP victories in eight ridings, and in two of those—Lesser Slave Lake and Peace River—Indigenous voters more than accounted for the margin of victory (see Table 11.1). The New Democrats captured sixty-five of the eighty polls in this analysis. In no riding did the First Nations and Métis ballots contribute in any significant way to an electoral victory by any of the other major parties.

Given these results, it seems appropriate that amid the orange T-shirts, placards, balloons, and bursts of applause at NDP campaign headquarters in Edmonton on election night, Rachel Notley would devote at least a minute of her victory speech to Indigenous peoples in Alberta. Over the next few days congratulations would stream in from Métis and First Nation communities and leaders from across the province, even though no Aboriginal candidates were elected for the New Democrats (or any other party). Some Aboriginal people took to social media to express joy—“So #happy #notleycrue #Yay #WayToGoVoters #Change #ThankYouCreator #FirstNation #NDP”—while others remained skeptical—“Will the NDP keep the racist white card? Respect our treaty rights, a status card should be good enough #ABVotes #FNPoli #Treaty8.”²² Amid such high expectations, a legacy of often troubled relations between the provincial government and First Peoples, and conflicting interests among many factions of New Democrat support, the Notley team took office, gingerly finding its feet and slowly advancing its platform. The next section of this chapter examines the NDP’s governing tenure from the day after the election through to the end of 2016 and interprets the policy decisions and actions taken by the New Democrats through the lens of Indigenous media.

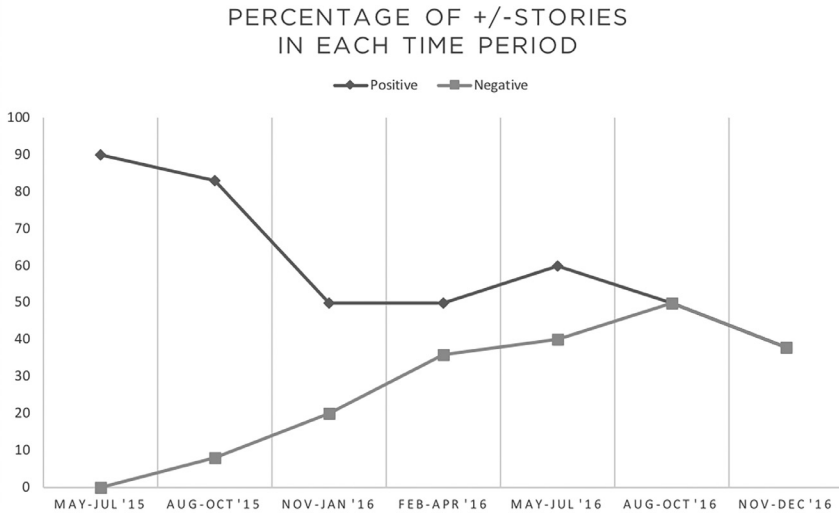
Indigenous Media and the NDP

The voter data analysis outlined above sought to separate broad voting trends among Indigenous peoples from non-Indigenous Albertans to arrive at authentic findings. This section seeks to do much the same, examining news media perspectives through a purely Aboriginal media filter. The approach here is informed by post-colonial theory, which distinguishes mainstream media coverage of marginalized groups from the decolonized perspectives of minority or alternative news organizations. Indigenous media typically challenge the dominant, often stereotypic representations of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit found in mass media. Production is controlled by Indigenous managers and journalists, allowing the news to be gathered and framed through self-representation.²³ APTN has been identified as a good example of this view, covering issues important to Indigenous people from an Indigenous perspective and communicating to all viewers that “Aboriginal cultures do have rich cultural knowledge that is worth becoming familiar with, which counters the general assumptions of many Canadians.”²⁴ Some research suggests that Indigenous media not only offer more context on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues, but more overall balance as well.²⁵

Digital news stories from Indigenous news organizations were collected between 6 May 2015 and 31 December 2016. The stories come from *Alberta Native News*, APTN, *First Nations Drum*, and three media organizations under the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society umbrella, *Alberta Sweetgrass*, *Windspeaker*, and CFWE-FM Radio. Over that time period, articles were chosen for analysis that in some way considered NDP governance and policy in Alberta. (Media accounts of the fires that swept through communities in and around Fort McMurray in the spring of 2016 were excluded.) A total of seventy-one stories met these criteria. Those articles were then broken down by their tone towards the provincial New Democrats—positive, neutral, negative—and by themes (news frames analysis).

Countless pundits, scholars, and media critics have observed an overwhelmingly negative tone in political news coverage. A recent study of US president Donald Trump’s first hundred days in office concluded that 80 per cent of news stories were negative, and in some weeks this reached 90 per cent.²⁶ One analysis of European and US political coverage found that

Figure 11.2. Positive and negative tone towards the Alberta NDP in news stories by Indigenous media.



Sources: Data compiled by the author.

“good news” amounted to about 6 to 15 per cent of the total output, and another concludes that “the existing body of evidence hints to predominant, increasing, and overarching negativity towards individual political protagonists and parties.”²⁷ Rachel Notley’s approach to media relations bears few of the stylistics of Donald Trump’s; however, the positive coverage her party has garnered from Indigenous news organizations nonetheless represents quite an anomaly compared to the typical media discourse. This is particularly true of the NDP’s first six months in office, during which it was able to advance some of the more straightforward commitments to First Nations and Métis made in its election platform. Over time the coverage remained fairly positive or balanced, as demonstrated in Figure 11.2, and even in the final two time periods shown below, remains balanced.

A closer look at the individual stories behind the tonal analysis above allows us to see a range of views on New Democrat policy among Indigenous leaders, commentators, and activists in context. These can be broken down

into specific events and issues that emerged during the NDP's first nineteen months as a government, and which dominated Indigenous news media coverage, as discussed below.

Election Reaction, Comment, and Analysis

Given the decisive electoral action taken by Métis and First Nations voters detailed earlier in this chapter, perhaps it is not surprising to see such strikingly positive coverage of the New Democrats' victory in the Aboriginal media. In addition to documenting higher voter turnout, there was acknowledgement of the party's Indigenous platform, captured in this editorial that appeared in *Alberta Native News*:

The NDP has also set a new precedent by presenting something that the PCs failed to do, both here in Alberta and in Ottawa. They presented an Aboriginal Platform, something that neither Alberta's Conservative Party or Stephen Harper's "new" Conservative government has ever done.²⁸

Indigenous news stories also featured congratulatory messages from chiefs across all three of the province's Treaty areas, as well as the president of the Métis Nation of Alberta, Audrey Poitras, who described the NDP win "as nothing short of a political game-changer."²⁹ In some cases those well-wishes were tinged with hints of skepticism. The assessment of Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation chief Allan Adams, commenting on Notley's reference to First Nations in her victory speech, is a good example: "Finally, we are going to go somewhere, if she means what she says."³⁰ Others recognized the opportunity for change. The then regional chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) Alberta, Cameron Alexis, said it was "time for a new government to be given a chance," and that "the Progressive Conservatives have had 43 years to get it right and I still haven't seen it."³¹ However, amid the expressions of optimism were a few notes of caution as well, including this from Treaty 8 Grand Chief Steve Courtoreille, who warned that the NDP's electoral victory would "push everything back and it's not what we need, almost starting over again. . . . I sensed a willingness on the part of the (Prentice government) wanting to work with us."³²

First Months in Office

In the weeks following the NDP's election night celebrations, several actions were taken by the newly formed government—each varying in political significance—that caught the attention of the Indigenous press and drew generally positive comments from these sources. When Notley's cabinet was sworn in news stories took note of a blessing provided by a Métis Elder, as well as an honour song performed by a member of the Enoch Cree Nation. When Notley attended Treaty 6 Recognition Day, in Edmonton, *Alberta Sweetgrass* pointed out that it was the first time a premier had been in attendance in several years.

However, the two biggest stories on the Indigenous news agenda were an apology on behalf of the province to residential school survivors, and the implementation of UNDRIP. The latter was one of the NDP's key election promises, but the residential school apology was somewhat unexpected. In the Legislative Assembly, and with survivors in the gallery, Notley acknowledged the damage done by the residential school system, stating that “members of this chamber did not take a stand against it,” and she reached out to Indigenous Albertans: “In the journey of reconciliation you no longer have to walk alone. Your truth has woken our conscience and our sense of justice.”³³ Twenty-five of the 139 residential schools in Canada were in Alberta, where there are an estimated 12,000 survivors, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.³⁴

In *Alberta Native News*, Chief Randy Ermineskin of the Ermineskin Cree Nation said he was impressed: “a lot of governments haven't quite listened to us the way they should. This new government is really proving something to others—that we need to include everybody.”³⁵ Treaty 6 Grand Chief Bernice Martial was on hand for the apology; she told APTN, “It was overwhelming for me. I thought, ‘Wow!’ finally coming from a premier.”³⁶ In the same address, Notley also committed her government to working with other governments on an inquiry into MMIW, though at this stage the Harper government was opposed to that process. The support for an MMIW inquiry was part of the NDP's Aboriginal election platform, as was the implementation of UNDRIP. In early July 2015, Notley instructed her cabinet ministers to review their departments' “policies, programs and legislation” in an effort to accommodate the changes required to meet the

principles of the UN declaration.³⁷ The move caught the attention of AFN Chief Perry Bellegarde, who described the NDP government as “a human rights leader in Canada . . . [since Notely] highlighted that Indigenous peoples must benefit both from the development of natural resources in the province and conservation of the environment.”³⁸

Resource Development and the Environment

One of the themes that comes up most consistently in the Indigenous news coverage of the Alberta government is the concept of resource revenue sharing as part of a more equitable arrangement between the province and its Indigenous population. It is an issue supported in the UN declaration—a fulfillment of treaty terms—that First Nations leaders repeatedly mention as a reason for optimism vis-à-vis the new provincial government. They maintain that they never signed away their rights to benefit from resources and have been actively pursuing a formal agreement at the provincial level for many years. Back in 2013, a group of chiefs produced a study that supported their position. According to APTN, that report showed that “if First Nations received only 5 per cent of provincial resource revenues they would be more than capable of financial independence.”³⁹ And yet, when Alberta chiefs met with the Tory Aboriginal relations minister at the time to discuss revenue sharing they were reportedly told that “we’re not going to take a share of our resource revenues and give it to First Nations.”⁴⁰

When Craig Mackinaw stepped in to the role of AFN Alberta regional chief just weeks after the NDP’s election win, he promised to press this issue but remained hopeful, saying, “I’m waiting to see. I guess we will see within the next year how they stand and how they’re going to work with us.”⁴¹ However, Mackinaw’s position on the NDP government became much clearer in just half that time. After the release of the royalty review by a government-appointed committee in early 2016, Mackinaw questioned the New Democrats’ commitment to their election promises and criticized the process for a lack of Aboriginal input: “The only notice I got was having a town hall-type meeting and that’s not really discussing the issues to the specifics.”⁴² Also noted in the coverage was support for resource revenue sharing from industry, including such key oil sands players as Shell, Syncrude, and Suncor.⁴³

In a similar vein, the provincial NDP's more aggressive approach to climate change and the environment was also very much on the agenda of Aboriginal leaders, as portrayed in the Indigenous press. As with resource revenue sharing, the news accounts detail Indigenous leaders' efforts to work with the Alberta and federal governments on green initiatives, but also frustration and an eagerness to move beyond just talk. At one of those joint Edmonton-Ottawa environmental meetings, then Treaty 6 Grand Chief Randy Ermineskin explained his participation this way:

Our peoples are waking up . . . it will be our Indigenous peoples who will save our Mother Earth. This is why we have come together to discuss what we need to do to protect and heal our lands, water and air. So we will listen to Canada's plan and Alberta's plan. . . . We owe it to our children and grandchildren to do all we can.⁴⁴

While the New Democrats' plans to phase out coal-fired electrical generation, impose a carbon tax, and cap greenhouse gas emissions in the oil sands was generally well received, the Notley administration ran into trouble in its attempts to balance development in a deep recession against territorial concerns. Almost a year after taking office, the NDP government found itself on the end of a lawsuit filed by the Fort McKay First Nation over a proposed oil sands lease near Moose Lake, in the band's traditional territory. The Fort McKay First Nation states on its web site that "we believe the practice and preservation of our traditional ways of life can occur simultaneously alongside continuous and responsible oil sands development,"⁴⁵ but the project, which was spearheaded by Prosper Energy Ltd., would come within two kilometres of an area described as "irreplaceable" in a news release. At the end of April 2016, Chief Jim Boucher explained how existing policy and the Alberta Energy Regulator worked against each other, pointing out that "one department of government is barreling ahead with development while Minister [Shannon] Phillips [Environment and Parks and responsible for the Climate Change Office] and other government officials are working with us to protect the same area from development."⁴⁶

When first ministers from across Canada met to discuss climate change in Vancouver a week later, Premier Notley and the other leaders drew heavy

criticism for the limited scope of the talks. Athabasca Chipewyan Chief Allan Adams left the meeting in total frustration, decrying the lack of discussion around the need to “take care of mother earth” and vowing to challenge the government. “We’re not going to stand around and wait for these guys to do what they’ve got to do,” he said after the meeting. “Alberta wants to develop more, well, we will be there to stand in the way. We will not sell out to corporations nor will we ever be silenced ever.”⁴⁷

Pipelines

During the election campaign, and then in government, the NDP have tried to marry a progressive climate change agenda with its reliance on Alberta’s main economic engine, the energy industry. News coverage in the Indigenous media has captured this dynamic in the context of Métis and First Nations interests, often providing more balance than is typically found in mainstream reporting. This was especially evident in news stories about pipelines. For example, when US president Barack Obama rejected the Keystone XL project in late 2015, *Windspeaker* noted that this would force more bitumen to be transported by rail, and referenced work by the conservative Fraser Institute, “which found that rail is over 4.5 times more likely to experience an incident when compared to pipelines in Canada.”⁴⁸

Other news accounts mentioned support for pipelines among groups such as the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. At the same time Indigenous media referenced the need for the provincial government and Ottawa to better consult with Aboriginal peoples, and documented widespread community opposition, both in Alberta and across the country. When Obama labelled oil sands crude as “dirty oil” there was approval among some First Nations in Northern Alberta, including Melina Laboucan-Massimo, a *Greenpeace* activist and a member of the Lubicon Cree, who said, “I was happy to see his strong words.”⁴⁹

A year later, Premier Notley was guardedly celebrating federal approval of Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain pipeline expansion, suggesting her government’s climate change policies paved the way for approval. In a statement she praised the Trudeau government without even mentioning that Enbridge’s Northern Gateway proposal had just been rejected. Aboriginal media coverage included extensive reaction from Notley and Prime

Minister Justin Trudeau. There was reference to the 157 conditions that the National Energy Board said must be met before Trans Mountain operations begin, and to the support of 39 Indigenous communities for the project, but as APTN noted, “Moments after Trudeau announced the approval of the Trans Mountain project, calls went out on social media to begin organizing opposition to the project.”⁵⁰ At the time, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram were filled with posts in support of those protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservation in North Dakota, galvanizing an “anti-pipeline movement [that] has electrified a continent-wide movement against new oil pipelines.”⁵¹

However, an editorial in *Alberta Native News* underscored the challenge for the NDP government on the pipeline file, and for Indigenous communities. The piece tracks the emergence of an anti-pipeline coalition of First Nations and environmental groups, the Treaty Alliance Against Tar Sand Expansion, which followed within weeks by the rise of a rival, pro-pipeline group. Against that backdrop, the editorial describes the struggle to find common ground between these groups’ respective positions. Stephen Buffalo, the head of the Indian Resource Council explained:

We’ve always been consumers of goods and services, not producers of goods and services. We need to fit into that chain somewhere. That’s wealth creation, that’s job creation. We will make sure that things are done right to protect Mother Earth, but we need a revenue stream too.⁵²

The editorial concludes, that “it is time to quit the bickering,” and for Indigenous communities to sit down and find approaches “that ensure a healthy environment while at the same time creating growth and allowing all Nations to benefit through economic development opportunities.”⁵³

The positive-negative tonal arc traversed by Indigenous media over the sample period shifts from a largely positive to a more critical but balanced perspective. Early New Democrat policy decisions—adopting UNDRIP, apologizing for residential schools—were likely to be supported by Indigenous peoples and not seen as controversial. However, over time the challenges of managing the range of disparate interests across the province invariably results in the kind of political compromises that draw opposition

from some quarters. Support for the MMIW inquiry came swiftly and with considerable ease compared to the ongoing complexity of navigating a pipeline policy that works for a range of First Nations and industry. At the same time it is worth pointing out that even in the final months of the sample period, Indigenous media coverage of the New Democrats reflects a degree of balance between positive and negative tones that would be the envy of most parties in power.

Alberta and Indigenous Political Activism

The “Orange Chinook” that brought the NDP to power in Alberta was driven in part by growing political activism among Indigenous peoples. Several Aboriginal media organizations reported high participation rates among First Nations and Métis voters. At the same time those media accounts referenced a tremendous sharing of information related to political platforms, events, and polling hours and locations. Coupled with festering dissatisfaction after forty-four years of Progressive Conservative rule, a detailed platform with genuine Aboriginal initiatives appears to have provided ample motivation for the Indigenous electorate.

Yale Belanger identifies “key barriers” to First Nations participation in elections, including “a lack of effective communication,” the perception that Aboriginal people do not make up a significant proportion of the vote to “wield actual influence” in most electoral districts, and “feelings of exclusion” from the rest of the electorate.⁵⁴ In the case of the 2015 Alberta election, these barriers seem to have been overcome. The Twitter hashtag #RockThe IndigenousVote, discussed earlier in this chapter, is just one example of how social media were able to support effective communication among Aboriginal peoples. Resignation about the limited impact of individual votes seems to have been overridden by a motivation to bring about change. Moreover, the power of First Nations voter blocks *did* have an impact in some ridings, as indicated by the election data analysis above. And perhaps feelings of exclusion on the part of some Aboriginal voters were addressed by the fact that the NDP’s election platform featured more than mere token references to Indigenous concerns.

The lessons from Alberta were picked up by Indigenous groups across Canada. If voters could unleash such dramatic change in Alberta, why not in

Ottawa? The parallels between the provincial campaign in the spring of 2015 and the federal race held that fall are manifold: a multi-term Conservative regime that did not seem to be listening to its constituents anymore, that refused to back an MMIW inquiry, that would not adopt UNDRIP, and that failed to address chronic housing and drinking water issues on First Nations. The difference in the federal campaign was that the NDP victory in Alberta had already set a precedent; it provided a template of political action and hope. Even First Nations singer-songwriter Buffy Sainte-Marie weighed in on the Notley victory, telling the *Huffington Post*, “The Alberta election, that’s a change, that’s inspiring to a lot of people. Sometimes people get to feeling so dis-empowered when it appears that things are going wrong. We can pick up on momentum like the Alberta election or like Idle No More.”⁵⁵

And the momentum from Alberta did carry through. Manitoba Grand Chief Derek Nepinak told the *Toronto Star* that the drive to remove Stephen Harper from office “awoke the sleeping giant in our people.”⁵⁶ Indigenous leaders across Canada mobilized their communities. AFN National Chief Perry Bellegarde said the level of excitement was “huge. I know certain chiefs shut down their communities and bused their people to the stations. Some chiefs went door to door, knocking on their reserves, to make sure people were educated and aware that it is voting day.”⁵⁷ On social media “the hashtags #RocktheVote and #RocktheIndigenousVote were used on election day as people posted selfies of their trip to the ballot box.”⁵⁸ As in Alberta, Indigenous voters went to the polls in record numbers in October 2015, and there were reports of as many as six communities running out of ballots.⁵⁹ More importantly, if the goal, as Nepinak suggested, was to bring in a government more sympathetic to Indigenous issues, electoral activism paid off.

However, once regime change has been accomplished, the work of holding new governments to account begins anew. For some, skepticism toward a new government is well earned. Not long after the New Democrats were elected in Alberta, an editorial in the *Windspeaker* captured this sentiment well:

It’s the long-term progress of all this new-found lovey-dovey talk that we’ll be judging. . . . It wouldn’t be the first time that First Nations have been used as handy props to woo votes. The proof will be in the pudding going forward, is all we’re saying. We’ve become a little nauseated by the promises to

First Nations by provincial governments. There's a big photo op and then the bubble bursts on the way home in the car.⁶⁰

Buffy Sainte-Marie suggests that casting a ballot is just the beginning of change. "You don't vote and go home and give them the keys to the car, he'll drive you right off a cliff. You have to help people to stay honest."⁶¹

At the time of this writing, the Alberta New Democrats have continued to demonstrate a level of commitment to Indigenous issues with their apology to survivors of the "Sixties Scoop," a practice in the 1960s of taking children from Indigenous families and placing them with non-Indigenous foster or adoptive parents. The United Conservative Party (UCP), riding a substantial lead in opinion polls, has just come off its first policy convention. Media reports suggest there was not much discussion of Aboriginal issues at the gathering, though as Don Braid pointed out in the *Calgary Herald*, "one delegate fumed about how fed up she is with First Nations people who 'take and take.'"⁶² That comment was apparently met with some boos. However, just 3 out of 114 policy resolutions to emerge from the UCP convention were related to First Peoples. Under the heading "Indigenous," one calls for the strengthening of "economic opportunities and entrepreneurship," while the other two appear to present dog-whistle tropes of First Nations and Métis people as privileged and corrupt (one recognizes all Albertans "as equal under the law," the other calls for "accountability and transparency into all provincially funded indigenous programs").⁶³

There has been no real "lovey-dovey talk" directed at Indigenous voters on the part of UCP leader Jason Kenney, and very little coverage of the party in the Indigenous news media considered in this chapter. One story that did appear in *Windspeaker* detailed "disbelief and anger" in the face of comments made by Dave Schneider, the UCP MLA for Little Bow, in Sothern Alberta. Early in 2018, Schneider lamented to a local news reporter that the redrawing of electoral boundaries meant his new riding includes "the biggest reserve in Canada. . . . Not that that's bad, but these people don't traditionally vote, and how is the population going to get engaged in this political system in the province."⁶⁴ Schneider later apologized on Twitter to "any offended by my choice of words."⁶⁵ The *Windspeaker* story also included this pointed observation: "Rachel Notley's NDP government was swept into power, on part [*sic*] thanks to a strong Indigenous platform,

which included adopting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”⁶⁶

The writer might have additionally noted that the progressive NDP platform resonated with many Indigenous voters and boosted turnout at the polls, according to Indigenous media and the data analysis here. In fact, the findings described in this chapter provide a stark contrast to Schneider’s comments. Political parties that fail to take these facts into account do so at their peril.

NOTES

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