

Claiming One's Place - A Bigger Role for Indigenous Peoples and Parliamentarians in Ottawa

As a part of a conference celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Parliamentary Internship Programme, a panel was organized to discuss the historic and emerging roles of Indigenous People within the federal government and Parliament. Although unforeseen circumstances prompted a last-minute change in the line-up, a panel of current and former MPs, an academic and a public servant offered insightful commentary based on several perspectives. The panel particularly focussed on the challenges and opportunities involved in respectfully engaging a diverse population, creating self-government structures and building on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The following text has been edited and revised for length and clarity and is not a verbatim report.

Danielle Whyte, Hon. Leona Aglukkaq, Dan Vandal, MP, and Brock Pitawanakwat

Introduction: It's my pleasure to introduce the moderator for the next session, Danielle Whyte. She was an intern in 1995-1996 who worked with MP Jean Augustine of the Liberal Party and Paul Crête of the Bloc Québécois. She's spent her post internship years as a public servant, and since 2000 has been working on Indigenous issues.

Danielle Whyte: I'm really honoured to be here with you this morning, and I'd like to begin by acknowledging like we did this morning, that the land we're gathered on is the unceded territory of the Algonquin Nation. I'd like to offer our gratitude and respect to the Algonquin people who are elders and knowledge-keepers.

I was an intern in 95-96, I'm originally from Mi'kmaq territory on the west coast of Newfoundland, from a small community there. I'm of Mi'kmaq and European ancestry. I now make my home in Ottawa where most of my career has been focussed on Indigenous policy and Indigenous policy issues. In preparation for the panel I was thinking back to our intern year, 1995, and the extent to which Indigenous issues factored into the political agenda. I think the key question at the time was whether the James Bay Cree in Northern Quebec would remain as part of an independent Quebec or whether they would secede, so despite coming on the heels of the opioid crisis and the launch of the World

Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, it was not really an issue at the top of the political agenda as the national unity crisis loomed.

Fast forward 20 years and we have a government that says this is the most important relationship – the relationship with Indigenous people; so, with that in mind, I'd like to bring up our panel.

When I was an intern in 1995, I believe there were three Indigenous members of Parliament and probably a handful more were Senators. In 2015 there were 10 Indigenous members of Parliament elected. Just out of curiosity, who knows when the First Nations People in Canada first got the right to vote? The answer? 1960. So, not that long before the start of our internship programme. The first status Indian was elected to Parliament in 1968. Our panelists are among a very small and esteemed group of people. If you believe what you read on Wikipedia, only 39 Indigenous people have served as members of Parliament since Confederation, so I'm really honoured to welcome our panel here this morning.

And I'd like to start by introducing the Honourable Leona Aglukkaq who served as a Member of Parliament for Nunavut from 2008-2015. She was the first Inuk to be sworn into the federal cabinet, she served as Minister of Health, Minister responsible for the Canadian Northern



Left to Right: Danielle Whyte, Hon. Leona Aglukkaq, Dan Vandal, MP, and Brock Pitawanakwat.

Development Agency, Minister of Environment, and the Minister for the Arctic Council. She also served in a number of ministerial portfolios in the Nunavut Legislative Assembly, and also on the public service side as the deputy minister in the Nunavut government and in the municipal government. Next, we have Dan Vandal. He was elected in 2015 as a Member of Parliament for Saint Boniface—Saint Vital. He's the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Indigenous Services and a former city councillor and deputy mayor of the city of Winnipeg. He has also served as chair of the board of directors for the Aboriginal People's Television Network. And finally, I'm pleased to welcome a fellow former intern, Brock Pitawanakwat, who was an intern in 2002-2003. He is currently an associate professor of Indigenous Studies at York University. Prior to joining York, he taught at the University of Sudbury. He is a Yellowhead research fellow and a regular contributor

to the Indigena roundtable podcast. He has also served as a researcher for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The panel members will talk to us a bit about the role of Indigenous Peoples in Parliament. We've asked them to reflect on how they see their role, what some of the unique factors and considerations of being an Indigenous person in Parliament and in politics are, and also to talk about their perspectives on whether the growing understanding of Indigenous issues that came from the work of the TRC and jurisprudence on Indigenous rights, has changed the way that First Nations people feel about Parliament.

Leona Aglukkaq: Good morning everyone. I was asked to sit on this panel last night while I was sitting on a train coming from Toronto, so my time to reflect was limited, so I apologize first of all for that, but I'm very happy to be here.

I am an Inuk, born and raised in Canada's Arctic. I come from the community of Gjoa Haven, which is located in the Northwest Passage. I grew up in the North. My family moved from living off the land to a settlement in the 1970s. I was educated in the North and worked in the North for over 30 years in the public service. How I got into politics is really accidental. I first got involved in community politics in Cambridge Bay and served on the council for six years. The full time job I had at the time was with the territorial government in education.

I moved to Iqaluit to continue that role, but I was also involved in the creation of the Nunavut territory and was assigned as assistant deputy minister of Human Resources, with the Office of Interim Commission – an organization established in 1998 to oversee the development of the Nunavut Government prior to April 1 1999. It's not every day people get involved in the creation of a new territory, in changing the map of Canada. For over 30 years Inuit had negotiated a modern land claims agreement that resulted in the creation of a new territory, a new public government for Nunavut. After serving in public service roles, I entered politics.

I was asked to run to represent the community of Gjoa Haven and I hadn't been home for 18 years when I ran. I ran against six men and won that riding. And I can say that I would not recommend campaigning in Nunavut in February. It is cold. I remember my brother had given me his vehicle to drive around. I couldn't figure out why every morning when I got into his truck there was no gas. "What happened?" I would ask. "Somebody must have been driving this vehicle." But no, it was on auto-start when it reached a certain low temperature. The problem was it never went off. It was -60 and door-knocking was difficult.

I had my son when I made the switch to federal politics. I had a three month-old campaigning in the largest riding in Canada, probably the world; a riding that covers three time zones. Twenty-five isolated communities and no highways to take to drive into the next town to door-knock. The other thing that's quite unique about Nunavut is that 85 per cent of the population are Inuit. Nowhere else in Canada is there a population makeup quite like Nunavut where Indigenous people are a majority. Campaigning in Nunavut is also unique in that Nunavut has four official languages; Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, English and French. To campaign in Nunavut, you fly to the community, you do the radio show, and you sit there until the phones stop ringing, get on the plane, fly to

the next town and start again. A 35-day campaign in Nunavut is quite challenging in that there's not enough days to hit all 25 communities.

Why did I get involved in politics? Frustration that things were not moving. We didn't have a strong voice in Nunavut to advance the intent of our land claims agreement in a federal system. Nunavut organizations sought for arbitration, and requested arbitration 16 times to try to get the federal bureaucracy to move on implementing the articles that Inuit negotiated over 30 years.

My frustration as an Inuk beneficiary from Nunavut is that we agree to land claims agreements but shortly thereafter they're shelved. And, I remember in 2008 sitting as a Member of Parliament, I literally would carry our modern-day land claims agreement educating bureaucracy on the various articles that they're responsible for. For example: procurement in Nunavut. How is that supposed to be implemented? Is Inuit employment important in procurement procedures?

So, I got involved. Just because there's lack of understanding of the history behind the intent of what Inuit wanted from Nunavut. And what we wanted in terms of giving us the mechanisms to see opportunities in our region, to create opportunities for ,like employment, education.

Dan Vandal: Thank you so much. And it's a great honour and a pleasure to be here today on this panel. Much like Leona, I found out about this early this morning, actually; there was a flurry of calls, but I'm glad I'm here.

My name is Dan Vandal. I'm from Saint-Boniface. This is where Louis Riel is from. It is the birthplace and the resting place of Louis Riel, the father of Manitoba and the leader of the Metis nation. I'm a first-time Member of Parliament but I was elected in 1995 as a city councillor for Saint-Boniface. I've been in politics since that time except for a three-year stretch beginning in 2004 when I ran to be mayor of the city of Winnipeg and came in second. So, I was out of politics for a few years, but returned as a councillor in 2007. I served as a councillor until 2014 and then decided to make the jump in 2015 to federal politics.

For those of you who don't know Winnipeg or Saint-Boniface, it's a great city. It's cold; it's not as cold as where Leona comes from, but it's still cold. It's not a fast growth city, yet the fastest growing demographic

in Winnipeg are young Indigenous people, principally First Nation and Metis. That presents incredible challenges. We all know the statistics on poverty. There are incredible challenges but also incredible opportunities, because Winnipeg is aging and jobs are going to be opening up not only in government but all over the private sector. So, it's an opportunity for government to partner with the private sector, with Indigenous organisations, to try to do all sorts of employment, training and education initiatives to make sure that young Indigenous people can contribute to our economy and contribute to our society in a positive way.

I think that's ultimately why I became an elected official, both at the city and at the federal government. That's always been my *raison d'être* for doing what it is I do. Becoming an MP, actually I found it very positive. I am part of a team that really puts reconciliation front and centre of everything that we do. I say that for a few reasons. I think one of the most important reasons is that every member, every minister of the Liberal government has in their mandate letter a note about how they can forward the goals of reconciliation. Whether you're Fisheries Minister or Finance Minister – certainly Indigenous Services or Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister – they have in their mandate letter how they can move Indigenous issues and reconciliation forward. And I think that's incredible. That's an incredible starting point. And of course, we've followed up with significant investments in the budget.

I'm Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indigenous Services, Seamus Regan. We have five key priorities. One is infrastructure, including water. I'm very proud of the fact that we've removed 85 long-term drinking water advisories. There's 61 left to do and we're committed to getting that done by 2022. So, infrastructure is a huge priority for us. The priorities include education, health care and child and family services.

Shortly after I got here, I became chair of the Indigenous caucus of the Liberal Party. We made a decision early to focus on what the ministers are doing. So, every meeting of Indigenous caucus, we managed to book a minister to come in and explain what their ministry doing that's relevant to Indigenous people, that's important for Indigenous people and to learn how can we help. Our job as an Indigenous caucus was to educate ourselves on what each ministry is doing and offer our assistance on how we can help that ministry, offer constructive criticism and communicate what they're doing.

Brock Pitawanakwat: I am really honoured to be here, as a former intern myself from 2002-2003. I already knew at that point that I was specifically interested in Indigenous issues, so I mentioned that in the actual interview process and I was fortunate to be selected. It was a challenging year for the reasons that people have already mentioned today, as well, in terms of managing multiple roles. I think identifying as an Anishinaabe person, there were some other particular challenges that I think maybe people were oblivious to.

I noticed that I had a real challenge in terms of feeling like I was a part of this and as an Indigenous person and First Nations person, I don't know how many people really thought about coming to John A. Macdonald building this morning. Those symbolic moments come up all the time, as an Indigenous person, if you are reflective of your history and the experiences that your family and community, and you even as an individual have been affected by.

I'm also honoured to be on this panel and have the opportunity to hear about some of the really impressive things that are going on that people are putting a tremendous amount of work into. I commend people for doing that, but I wanted to kind of reserve my comments since I am an outsider here.

I'm an academic. This is the route I took as soon as the internship programme ended. I ended up taking a faculty position in Saskatchewan teaching Indigenous Studies and that's what I've been doing off and on for the last 16 years. I find that I draw on my experience as a parliamentary intern a lot. There are many instances in my teaching and in my research when I reflect on the experiences of being an intern and what I was able to observe.

I'll just briefly mention that I ended up working for two MPs who both were on the Aboriginal Affairs Committee. This was at the time that the First Nations Governance Act was going through. There was a lot of people who were paying attention to Indigenous issues on the Hill and it generated quite a bit of controversy because the circumstance was such that there were no First Nations MPs on that particular committee.

The legislation was entirely focused on First Nations people and their communities. There is, I think, an obvious sense of injustice to have situations where you had a committee of settler Canadians as Members of Parliament who were making decisions that would have profound impacts on other people. And the MPs sitting around the table really had very little actual skin

in the game, so to speak, in terms of an actual outcome. It was tough to watch. And it was exhausting.

It was pointed out to me by several people that, at the time, the committee was kind of a place where you could go and work in the shadows. Nobody pays too close attention to Aboriginal Affairs and Natural Resources, so while you're kind of figuring it out or if you're stumbling, not too many people noticed. I was working for John Godfrey, an MP who wanted to be on that committee. He could see that this is a relationship that has been neglected historically by Canadians and that is of primary importance. And so, I'm really fortunate that I had that opportunity to work with him.

I also am fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Senator Murray Sinclair, who was supposed to be on this panel but was, unfortunately, unable to be here due to family reasons, at the TRC. I was assigned to work with him directly for the first six months and then moved over to the research group. I know that part of this panel, as it was envisioned, was to look at what impact reconciliation has had in terms of Parliament and I think the jury's really still out. This is a crucial period in the last several months of this government's mandate. There is legislation in terms of child welfare, Indigenous languages, but there are also some really major commitments that the current government made while campaigning around the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The TRC's calls to action were wholeheartedly endorsed by the current prime minister. Indigenous peoples are watching and hoping that this action will happen in the months to come. Hopefully that isn't forgotten in the next campaign either because certainly my fear is in some ways is that reconciliation is just going to be like a box that will have to be checked after this current mandate. I certainly hope that's not the case because there's so much left to do there.

DW: So, we have time now for some questions.

Question: There's been a lot of talk recently about Indigenous communities or collectives forming their own assemblies and enacting their own laws. The parliamentary secretary referred to a government bill which alludes to that possibility. So, for the whole panel, what role do you foresee in having Indigenous assemblies? If there is to be a fourth level, how will that interact with the existing three?

DV: It's in the Constitution that the Metis First Nation and Indigenous nations have an inherent

right to make their own laws. And so, there's a school of thought that says that there's nothing stopping Indigenous nations now from making their own laws and having them implemented. The purpose of the current legislation is to identify those rights in partnership with Indigenous Nations. What we are doing on the child welfare issue is, I believe, that we've introduced a bill that affirms that inherent right for Indigenous Nations to make their own laws concerning child welfare. There are standards, there are three main principles for how it would be implemented. There is a process whereby there would be a negotiation – I'm not sure that's the right word – a discussion between the Indigenous Nation, the provincial governments, and the federal government because there is currently a huge role for the provinces in child welfare. After a year of that discussion, if there is not agreement on the law then the law of the Indigenous Nation would take precedence over both the provincial and the federal law. So that's being discussed right now as I speak. I'm the first to say it's only a beginning. There's still a long, long road to go on that issue but that's a prime example, a real-life example of where our government is affirming an inherent right for nations to make their own laws. So, I'm not sure if that answers your question but that's something we're working on right now.

BP: Sir, I'll just say really quickly I think one of the challenges is coming at it from the First Nations perspective. I'm doing a policy brief right now for the Yellow Head Institute on the Anishinaabe self-government negotiations. So often it seems like what we're being offered is actually just to manage our own poverty. There's almost nothing there about really changing the fiscal relationship and similar control over Indigenous land and resources. First Nations people and Inuit people would have had 100 percent of the Canadian land mass not that long ago, now it's less than 1 percent. In terms of the actual willingness politically to transform that, it seems like so often we're still dealing with distractions. The fear is, essentially, self-government means we're going to be self-governing our own misery. That's my fear.

LA: Thank you for that question. My focus will be on Nunavut and Inuit. Twenty, twenty-five years ago Nunavut was created. We're a very young region. And I mentioned in my opening remarks that Nunavut is unique in that nowhere else in Canada do we have a population where 85 percent of the population is Indigenous. How do we ensure that we deliver programs reflective of the population we're serving? Nunavut was created around that idea.

The public government for Nunavut was created as a result of Inuit negotiating their land claims agreement. We Inuit asked for government to deliver essential services including education, and health, and the ability to make and enforce law. Right now in Nunavut we have a 100 per cent Inuit cabinet. We have an Inuk premier and all cabinet ministers are Inuit. Our leader is a representative of the Inuit land claims agreement. I got involved in politics because I saw there were opportunities for us in Nunavut. We have a region rich in resources. And in our claim, we negotiated land ownership of those regions that are rich in resources. We established the Institute of Public Government that would oversee how those developments would occur by Inuit. And projects don't always proceed. Responsible resource development, as stewards of our land, is very important to us. Because we depend on wildlife for food, just like you depend on your farms for your beef and pork and chicken. The regime we established is unique in Canada. It's not perfect but it gives us the legal mechanism to oversee development on our terms and to educate.

It's a pretty good model, in my view, in that we are at the table making decisions on how projects will proceed. Could it be improved? Absolutely. I mean this is why we're in politics and government is how we make things better. And it evolves. A solution 10 years ago may not be relevant today. With that understanding, how do we move forward? By engaging with us. Don't study us from afar and come up with solutions that you think are right for us. Engage us. You know there's a wealth of knowledge among people. And you know I'm very proud as Arctic Council member to have put forward a policy regime that incorporated Indigenous traditional knowledge into science. How do we make scientific study about the North more relevant to us and how do researchers tap into that untapped wealth and knowledge of Indigenous people in the Arctic to make better decisions about climate change, about our environment, about wildlife management, and so on?

Question: My question is sort of a procedural or institutional question. Given the number of departments and agencies in the government of Canada and the number and diversity of Indigenous peoples across Canada, how can we manage these nation-to-nation relationships in a way that's coherent and that's consistent over time? In my experience, from the public servant perspective, often public servants look at Indigenous peoples like they belong

to a school of fish. They say, well they all look the same to me, why do I have to shake hands with all these fish? And then, we will see something on the Indigenous side. They're looking at the governments of Canada and say well the government is one octopus. Why do I have to shake all of its hands? If we're ever talking to an Indigenous nation, I might be one of 50 different public servants to have contacted that first nation this month. So how can we structure this relationship in a different way?

DV: The important issue is that I don't think Canadians really value the diversity of Indigenous Nations. There are over 600 First Nations all across Canada and over 70 Indigenous languages, geographically diverse and that's just First Nations. I believe groups can work better together, but it's a challenge. I won't even talk about government diversity; I'm still working on that one. We've actually split up Indigenous Affairs to Crown-Indigenous Relations and Indigenous Services as a way to be more effective. The prime minister and the ministers have set up approximately 50, probably more, round tables with various nations that meet regularly to update government on what the important issues are with ministers present. I'm sure the high level of administrative help allows everyone to hear the same message and allows everyone to work towards, I hope, the same solutions.

BP: Looking at it from the community perspective, one of the great frustrations is there tends to be a lot more turnover on the government's side than there is on the community side. Those people live there, they're from there. A representative from the government, especially if it's younger staffers who are coming through so often things like self-government tables, changes often. There is a lot of education that the community has to do for the people who are coming in that they're negotiating with. It's an incredibly tough situation and the importance of patience is huge.

And one of the things to think about is the diversity. People sometimes talk about Europe and say: "Oh it's amazing, you can drive an hour and there's a whole other country, another language, another history." Well check that and actually pay attention to all the Indigenous Nations that you have here. It's complex. Turns out if you colonised 60 to 80 nations, you're going to have an administrative mess on your hands. So maybe if people keep that in mind, they might be a little more patient when working with communities.