

Why I Support Idle No More

— Linda Goyette, 16 January 2013 (<http://www.lindagoyette.ca>)

I am no longer a journalist, and I do not seek a bully pulpit on any topic, but tonight I want to explain to my family and friends why I give my unqualified support to the Idle No More movement as a Canadian citizen.

I am becoming more and more concerned about the harsh backlash among non-aboriginal Canadians against this peaceful protest movement. I'm not talking exclusively about virulent racial bigotry and hate speech, although it exists in dark places, but more about the willful denial of reality, the blindness to injustice, among many decent people.

These are the people I address tonight. I respect their right to a different opinion, but I hope they will hear me out.

Four Saskatchewan women—Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean and Jessica Gordon—and Chief Theresa Spence of Attawapiskat First Nation in northern Ontario found the courage to say that a change is going to come. Thousands of indigenous people across Canada are demonstrating in peaceful ways to tell the country that they will wait no longer for that change. When I see round dances in shopping malls, peaceful road blockades, or a chief on a hunger strike, I see an opportunity to learn more about the deep frustration of my neighbours. I see no threat at all.

The protesters are asking for the country I want for myself, and for my family.

Millions of Canadians do respect First Nations, Metis and Inuit legal rights because these rights are guaranteed in our modern Constitution, frequently upheld by our highest courts, entrenched in our historic treaties, and valued in our intermingled family connections, our friendships, our minds and our hearts.

Many of us badly want the Canadian government to respect Indigenous land, resources, cultural ways, and most of all their right to self-determination.

I feel hopeful—wildly hopeful—that a core demand of the Idle No More movement for stronger protection of our shared natural environment will spread to Canadians of all racial backgrounds and political allegiances. I also hope that the Harper government will think twice in future before it passes omnibus legislation with minimal parliamentary debate or national consultation on the contents.

If the Idle No More movement has allies, and it does, we need to be more outspoken. Our silence in 2013 will be interpreted as complicity, and polite agreement, with everything that is wrong with the relationship between Canada and the founding peoples. Firm support for Idle No More could push the whole nation forward in a new and more positive direction.

We need to stand beside indigenous peoples when they confront an obtuse federal government that consistently undermines their success while it scolds them about local governance. In our homes and communities, we need to challenge the mockery, the simplistic assumptions, the casual and devastating bigotry that diminish Canada and make it a smaller, narrower place than it deserves to be.

As some of you know, I have worked for most of my adult life as a reporter, writer and oral history transcriber with enduring connections to many First Nations and Metis people and their communities in different parts of Canada, primarily in the West. That doesn't make me an expert in anything, but I have had a rare opportunity to learn from the true experts – the people themselves, their life experiences, their values, their hopes. I have witnessed with my own eyes hardships and injustices that took my

breath away, not only in Attawapiskat in 2010, but in almost every province and territory over three decades.

To those comfortable Canadians who complain that their hard-earned tax dollars disappear down a huge funnel to places like Attawapiskat, I say: Visit the place yourself, or any other isolated, northern Aboriginal community, and you might notice that most inhabitants, primarily children and old people, endure substandard public services beyond the imagination of southern, urban Canadians.

They can't count on clean drinking water, warm housing, decent elementary schools, safe roads, good fire protection or sewage systems—all services that white Canadians in neighbouring towns and cities take for granted. Other Canadians can rely on fairly capable local and provincial governments while First Nations have to contend with the inept budgeting practices of the federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, not to mention the restrictive nature of our hideous national antique, the Indian Act. Read it some time. It will change your view of your country.

To those Canadians who allege that all chiefs and band councils are robber barons who “make more than the prime minister,” and run a vast northern kleptocracy, I say: I have never heard an Idle No More activist or an Aboriginal person in any community defend overpayment of band officials, padding of expense accounts, or local corruption. Just as I have never heard any Canadian, anywhere, justify the overpayment of local, provincial or federal elected and public employees, although this also happens with depressing regularity.

Overpayment happens because we allow it to happen. That can change, too. I would like to hear Canadians ask why the president of the University of Alberta, Indira Samarasekera, received \$627,000 in the 2007-2008 fiscal year, which includes house and car allowances, performance bonuses and deferred compensation. Her salary had increased 6 per cent compared to the year before.

Folks, she earned more than Prime Minister Stephen Harper and U.S. president Barack Obama that year while Alberta students contended with steady tuition increases. She earned more than any First Nation chief I've ever heard of. Yet do we hear waves of public indignation about the continuing high salaries of university and college presidents across Canada? Even a murmur? We do not.

We swallow similar bad news about other elected and public officials who receive sky-high salaries, benefits, and sometimes, huge severance payments after dismissal for poor performance. That's our tax money, too. We could at least apply our indignation evenly across the country, and we might question the national preoccupation with compensation to chiefs, and how and why that obsession came to be.

Long ago, when I was reporting for the Edmonton Journal in 1980 or 1981, I received a brown envelope from a Department of Indian Affairs finance officer containing documents on the salary and benefits of an outspoken Cree leader Harold Cardinal who was working at the time to assist the northern Dene Tha' with poor conditions on their reserve. I was in my early twenties at the time, and inexperienced, and yes, I supplied the news story that brought a good man's hard work into disrepute, fortunately temporarily. I was a little pawn on a chessboard, pushed forward, to do the government's bidding. Shut him up. Shut it down.

I learned a hard lesson from that experience. I began to watch the situation more carefully. In the following three decades I noticed that each time First Nations and Metis leaders, or activists in the community, demanded their legal rights or a fair share of Canada's abundant resources, similar official brown envelopes would whiz in the direction of good, bad or indifferent reporters and media commentators. These journalists would dutifully report the news of overpayments--as they should, it is indefensible--but without any context or understanding of how they were being used to silence, ignore and marginalize Aboriginal people in great need.

Does the federal government release similar figures to the media about the plump expense accounts of its own senior deputy ministers? No, it does not. The Harper government encourages significant overpayments to a favoured few, on the one hand, and then spins this information to discredit the legitimate claims of an entire group of people. This is not good governance. This is dysfunctional manipulation.

I don't blame many southern Canadians for their singular focus on chiefs' salaries—that's just about all they've heard from the shells in the conservative media for two decades—but I don't think people understand that federal transfers to First Nations are often significantly lower than provincial transfers to non-aboriginal communities for the same services. The Auditor General and Parliamentary Budget Officer have confirmed this fact again and again, and conscientious people in provincial and local governments and in the media have complained about it.

Try to calculate how much public money your town or city receives for every school and hospital, for all salaries of local public employees, for road and bridge construction, for police and fire departments, for sewer lines, garbage disposal, recycling, public transit and so on. That amounts to many millions of dollars a year, too, even for small communities. Canadians interpret these financial transfers as a right of citizenship, the cost of a civil society.

More than one million people in Canada describe themselves as Aboriginal, and more than 700,000 have First Nations status. The Government of Canada will spend about \$8 billion this year for the budget of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, including all transfers to more than 600 communities. About twenty per cent of the total goes to departmental administration expenses, but look at the \$8 billion. That's the same amount that New Brunswick will spend this year on public services for its 751,000 people.

To those Canadians who say, "But I pay taxes, and they don't, so I have earned these services, and they haven't," I say in reply: A large majority of First Nations people and all Metis people, now live off-reserve, work for a living, and do pay taxes. It is the Canadian way to provide public services for all citizens, even those without paid employment, such as the elderly, parents caring for children at home, people with disabilities, and people who earn too little in their jobs to pay significant taxes. Some people on reserves, and in neighbouring non-aboriginal communities too, fall into these categories. Why should we resent them? Their gifts to us are beyond the measure of money.

More important, this country is affluent and comfortable by international standards because of the rich natural resources it extracts from its northern and western regions, the traditional territory of many First Nations and Metis people. They have paid and paid the rest of Canada—in lost revenue, over generations—for the miserable level of public services they have received through much of the last century. They have received no fair share of the benefits of a rich nation, and it is time they did.

To the Canadians who say, "But Idle No More leaders should be more specific, they should define their terms, I don't know what they want," I say: Where have you been hiding throughout your lifetime? If you don't know what they want, you haven't been listening.

The parents and grandparents of Idle No More activists lined up at the microphones at the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry after 1974, patiently explaining to the country why their land and sovereignty needed to be respected. Decade after decade, others spoke to parliamentary committee hearings, First Ministers conferences, and every MP and reporter who would listen to them.

Year after year, they testified at hearings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and at hearings of the United Nations human rights bodies. In case after case, they took the federal government to the Supreme Court of Canada to press for legitimate recognition of their land claims and treaty and Aboriginal rights. They negotiated the Kelowna Accord with the former prime minister, and then saw the deal collapse.

Their frustrations found expression at Oka and Burnt Church and Ipperwash, Ont., in the protest marches through the streets of Edmonton and Winnipeg, in the railway blockades in B.C. They celebrated many victories and land claims settlements along the way, and found allies, and achieved significant improvements on their own initiative.

If you don't know about this yet, it is not too late to learn. Rather than demand that other people define their terms immediately in language you are ready to accept, just listen, and remember what you have heard.

It shouldn't be necessary to say that diverse Aboriginal communities have different definitions of sovereignty, and different interpretations of their relationship with the Canadian state. People are different. Communities are different. No single answer is the total or final answer on any public issue.

The very least Canadians can do is pay attention with some level of respect and gratitude for a largely peaceful protest movement. Other countries would envy us for Idle No More, and its non-violent core values. Their patience is a great gift to this country.

When the percentage of Aboriginal people in schools, colleges, universities, hospitals and jails matches their percentage of the Canadian population, some equality will have been achieved. Equality does not exist now.

I think this is a defining moment in Canadian history, a time when each citizen is asked to make a choice. Where do you stand? Where will your children and grandchildren want you to stand? I have made my decision. I leave your decision to you.

Thank you for listening.

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To learn more about. . .

The Idle No More movement:

Website: <http://www.idlenomore.ca>

On Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Idlenomore.official/?ref=ts&fref=ts>

On Twitter #IdleNoMore

Nine questions about Idle No More, CBC report,

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2013/01/04/f-idlenomore-faq.html>

Duncan McCue CBC commentary: The cultural importance of Idle No More

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2013/01/08/f-vp-mccue-idle-no-more.html>

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idle_No_More

Bill C-45, the fine print of the Omnibus Bill

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/10/19/pol-list-2nd-omnibus-bill.html>

About Attawapiskat:

An NFB documentary by award-winning Alanis Obamsawin;

http://www.nfb.ca/film/people_of_kattawapiskak_river/

*“Still waiting in Attawapiskat,” Canadian Geographic magazine,
Linda Goyette with photography by Liam Sharp*

Attawapiskat finances:

The journalism of Chelsea Vowel

*http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/chelsea-vowel/attawapiskat-emergency_b_1127066.html
and*

http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/chelsea-vowel/attawapiskat_b_1734332.html

The issues at the heart of this debate:

8th Fire: Aboriginal peoples, Canada and the way forward

Special CBC reports: <http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/8thfire/index.html>