

[kee/chi - nee/wesk] • **noun**

THE GREAT SPIRIT OF THE FEMALE SIDE OF LIFE OF ALL THINGS

KCI-NIWESQ

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA MAGAZINE

———— a single bead is small, but when strung together they become something remarkable. ————

If we all vote, together we can make a difference.



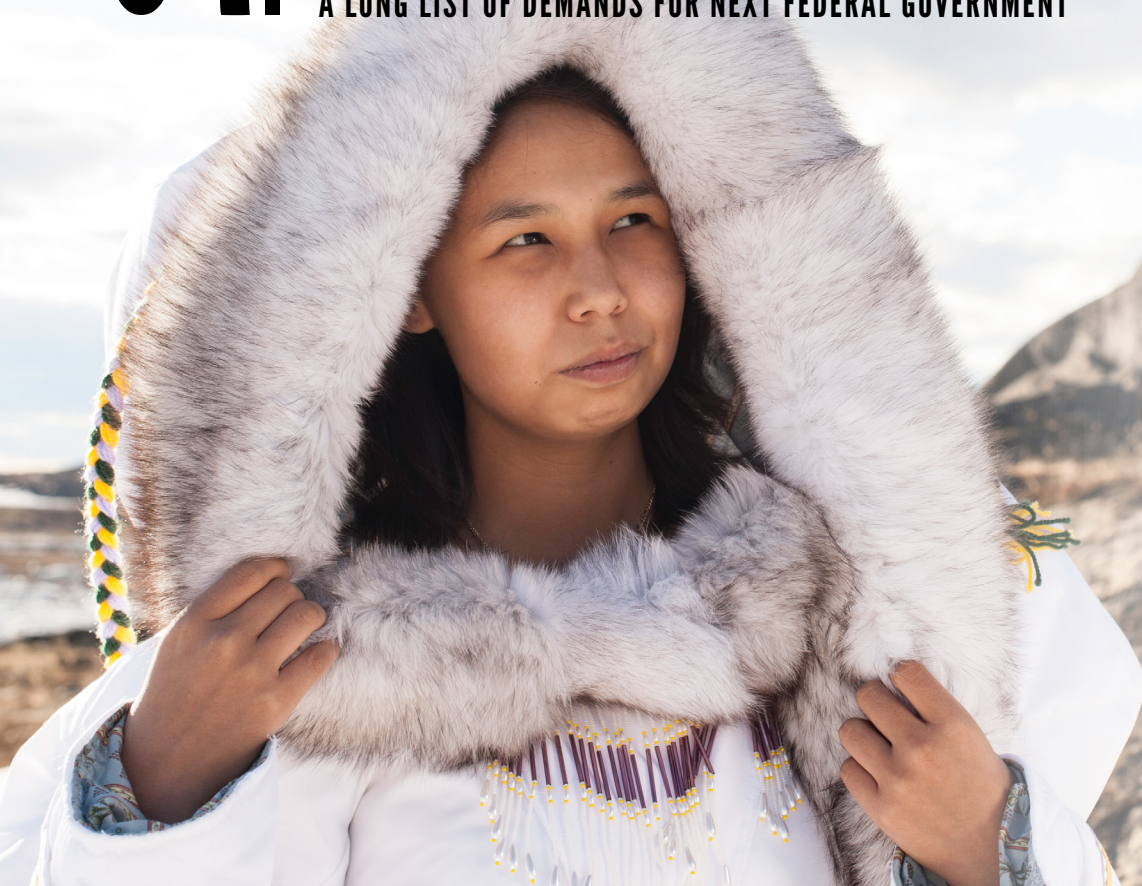
sept • no. 06

WE'RE DONE ASKING. WE'RE VOTING.



04. INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS

A LONG LIST OF DEMANDS FOR NEXT FEDERAL GOVERNMENT



S
T
E
N
T
E
N
C
O



03.

MIIGWETCH

MESSAGE FROM THE CEO/DIRECTRICE GENERAL,
LYNNE GROULX

09.

NELLIE COURNOYEA

POLITICAL TRAILBLAZER

12.

EXTRAORDINARY INDIGENOUS WOMEN
AND THEIR REMARKABLE
POLITICAL LIVES

18.

BEING AMONG THE PEOPLE:

CHALLENGES & REWARDS OF BEING FEMALE CHIEF

21.

BARRIERS

KEEPING INDIGENOUS VOTERS FROM THE POLLS

24.

TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE:

CAN CASTING A BALLOT HELP CHANGE
THE COLONIAL SYSTEM FROM WITHIN?



LYNNE GROULX LL.L., J.D. | CEO

NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA
L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA

THIS ISSUE IS COMING TO YOU IN THE DAYS BEFORE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND CANADIANS WILL GO TO THE POLLS TO SELECT THE NEXT GOVERNMENT OF CANADA—THE GOVERNMENT THAT MAKES THE DECISIONS THAT HAVE A DIRECT IMPACT ON THE LIVES OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THIS COUNTRY.

You will see that the stories in this edition are related to voting issues, or to politics, or to Indigenous women who are political leaders.

As an association that advocates for Indigenous women, we are not going to tell you how to vote, although you can see the analysis of the platforms of the major political parties that we have posted on our website.

But we do urge First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women to become politically active, whether that is at the local, provincial, or federal level. Our voices need to be heard in our communities, in the provincial and federal legislatures, and at decision-making tables.

In this issue you will read about one of the incredible political leaders of our time, Nellie Cournoyea. The first Indigenous woman to be premier of a territory, Ms. Cournoyea will tell you that it is women who get things done, whether that is in the home or in the halls of government.

You will also read about Ava Bear, Chief of Muskoday First Nation. She is representative of a growing movement of Indigenous women who are standing up to become leaders of their communities.

We will also take you across the country to ask Indigenous women to outline the main election issues in their respective regions. You will see that there are similar concerns being voiced, regardless of location.

We have also gone to four outstanding Indigenous women who are active in politics at the federal or provincial level to ask them why they chose that life, what challenges they have faced, and what words of advice they have for First Nations, Métis, or Inuit women who are contemplating a political career

And we ask a question that runs through the minds of many Indigenous people at this time of year: To vote or not to vote?

That is indeed a personal decision.

But our view is that Indigenous women need to have their hands on the wheel that steers this country and we must work within the colonial system for now, as we are significantly impacted by the decisions made by politicians. We must also work to ensure the next generation of Indigenous women are not left to deal with the systemic human rights issues affecting us today.

So thank you once again for opening the pages that follow. Thank you for reading the sixth edition of Kci-Niwesq. Please drop us a line and let us know what you think at reception@nwac.ca.



ACROSS CANADA

OFFICE OF THE
PRIME MINISTER
AND
PRIVY COUNCIL



Canada

INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS

HAVE LONG LIST OF DEMANDS FOR NEXT FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Indigenous issues have been raised regularly by federal party leaders as they campaign for votes in the 2021 federal election. But it is still unclear whether the voices of First Nations, Métis and Inuit women are being heard.

THE NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA (NWAC) says the disproportionate number of Indigenous women and girls who go missing or are murdered every year in Canada remains a top issue for its members.

And then there are the basic human rights to clean water, housing, health, and mental health. Environmental issues, including climate change, are also a key concern, says NWAC CEO Lynne Groulx.

And this year, there have been many calls for resources to help Indigenous communities find the unmarked graves of children at former Indian residential schools.

Here is what some Indigenous female leaders around the country are saying are the leading issues for the women in their regions.

LYNN KENORAS-DUCKCHIEF, Chief of the Adams Lake Indian Band near Kamloops, B.C., says her people have physical, spiritual, and emotional needs, many of which could be addressed with support from the federal government.

If we look at the physical needs first, says Chief DuckChief, "I think about the prenatal care for our new mothers, and the maternal care for our children."

The First Nation is trying to take jurisdiction over the children of the community who are in foster care, she says. That will require federal funding.

Meanwhile, poverty remains a huge issue, she says. "Children are coming to school hungry."

There is also a need for more health care resources that will allow the elderly to stay in the community, rather than being shipped off to Vancouver or even to Kamloops when they fall ill, says Chief DuckChief. "I read somewhere that when we lose an elder, it's like losing a library. And I think that's so true."

In hospitals, she says, more supports are required to ensure that the spiritual needs of Indigenous patients are respected.

And of course, she says, there are additional health care needs because of the pandemic and the way it has changed the lives of people on the First Nation.

Chief DuckChief was an Aboriginal family counsellor in the public school district before she ran for leadership of her First Nation. "I'm really worried about how COVID has impacted our school-aged children," she says. It has created gaps in their education, she says, and their anxieties have been fuelled by the summer's wildfires and the discovery of unmarked graves at the residential schools.

"All across Turtle Island, you just have that compounded grief and trauma," says Chief DuckChief.

"I'M REALLY WORRIED ABOUT HOW COVID HAS IMPACTED OUR SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN. IT HAS CREATED GAPS IN THEIR EDUCATION, AND THEIR ANXIETIES HAVE BEEN FUELLED BY THE SUMMER'S WILDFIRES AND THE DISCOVERY OF UNMARKED GRAVES AT THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS."

- LYNN KENORAS-DUCKCHIEF



Lynn Kenoras-DuckChief

ANNIE BERNARD-DAISLEY, Chief of We'koqmaq First Nation in Nova Scotia and past president of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association, says violence is a top concern for Indigenous women in her region.

"There's so many missing Aboriginal women in our communities and across the nation," says Chief Bernard-Daisley.

There has been a national inquiry into the deaths and disappearances, but "what kind of emphasis is the government actually putting on the safety and the well-being of our Indigenous women in this country?" she asks. "When somebody else goes missing in our nation, it's up to us as community members and family members and friends to try to pull our resources together to help her."

Indigenous women are always the second or third thought for the federal government, says Chief Bernard-Daisley. "There's going to be a lot of money needed to address the Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry."

On top of that, Indigenous women need more support in court, she says. "I see a lot of blatant systemic racism in our judicial system and barriers that are created for Indigenous women."

There needs to be more assistance for mental health issues, says Chief Bernard-Daisley.

The reserves must have clean water, she says, the pace of social reform and the reform of the child welfare system must be accelerated, and there must be money targeted to the search for unmarked graves at former residential schools.

And if the funds are not provided to "teach the true history (of colonization) and if you don't teach about treaties," says Chief Bernard Daisley, "we're never, ever going to get anywhere near ending racism in our country."

Denise Cook is co-chair of Manitoba Moon Voices and a member of NWAC's board of directors. Ms. Cooke says Indigenous women have been giving identical messages to governments for generations but "it doesn't fall on ears that are open to hearing."

Indigenous women have many needs, she says, and most of them are not new.

"MMIWG2S+ is huge, and safety for our women is essential to our community's wellness," says Ms. Cook.

There is a need for more safe places for women who are seeking support and shelter from unsafe situations, she says, and the families of many of those who are missing or who have been murdered "still don't know what happened to their loved ones."

Our women need to be able to provide for their families, says Ms. Cook. "They don't get by on what they get from income assistance. It's always a struggle. And that compounds so many other things including health care, housing, education, and involvement with child welfare."

The National Inquiry called for a universal basic income, she says, and that should be a priority.

Ms. Cook is also concerned about the environment. "It's at a crucial point and we have to be mindful of what we are leaving our future generations."

And, she says, there needs to be a real focus on supporting Indigenous people who have experienced historical trauma and the effects of that trauma.

"A lot of that work needs to happen and it's not all on the shoulders of Indigenous women to do that work. It's on everyone for the wellness of our communities."

**"THERE'S SO MANY MISSING
ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN OUR
COMMUNITIES, AND ACROSS
THE NATION. WHAT KIND OF
EMPHASIS IS THE GOVERNMENT
ACTUALLY PUTTING ON SAFETY
AND THE WELL-BEING OF OUR
INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN THIS
COUNTRY?"**

- ANNIE BERNARD-DAISLEY



"INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARE OVER-REPRESENTED IN THE HOMELESS CRISIS THAT IS CURRENTLY AFFLICTING YUKON. THE RENT IS SO HIGH AND THAT'S A HUGE BARRIER TO BEING ABLE TO AFFORD A PLACE TO LIVE. OTHER BARRIERS INCLUDE DISCRIMINATION, RENTAL HISTORY, AND INCOME LEVEL."

- BERNIE SCARFF





DENISE COOK is co-chair of Manitoba Moon Voices and a member of NWAC's board of directors. Ms. Cooke says Indigenous women have been giving identical messages to governments for generations but "it doesn't fall on ears that are open to hearing."

Indigenous women have many needs, she says, and most of them are not new.

"MMIWG2S+ is huge, and safety for our women is essential to our community's wellness," says Ms. Cook.

There is a need for more safe places for women who are seeking support and shelter from unsafe situations, she says, and the families of many of those who are missing or who have been murdered "still don't know what happened to their loved ones."

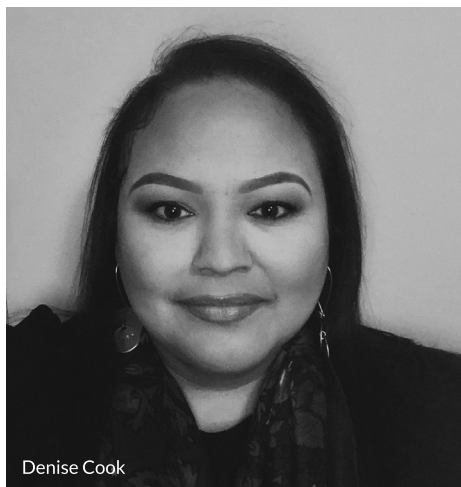
Our women need to be able to provide for their families, says Ms. Cook. "They don't get by on what they get from income assistance. It's always a struggle. And that compounds so many other things including health care, housing, education, and involvement with child welfare."

The National Inquiry called for a universal basic income, she says, and that should be a priority.

Ms. Cook is also concerned about the environment. "It's at a crucial point and we have to be mindful of what we are leaving our future generations."

And, she says, there needs to be a real focus on supporting Indigenous people who have experienced historical trauma and the effects of that trauma.

"A lot of that work needs to happen and it's not all on the shoulders of Indigenous women to do that work. It's on everyone for the wellness of our communities."



Denise Cook



"OUR WOMEN NEED TO BE ABLE TO PROVIDE FOR THEIR FAMILIES. THEY DON'T GET BY ON WHAT THEY GET FROM INCOME ASSISTANCE. IT'S ALWAYS A STRUGGLE. AND THAT COMPOUNDS SO MANY OTHER THINGS INCLUDING HEALTH CARE, HOUSING, EDUCATION, AND INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD WELFARE."

— DENISE COOK

BERNIE SCARFF, the vice chair of the Yukon Aboriginal Women's Council, says three issues are top of mind for Indigenous women in her region as voting day in the federal election draws near: housing, health care, and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG).

Indigenous people are over-represented in the homeless crisis that is currently afflicting Yukon, says Ms. Scarff.

A recent study that looked at one night in April in Whitehorse found that 85 per cent of the people who did not have a roof over their heads were Indigenous, she says.

"The rent is so high and that's a huge barrier to being able to afford a place to live," says Ms. Scarff. "Other barriers include discrimination, rental history, and income level."

Many of those who cannot find homes are single mothers with children and those escaping domestic violence, she says.

"And for people on social assistance, says Ms. Scarff, "the monthly choice is often whether to pay rent or to put food in the table."

In terms of health care, there is a massive need in Yukon for addictions treatment and a safe injection site. "Drug addiction is a huge crisis up here," she says.

Meanwhile, Indigenous people need to be able to comfortably access the justice system, says Ms. Scarf. Racism and poverty continue to play major roles in exposing First Nations women and girls to risk of violence, she says.

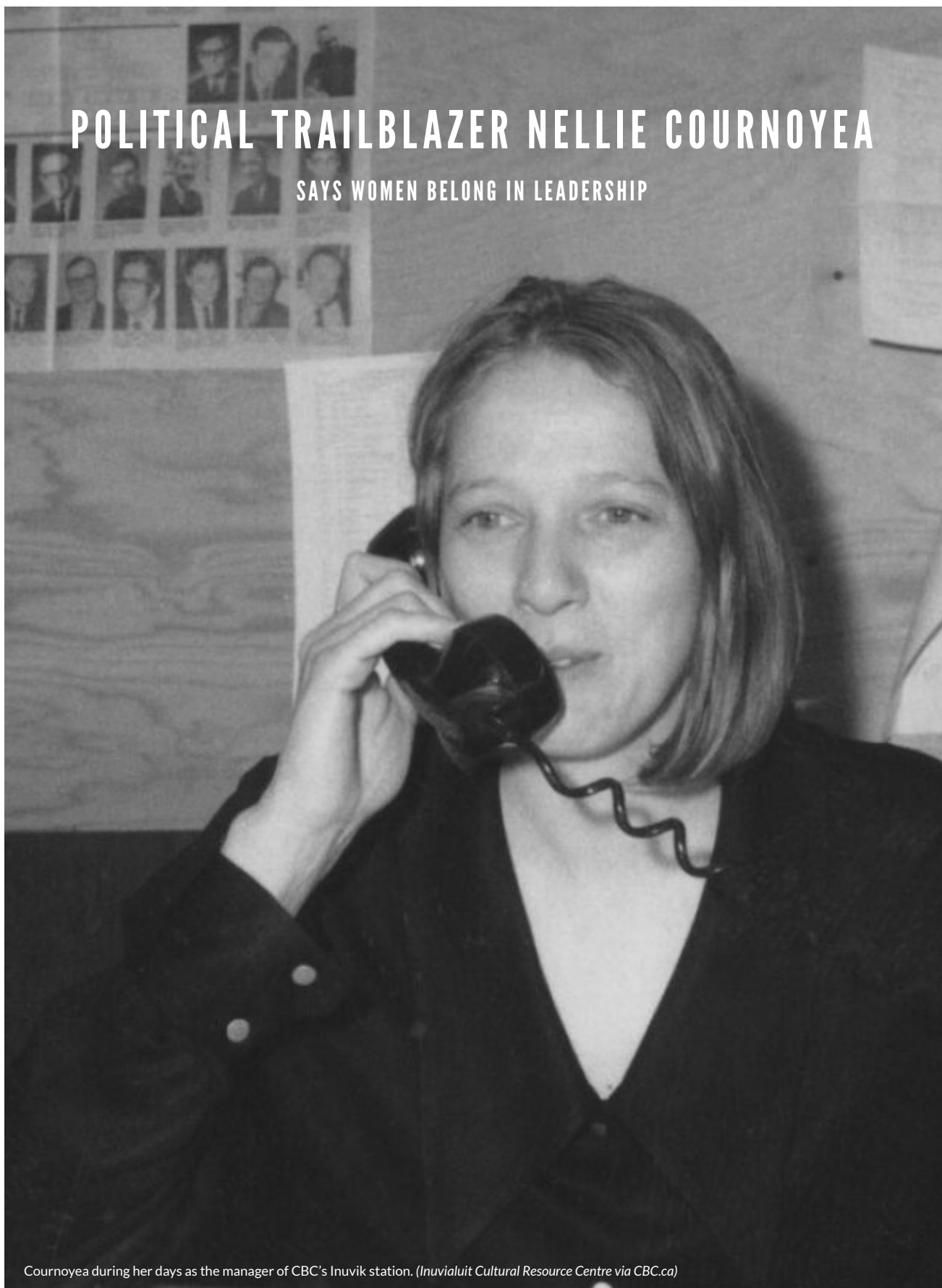
"There should be funds for safe transportation or affordable transportation for women and girls and Two-Spirited people," she says.

Public education about the number of Indigenous women and girls who are murdered or go missing needs to increase. "People across the country need to know what's going on," says Ms. Scarff.

"Many First Nations women are paving the way in addressing these issues ... MMIWG, poverty, homelessness, reconciliation, residential schools, addictions, education, health, and racism. We all need to listen and react with open hearts and minds."

POLITICAL TRAILBLAZER NELLIE COURNOYEA

SAYS WOMEN BELONG IN LEADERSHIP



Cournoyea during her days as the manager of CBC's Inuvik station. (Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre via CBC.ca)

POLITICAL TRAILBLAZER NELLIE COURNOYEA SAYS WOMEN BELONG IN LEADERSHIP

A trailblazer for Canadian women in politics says women are the ones who get things done, whether it is within the family or in government institutions.

Nellie Cournoyea, who is of Inuvialuit and Norwegian heritage, was elected premier of the Northwest Territories in 1991. She is a residential school survivor who was the first Indigenous woman to be elected premier of a province or territory in Canada.

And she has seen much change in her 81 years, including a slow but discernible increase in the number of women in political roles, especially in the North where women traditionally hold an important place in the social hierarchy.

"If you talk to a lot of the men, you know the dependence they had on the women in the community," Ms. Cournoyea said in a recent interview from her home in Tuktoyaktuk. "It was very dominated by family needs. And so women were always paramount, as far as I could see."

Ms. Cournoyea was raised in the traditional lifestyle of the Inuvialuit, hunting with her family along the coast of the western Arctic Ocean.

"We've been people who were very self-sufficient," she says, "living basically on our own good training to survive and forage for food and get the best out of how we lived."

It was during those early years that Ms. Cournoyea says she began to develop an understanding of her obligations to her people.

"Even though we weren't in town, or in the central area, all the time, to be part of the whole community, we were taught to take part and do things when everyone gathered together in the summertime," she says. "We didn't talk as though it was about politics. It was your responsibility to your community, your family, and what's happening. We just solved the problems ourselves."

The Indigenous people of the North understand that they are interconnected, says Ms. Cournoyea. "We're not a group of people who live alone. We're all related to



each other. And, if you do try to look after your family, and if you're doing well, then other relatives are really praying for you to help them too. So, there's a little political regime that starts there."

Ms. Cournoyea says the greatest challenges for leaders from the North in recent decades has been helping the people adapt to the rapid pace of change, and helping them maintain confidence within themselves as the world shifted around them.

People from the South have constantly been coming up with plans for improving life in the Arctic, well-meaning or otherwise, she says, and it all had to be done in a hurry.

The gas industry was developed. The fur trade ended. The environment changed rapidly and dramatically.

All of that probably could have happened with fewer negative impacts if there had been true involvement of the people who were living in the North, says Ms. Cournoyea.

"But that's not the way it was."

People who live off the land know what must be done to survive, but in the political sphere there is always an incentive to keep your presence known and that leads to a lot of "let's fix it," says Ms. Cournoyea.

Politicians outside the Arctic try to make decisions for the people who live there and do so as a well-organized and sophisticated political force.

So, being a leader in the North, she says, means trying to keep local people involved in those types of negotiations and convincing them they should not give up even if the strength of the outside voices seems overwhelming.

"It's giving people the confidence that they are the ones that can do it, rather than saying, 'well, it's impossible.'"

Ms. Cournoyea says being a woman in leadership flows naturally from her upbringing.





"When you come from a traditional background," she says, "it's not somebody else who tells you what your place is. And, certainly, growing up I have always been very aware of the importance of women in the household."

Ms. Cournoyea says roles were divided according to gender but different tasks did not make one sex superior to the other. "We always respected the knowledge of people—the knowledge of the men who were the hunters and the knowledge of the women who looked after the family including looking after the men. They had to support the family as a whole."

Women throughout her lifetime have always done what needed to be done, says Ms. Cournoyea who, even in her 80s remains involved in public life as Chair of Nutrition North.

"Women are generally always looking after the family and looking after the needs of survival, even today," she says. "And, if you look at the institutions and see who's actually running them, who's doing that everyday role, you will see it's women."

In the North, says Ms. Cournoyea, "there are very many women who are running the country."

Indigenous women who are considering a career in politics, should "start small," she says. "Start at a community level, taking part in committees and educational institutions. That's where you get your feet wet and you'll learn how far you can push the envelope, and how to push the envelope, because you're dealing with the outcome of a lot of negative things that have happened over the period of the last 100 years."

You don't have to aim to be prime minister, says Ms. Cournoyea.

"There's so many things that are political even at a very community level," she says. "And women have always been a big part of it—not just a political part, but a real part—in trying to get us to where we are today."

So women who aspire to political leadership "should just go for it," she says. And, above all, "retain your sense of humour. Laughing is good, singing is good."

"START AT A COMMUNITY LEVEL, TAKING PART IN COMMITTEES AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS. THAT'S WHERE YOU GET YOUR FEET WET AND YOU'LL LEARN HOW FAR YOU CAN PUSH THE ENVELOPE, AND HOW TO PUSH THE ENVELOPE. THERE'S SO MANY THINGS THAT ARE POLITICAL EVEN AT A VERY COMMUNITY LEVEL."

- NELLIE COURNOYEA



Cournoyea in Inuvik, in January 1972. (Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre via CBC.ca)

EXTRAORDINARY INDIGENOUS WOMEN

DISCUSS THEIR REMARKABLE POLITICAL LIVES

“There **needs** to be a fundamental shift in attitudes around **Women** and their participation in politics and in society. We **need** to see more **Women** being mentored. We **need** to acknowledge that they can do the job just as well as men, or any person **regardless** of how they **identify** in terms of their gender.”

– SHERRY ANTONE

Within these pages, you will read stories of strong Indigenous women who have taken the courageous leap into political leadership, whether at the local, provincial, territorial, or national level.

Although their numbers are growing, they are still very much in the minority around council chambers and in the seats of legislative assemblies.

It was a lack of women in politics that drove Sherry Antone to become a campaigner for inclusion.

Ms. Antone, who is a citizen of the Oneida of the Thames in southwestern Ontario, is the Ontario director of Equal Voice. She is an advocate for the rights and interests of First Nations people and has spent most of her career being a voice for social change.

Ms. Antone has been a policy adviser to both a Grand Chief and to a Regional Chief. She has also held jobs in the administration of her own community.

“As a young woman who was venturing into First Nations politics, women were not very visible in either mainstream or First Nations politics, which really drove me into the line of work that I like to do, and also drove my interest in wanting to participate in politics,” says Ms. Antone.

“Having that voice and having that opportunity to see yourself in that role is important. But also to be a person at the decision-making table and having influence is extremely important,” she says. “And I think that, for Indigenous Peoples—although not all Indigenous Peoples hold this view—the Canadian political system is a place to voice their opinions or to be part of the decision-making table.”

One of the biggest barriers preventing women from entering politics, she says, is a lack of support.

“There are not a lot of women who are encouraged to run in politics, whether in a First Nations community or at the municipal, provincial or federal level,” says Ms. Antone. “There’s not a lot of mentoring or financial support.”

In addition, she says, women still bear the primary burden of childcare.

As a result, politics is a very male-dominated world. That is a colonial construct, says Ms. Antone.

The Haudenosaunee, for instance, have clan mothers who hold important roles in political decisions, she says. “It’s been forgotten that women hold a natural place in the decision-making and politics overall.”

More women, and more Indigenous women, are running for political positions, says Ms. Antone.

In Ontario about one in every five First Nations communities is now served by a female chief.

“So it’s growing, but we’re still not there’s still not at parity in terms of gender,” she says. “There needs to be a fundamental shift in attitudes around women and their participation in politics and in society. We need to see more women being mentored. We need to acknowledge that they can do the job just as well as men, or any person regardless of how they identify in terms of their gender.”

Let’s meet some of the strong Indigenous women who have become political leaders in Canada.



Melanie Mark

NEW DEMOCRAT MLA FOR
VANCOUVER-MOUNT PLEASANT

B.C. Minister of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport

When Melanie Mark was elected to sit in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, she became that province's first female First Nations MLA.

It took until 2016 for a jurisdiction where six per cent of the population is First Nations to say a First Nations woman would serve at the provincial level.

When she got there, there was no playbook to follow. "Let's put it into perspective," Ms. Mark, who is now the B.C. Minister of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport, said in a recent interview. "You go to work every day and you're the only one ... It's pretty lonely."

It means she is often expected to single-handedly right the centuries of injustice brought against First Nations people. That is, of course, unrealistic, says Ms. Mark, who is Nisga'a, Gitksan, Cree, and Ojibway.

She says she does not ever expect individuals to change things on their own. "I always talk about paddling together."

And although being the only female First Nations MLA and Cabinet Minister can be challenging, she says, "it's also extremely empowering and invigorating and the best thing that I've ever done in my life."

Ms. Mark, who has a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Simon Fraser University as well as a Criminology Diploma from Douglas College and an Advanced Executive Certificate from Queen's School of Business, says she ran for the New Democratic Party because she was frustrated by what she perceived to be the inertia of the previous B.C. Liberal government.

"Six weeks on the job (as the then Minister of Advanced Education, Skills and Training) I got to make a difference, which is the reason I got into politics," she says. "I got to implement a province-wide program to make it tuition-free for former youth in care to go to any public post-secondary college and university in British Columbia, including the Native Education College."

Ms. Mark said she could have retired that day feeling good about the difference she had made in the lives of young people in the social welfare system.

"That's what I think public policy is all about and what politicians should be doing," she says. "I know for a fact that almost 2,000 young people are now getting a chance to thrive because we opened the door ... just by the stroke of a pen saying the minister approved it, the minister advocated for it. That is the reward and legacy I want to leave behind."

Ms. Mark's riding of Vancouver-Mount Pleasant contains part of the city's Downtown

Eastside where she grew up. Her mother, who was once homeless and lived out of a shopping cart, is now 16 years clean and sober. "I go to work each and every day to make people's lives better and to advance social, economic, and environmental reconciliation," she says.

The Minister says she is the descendant of "briefcase warriors," the Nisga'a, who fought for their rights at negotiating tables. "As First Nations people, we have been advocating and fighting for our rights for generations. No matter how many obstacles are in our way, no matter how many times we are knocked down, my mom and family and Elders have taught me to get back up again."

In the end, she says, it's family and love that's got her through the day. "I just bring that to work; I bring my heart to work. I fight because I know that people's lives are on the line. The hardships in my life gave me a swell of empathy. I'm fighting for people like my mom and my siblings who were in care. I know that many of us Indigenous women have that warrior spirit."

Ms. Mark says that Indigenous women bring a unique voice to the political table because they have faced and survived violence and injustice. They are also excelling at colleges and universities across Turtle Island, but more importantly, they are the life givers and natural nurturers, who want our loved ones to thrive.

"I think that Indigenous women have an inherent right to be leaders, and to be advocates, and to be fierce and to change some of the public policy that impacts our lives, whether it's at the municipal level, at the provincial level, or the federal level," says Ms. Mark.

"There aren't many of us, so it will be lonely," she says to other Indigenous women who are thinking about politics. "You have to surround yourself by amazing people who will remind you that you're not alone. You have to keep paddling, even on days that you want to give up, because there's too much riding on it and all of the people who are expecting you to be their voice are relying on you to fight for them."



Leah Gazan

NEW DEMOCRAT MP FOR
WINNIPEG CENTRE

Leah Gazan has taken her fight for the rights of Indigenous people from the peaceful protests of Idle No More to the floor of the House of Commons.

Ms. Gazan, whose mother is Lakota and Chinese and father is a Jewish Holocaust survivor, is running to serve a second term as the New Democrat MP for the federal riding of Winnipeg Centre. She first took the seat in 2019 by defeating Liberal incumbent Robert-Falcon Ouellette.

Before her life in Parliament, she supported Idle No More and advocated for a Bill introduced by NDP MP Romeo Saganash that would have required Canada's laws to be in harmony with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

"I was born into politics," Ms. Gazan said in a recent interview. "I grew up in an activist family my father was a CCFer (member of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, a forerunner to the NDP) and so was my mother. I don't remember a time in my life, even as a child, not fighting for a cause to advance human rights and a better world for all."

Ms. Gazan says she celebrates the power that she has as an Indigenous woman.

"I am resilient," she says. "In spite of all the things that have been put in our way to take us down, I am here and I am strong."

She says she focuses on that resilience, and the strength of her ancestors, and the privilege she has been given to be in a position of decision-making as she does her job as MP. "I lift up the voices of people in these spaces."

Indigenous women bring their history and their traditions to the work of politics, she says.

"One of our sacred duties that I was taught in my teachings was to protect life, all life, and that includes water," says Ms. Gazan. "As a sacred water carrier I take that very seriously, and that's influenced much of my work in the climate justice movement and the Indigenous human rights movement."

Being able to fight for those protections, she says, has been the greatest honour of her life. But she also says she enjoys the part of her job that takes her into her community.

"It's a community that I adore, rich with some of the best frontline leaders—grassroots leaders—in the country, rich with creative ideas and thought."

As she knocks on doors in advance of voting day, Ms. Gazan says she appreciates hearing the views of all her constituents, even those who say they will be casting a ballot for someone else.

"I had to take down two powerful men to get in this position," she says. One was an MLS who held the riding provincially for 15 years and the other was the incumbent MP.

"When I started on this journey, people were saying, 'I don't know if it can be done.' Don't let anybody tell you it can't be done," says Ms. Gazan.

If you are an Indigenous woman who is thinking about running for politics, she says: "Just do what you need to do every day. Don't focus on winning. Focus on doing the right thing, staying true to your values, staying true to who you are."

**"ONE OF OUR SACRED
DUTIES THAT I WAS TAUGHT
IN MY TEACHINGS WAS TO
PROTECT LIFE, ALL LIFE, AND
THAT INCLUDES WATER. AS A
SACRED WATER CARRIER I TAKE
THAT VERY SERIOUSLY, AND
THAT'S INFLUENCED MUCH
OF MY WORK IN THE CLIMATE
JUSTICE MOVEMENT AND THE
INDIGENOUS HUMAN
RIGHTS MOVEMENT."**

— LEAH GAZAN



Nahanni Fontaine

NEW DEMOCRAT MLA,
ST. JOHNS, MANITOBA

The lack of Indigenous female voices in the Manitoba legislature irked Nahanni Fontaine into running for office.

It wasn't until April 2015, when Amanda Lathlin was elected to be the representative for The Pas-Kameesak, that a woman of First-Nations decent took a seat in the provincial House.

"That really annoyed me and it offended me as an Indigenous woman, as one of the original peoples of these territories," Ms. Fontaine said in a recent interview.

So, when the next election rolled around in 2016, she decided to run.

Even the campaigning was a challenge, she says. "Non-Indigenous people would say, 'are you only going to care about Indigenous people and Indigenous issues?' And the first time I was asked that, I thought, well that's a weird question. Do you ask that of white men who come to your door? Do you ask white men if they're only going to care about white men?"

The public is accustomed to seeing politics as a sphere for white men, says Ms. Fontaine. It shakes things up, she says, to see it breached by Indigenous women or black women, or gender-non-conforming people.

"I faced violence during my first campaign, with the campaign manager of the Conservative candidate threatening me and swearing and saying, 'she's gonna effing get it.' I had to be escorted out of a candidates' forum."

Ms. Fontaine says she attributes that reaction to the fact that Indigenous women's bodies and spaces are routinely subjected to violence.

"Either it's physical violence, or it's racism and misogyny," she says. The colonial legacy manifests itself in the lives of Indigenous women, no matter where they go, and politics is no different, says Ms. Fontaine.

But Indigenous women, she says, also bring their culture and their history to politics.

"I don't go into the chamber, or any space I occupy, as a politician. I don't go in as Nahanni Fontaine. I go in as an Indigenous woman who comes from a long line and history



of matriarchs," she says. "I come from this history in this ancestry, where Indigenous women were the ones that allowed our culture and our language and our people to survive. They resisted colonization."

What that means says Ms. Fontaine, is that she will always remain true to who she is, and do what is right, and stand in her own truth. "Because that's my ancestry, that's in my blood."

Indigenous women in politics are routinely dismantling the system, she says, and some of the things she has done in the legislative chamber violated existing norms.

"I'm trying to execute change so that the next women that come along, things are easier for them," says Ms. Fontaine. "I think that Indigenous women are warriors. I think that we're amazing. And no matter what space we occupy, we bring that ancestry with us."

The best part about being a politician, she says, is being the voice for your people in a space where they have not been before.

There are opportunities to deliver Members' statements in which she has a chance to acknowledge people and different organizations.

"I'm proud of being able to acknowledge and lift up our women in a space where they're never even seen," says Ms. Fontaine. "And there's something very special about seeing Indigenous women in our communities get excited about politics now because they see themselves reflected in politics. That can be transformative. It's transforming democracies, not only for Indigenous women but for all peoples."

Politics can be a scary place, says Ms. Fontaine.

"The day that I announced I was running, I was terrified. And then getting on the campaign trail, I was terrified. And then, facing the things that I faced, I was enraged and terrified. And then I got elected, I went into shock. I was like 'what's going on?' And in my first day in the House, I was like, 'how did I get here?' she says. "But each stage teaches you something about yourself. If politics is what you want to do, if you believe that that's your path, to be scared or nervous or shy or unsure is normal. Even the strongest among us went through those emotions. And yet, because we're Indigenous women, we can persevere and get through anything."



Jody Wilson-Raybould

INDEPENDENT MP FOR
VANCOUVER-GRANVILLE, B.C.

Jody Wilson-Raybould was born into a political family and understood, even as a child, her obligation to give back to her community.

Her father, Bill Wilson, is a hereditary chief, and Ms. Wilson-Raybould is a member of We Wai Kai Nation. Her Kwak'waka name is Puglaas, which roughly means 'woman born of noble people.'

"I was essentially raised to be a leader, to contribute my skills and abilities, whatever those are, back to my community to ultimately help to improve quality of life," Ms. Wilson-Raybould said in a recent interview.

That sense of duty drove her to get a law degree, then to run to be a Regional Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and eventually to go into federal politics, where she has held the seat of Vancouver-Granville for the past six years and was Justice Minister for much of that time.

Ms. Wilson-Raybould, who recently released a book called *Indian in the Cabinet*, has opted not to run in the upcoming election. It is a decision she says she feels good about, and she is in a happy place.

"I was raised with a set of values and principles around inclusion and equality and justice that led me to the various roles that I've held," she says.

The blatant suppression of Indigenous Peoples led her to look for ways to speak out, and for venues where she could advocate for their advancement. A seat in Parliament gave her that podium.

Ms. Wilson-Raybould says she went into federal politics, not just to address Indigenous issues but to address the reality of Canada as a democracy, as well as "the place of marginalized people, social justice issues, and the environment."

It was not an easy ride. Many of the challenges she faced has been front-page news. But there were obstacles even at the less public, day-to-day level.

"We still have a long way to go in terms of equality and inclusion in this country," she says, "and that's not just as an Indigenous person but as other marginalized communities, as women."

Federally, far more men than women hold the job of MP.

"It's better in the Indigenous world in terms of Indigenous women taking on significant amounts of leadership roles," says Ms. Wilson-Raybould.

But the fact that she was the chief law officer of the country and still felt marginalized in terms of race and gender "is indicative of how far we still have to go."

That is a huge challenge, she says, and prevents many qualified women, and Indigenous women, from running for office. "The status quo is entrenched to a really significant degree" but, she says, "people are fighting against it. It's changing."

Diversity is critical in politics, says Ms. Wilson-Raybould. It leads to better decision-making, she says.

"I'm proud to be an Indigenous woman who was raised with a concrete set of values and principles and a significantly different worldview, about the fundamental interconnections and interrelationships between and among all things," she says, and that has fostered within her a consensus-based approach to decision-making.

A lot of white, male political leaders have adopted the motto that 'diversity is strength,' she says, but not many of them know what it truly means and they put up resistance when diversity could lead to change. "Change happens when the leaders actually listen to the diversity," she says. "I haven't seen that. I haven't experienced that."

It's one thing to have an Indigenous person run for a political party in a riding they can win, says Ms. Wilson-Raybould. But, after they are elected, it is equally important, she says, that political leaders listen to their views, not just on Indigenous issues but on issues that affect all Canadians.

On a positive note, Ms. Wilson-Raybould says she feels she was able to accomplish many important things throughout her six years in federal politics.

"When people come up to me on the streets,

and in airports, and say that they've watched me and they believe it's imperative that I've been in the positions I have been in, and that I have in some way contributed to inspiring them to get involved in public life and public service, that is incredibly important," she says.

"I was the first Indigenous Minister of Justice, but I know I'm not going to be the last. So that's rewarding for me."

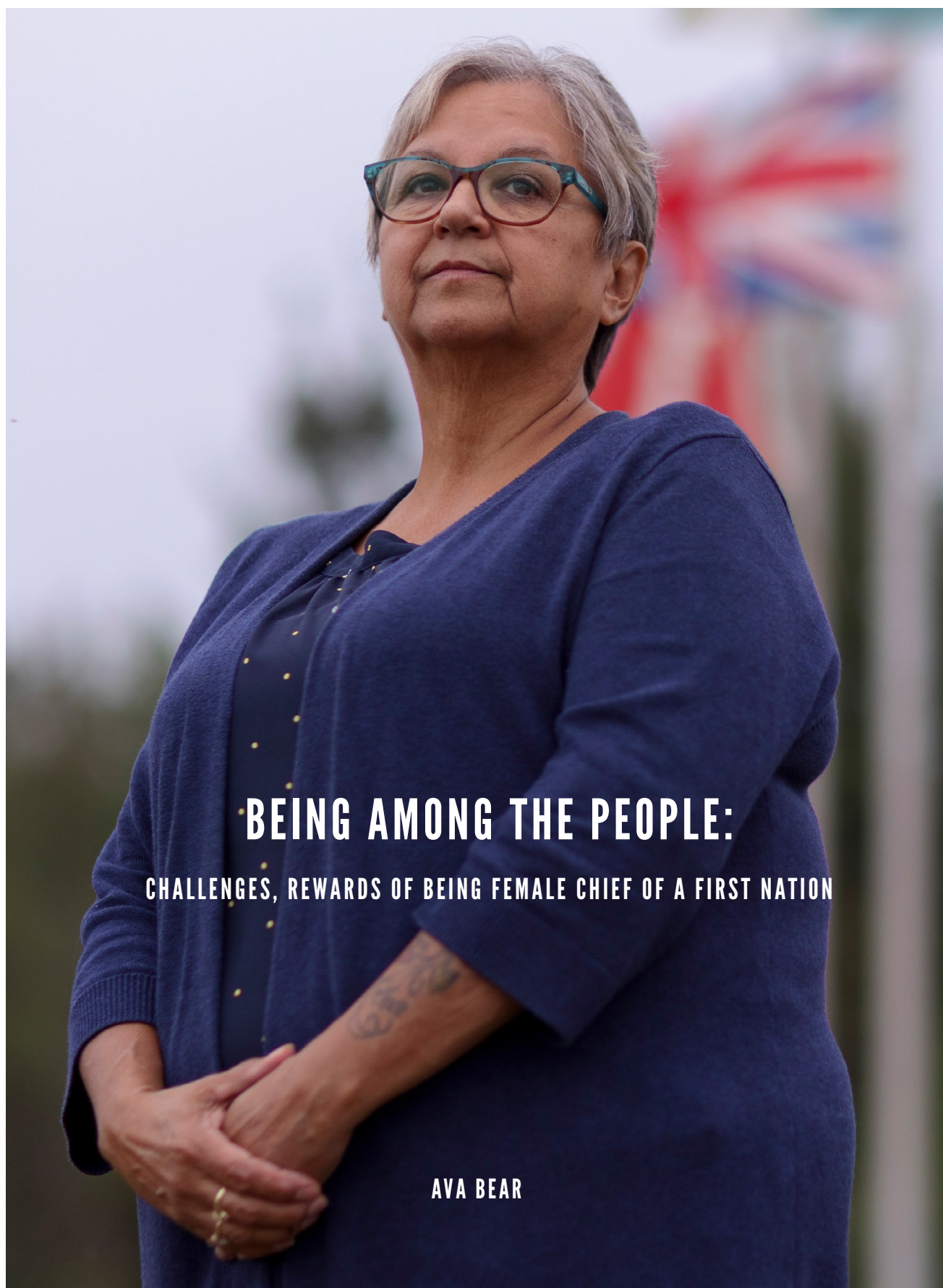
Her grandmother, she says, taught her that all voices matter and that everybody in a community has a role to play and must not have barriers put in their way.

"If you're passionate and you believe in something and you have a plan, work hard for it. And know that you belong around any table or in any (position for which) you want to put your name forward. Indigenous people have a place at any of those tables, or in any part of political life at any level."

**"KNOW THAT YOU BELONG
AROUND ANY TABLE OR IN
ANY (POSITION FOR WHICH)
YOU WANT TO PUT YOUR NAME
FORWARD. INDIGENOUS PEOPLE
HAVE A PLACE AT ANY OF
THOSE TABLES, OR IN ANY PART
OF POLITICAL LIFE AT
ANY LEVEL."**

— JODY WILSON-RAYBOULD





BEING AMONG THE PEOPLE:
CHALLENGES, REWARDS OF BEING FEMALE CHIEF OF A FIRST NATION

AVA BEAR

The best part of Ava Bear's job as Chief of Muskoday First Nation is the time she spends with her people.

The worst part, she says, is having to refuse a request for help because the community's budget is limited. "Not being able to fix everything" is a challenge, Chief Bear said in a recent interview. "People expect the Chief and Council to be able to solve all the problems, and we don't have all the answers."

But there are also rewards, like the day late last month when she rose early to offer happy words to a busload of Elders from her community as they headed out on a short trip. They asked that she be there to see them off.

First Nations governments, like all governments across Canada, are predominantly run by men. But the number of female chiefs and councillors is growing. Today, about 20 per cent of chiefs of the 652 First Nations across Canada are women, and female councillors are becoming more common.

The new head of the Assembly of First Nations is a woman for the first time in that organization's history. And the six-member Muskoday Council headed by Chief Bear has more women than men.

Indigenous women who are considering entering the political sphere usually start at the local level, and Chief Bear's political journey speaks to the type of life Indigenous women can expect to lead if they choose to take on community leadership.

Women bring a different perspective to politics, says Chief Bear.

"We definitely think differently than men. I know everybody has to think about the economy, we have to think about growing jobs, and all that sort of thing. But, we raise the children. So, I think we think more about the children and the young people. Maybe that's not even fair to say. But there is a difference."

Ava Bear was elected in March to be Chief of Muskoday, a First Nation of Cree and Salteaux people near Prince Albert in Saskatchewan with a population of about 2,000, roughly 600 of whom live on the reserve.

But she has spent decades in public service, some of them as a political leader on her band council and on the Saskatoon Tribal Council, and some of them as director of a community health centre.

In addition to her own children, who are now grown, Chief Bear and her husband have helped to raise seven others, some of whom lived with them for eight years. So, she has had a busy house, in addition to her community responsibilities.

She is 65 and had been counting down the days to her retirement when the incumbent Chief of Muskoday announced he would not be running again.

"A few people talked to me and asked me if I'd consider it," she says. "When she was a young member of the tribal council, 'my dad had always, always encouraged me to run for chief. Every election he would ask: 'Are you going to put your name forward this time for chief?'"

So the idea was always in the back of her mind but she had almost given up on it because of her age. "Then, when this opportunity presented itself, I thought, 'sure why not?'"

Chief Bear was first elected to sit as a councillor in Muskoday when she was in her 30s. Then came an opening for vice-chief of the Saskatoon Tribal Council. She ran for it thinking she would never get elected but ended up winning. She was the only woman at that table.

"At the time, my son was still quite young and I commuted almost daily to Saskatoon. And it was hard on me and hard on him ... and, you know, winter driving conditions in Saskatchewan are not the greatest," says Chief Bear.

Family comes first, she says. "So I just decided not to run again. But, I did really enjoy that position. It was an urban portfolio, it was brand new and we were doing exciting things, breaking ground, and it was really enjoyable."

When she left the Saskatoon Tribal Council, she served as a councillor in Muskoday for several more years, and then decided she needed a break so she went to university and got her social work degree. When she completed that, she took the job at the community health centre.

In 2003, she took a stab at provincial politics and ran for the New Democrats in the Batoche riding.

"I had to go to all these little towns and villages and knock on people's doors," she says. "And I distinctly remember one person



**"THE WORLD NEEDS WOMEN IN PLACES OF AUTHORITY,
IN PLACES OF DECISION-MAKING." - AVA BEAR**

telling me that I had three strikes against me right off the bat. One, I was running for the wrong party. Two, I was a woman. And three, I was First Nations."

Some candidates may have been shattered by that kind of racism and sexism. But Chief Bear says she would rather have people tell her what they are thinking so she can address any misguided views head on.

"I felt like I did a lot of education sessions on that journey because so many people said to me, 'well, why do you think you can run. you don't even pay taxes,'" she says. "Well, of course, we do pay taxes and we do contribute to the economy. So a lot of people got a little education about taxes during that campaign. But I really enjoyed the process."

In the end, she placed second, losing by fewer than 600 votes.

Now that she is Chief of Muskoday, there is no typical day, though she does spend a lot of time in meetings. Since she was elected in March, she says, there have been three or four days when she did not have meetings to attend.

Many of them are done by Zoom because of COVID, which is sad, says Chief Bear. "I miss the face-to-face, I do," she says.

All councillors have portfolios. Chief Bear is required to know what is happening in each of them as well as her own, which involves the 'hub,' which is called the Muskoday Intervention Circle where risks are identified and resolved before they can become crises.

And, of course, much of her day involves solving problems brought to her by community members. They run from septic systems that need pumping, to finding someone a ride to the hospital, to enhancing community safety.

"People want to feel safe in their own homes," says Chief Bear. "Because we're so close to an urban centre—we're only 15 minutes away—we have problems with addictions and with gaming, gang affiliations. ..."

Chief Bear says she is someone who likes to govern with plenty of feedback. "So we made a decision that we're going to meet quarterly with our membership, which is on a more regular basis than in the past, and is another method to keep people informed."

"The best part of my job is the people and being with the people," she says. "I enjoy

that, getting out to the events, the social things, and being with them."

The hardest part of the job is saying no to people when there is no money available to pay for the things they think they need. "At the same time," says Chief Bear, "you want to build independence, you want to help people become self-sufficient and try to empower them to be the best they can be."

What would she tell another Indigenous woman who is considering a life in politics? "I would say go for it. The world needs women in places of authority, in places of decision-making."

**"WOMEN BRING
A DIFFERENT
PERSPECTIVE TO
POLITICS. WE
DEFINITELY THINK
DIFFERENTLY
THAN MEN."**

-AVA BEAR





BARRIERS THAT KEEP INDIGENOUS PEOPLE FROM POLLS

GRADUALLY BEING LIFTED

THE NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA (NWAC) HAS LAUNCHED A CAMPAIGN TO GET INDIGENOUS WOMEN TO THE VOTING BOOTH AS CANADA DECIDES WHICH PARTY WILL LEAD THE NEXT GOVERNMENT IN OTTAWA.

And Elections Canada has introduced a series of measures, some of which are new for this election, to make it easier for Indigenous people to cast a ballot.

"Our voices need to be heard on issues of importance at the national level," says NWAC CEO Lynne Groulx.

"It's also a human right. And we need to exercise that human right," says Ms. Groulx. "We were, for a long time, not allowed to vote because of the Indian Act. So, if we want to have our voices heard and we want government to develop programs and to take rights seriously, then we need to exercise that democratic right."

NWAC has provided resources, workshops, and a comprehensive voter guide to make sure everyone knows when, where, and how to vote in this federal election. It has also graded the different parties on their responses to important Indigenous women's issues. The results have been posted on nwac.ca.

"Canada's electoral system is a system of Western colonization, but it's the system we have. One of the ways to make important policy and legislative changes is to have our voices represented in Parliament," says Ms. Groulx.

David LeBlanc, the Assistant Director of Stakeholder Mobilization at Elections Canada, said in a telephone interview that Indigenous electors have historically faced barriers to registering and voting in federal elections.

Elections Canada is not tasked with convincing people they should cast a ballot. But the agency is responsible for making it as easy as possible for those who choose to vote to do so.



Recognizing that Indigenous electors typically face more obstacles than other Canadians, says Mr. LeBlanc, Elections Canada has introduced measures aimed specifically at First Nations, Métis, and Inuit voters.

For instance, many Indigenous people are not fluent in either English or French. So the core 16 Elections Canada documents—the ones that explain where, when, and how to vote—have been translated into 16 Indigenous languages.

And there is a program called CanTalk through which speakers of Indigenous languages can arrange to have someone simultaneously translate their interactions with polling staff on election day.

Another voting obstacle for Indigenous Peoples has been identification.

"Research shows Indigenous electors often aren't aware of the ID necessary to vote and, secondly, don't have access to ID in general," said Mr. LeBlanc.

What is required to be eligible to vote, he says, is a "tier one" piece of identification, which is government-issued ID with a name, address, and photo. In the past, that has meant something like a driver's licence or passport. But this year, for the first time, band membership cards with photos serve as tier one ID.

Band membership cards without photos can serve as "tier two" forms of identification. But, in that case, they must be accompanied by another piece of information like mail sent to the voter's address or the information card that tells registered voters where the polling station is located. A complete list of accepted pieces of "tier two" identification is posted on the Elections Canada website.

In addition, people who have no identification can still vote if they arrive at the polling station with someone who can vouch for them and who can prove their own identity and address.

Other aids that have been introduced for Indigenous voters include the Indigenous elder and youth programs, says Mr. LeBlanc. Indigenous elders and youth can be hired by the returning officer to be at the polling station on voting day to make other voters their age feel comfortable.

There is also something called the Community Relations Officer Program in which the returning officer hires someone

"CANADA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM IS A SYSTEM OF WESTERN COLONIZATION, BUT IT'S THE SYSTEM WE HAVE. ONE OF THE WAYS TO MAKE IMPORTANT POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE CHANGES IS TO HAVE OUR VOICES REPRESENTED IN PARLIAMENT."

— MS. GROULX

to improve registration and voting in specific communities. They help Indigenous communities understand the services that Elections Canada offers, including language services.

Returning officers have also been tasked with the job of reaching out to every Indigenous community, including those in the Far North, to see if they would like to have a polling station, and to determine what would be the best polling option.

"Polling sites aren't going to be the right fit every time," said Mr. LeBlanc. "Some communities might be well served by a polling site in the neighboring town or the community might choose to vote by mail or other options."



The returning officers, said Mr. LeBlanc, are “charged with being flexible and creative and coming up with the solutions.”

The Indigenous vote has fluctuated significantly in recent years. Elections Canada keeps no statistics on how many Indigenous people cast ballots. But, in the first four elections in this century, the population of people living on reserve who turned out to vote in federal elections hovered between 40 and 48 per cent—well below the national turnout.

Then, in the 2015 election, 61.5 per cent of the on-reserve population arrived at polling stations to cast a vote.

Some “returning officers were actually caught off guard,” says Mr. LeBlanc. In some cases, polling sites ran out of ballots and returning officers had to drive to other communities to pick up extras. “This obviously wasn’t a great scenario because it caused delays,” he says.

To ensure that does not happen again, he says polling stations are now supplied with enough ballots for the entire community.

The Indigenous vote was down slightly in 2019 from 2015 levels. But the numbers still topped those of the other four elections of the 2000s.

“It’s been a fascinating time” to be playing a role in helping Indigenous voters exercise their democratic rights, says Mr. LeBlanc. “It’s impressive how engaged people have become in a relatively short time.”

**“IT’S BEEN A
FASCINATING
TIME TO BE PLAYING
A ROLE IN HELPING
INDIGENOUS
VOTERS EXERCISE
THEIR DEMOCRATIC
RIGHTS.”**

- DAVID LEBLANC





TO *V*OTE OR NOT TO *V*OTE

CAN CASTING A BALLOT HELP CHANGE THE COLONIAL SYSTEM FROM WITHIN?

To vote or not to vote

It is a question First Nations people have wrestled with since they were granted the right, in 1960, to take part in federal elections without losing their Indian status and band membership (see *A Brief History of First Nations Voting Rights*).

Just because they CAN vote, does that mean they SHOULD?

Some, like Pam Palmater, a Mi'kmaq lawyer, professor, and activist, argue that it is "a bitter irony" to ask First Nations people to vote in a governing system premised on their ongoing oppression.

When First Nations people vote federally, they are helping to choose the next government and cabinet ministers who will breach their Aboriginal, treaty, and land rights, Dr. Palmater has said in a magazine editorial.

And Arthur Manuel, the revered political leader and activist who grew up on the Neskonlith Reserve in British Columbia and died in 2017, says Indigenous people who accept the colonial system of government in Canada are endorsing their own impoverishment.

But others say the colonial system of governance is the one that exists at the present time, and the only way to make change is by participating in it.

Shayla Stonechild, a Métis and Nehiyaw Iskewew (Plains Cree Woman) from Muscowpetung First Nation is the founder of Matriarch Movement, a non-profit organization dedicated to highlighting Indigenous voices. Ms. Stonechild says the choice to vote is personal and will be decided according to one's own individual sovereignty.

But "I believe that I will always vote in the federal election because I feel like that's a part of me taking my power back," says Ms. Stonechild. "I want to see change happening within my local community but also in Canada. I feel like our vote is one way to hopefully make a shift within our own community and also in the country."

The colonial system, which has sought to suppress Indigenous voices, must change,

says Ms. Stonechild. "Participating in a colonial system is just one way of potentially actively dismantling it from within."

Leena Minifie (Gitxalla), who is part British and part Tsimshian and is the founder of Ricochet Media, says she is of two minds.

Without exercising the right to vote, it is difficult to contribute to policy change, says Ms. Minifie. And in urban areas, she says, Indigenous people are more politically active because they see those effects more directly.

"When I was living up North, I felt a little bit more disconnected," says Ms. Minifie. "When you're in your own traditional territories, voting doesn't really change your day-to-day practice and living."

But then there are times, she says, when Ottawa is trying to impose change that will affect Northern communities for decades or even centuries.

"So should Indigenous people vote?" she asks. "Yeah, if they think the federal government's gonna make a big imposition and try to change their lives and push things on them without their consent. Then they need a voice, or they need to elect somebody who can be at the bargaining table."

Fallon Farinacci, a Métis woman from Manitoba who lives in the Niagara Region and was a member of the Family Advisory Circle of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, says she understands the reasons why an Indigenous person would choose not to vote.

But "our voices do matter," she says, "and for me as a parent, it's important to vote right now because I have children."

As an Indigenous person, says Ms. Farinacci, she thinks of the welfare of seven generations. "We are essentially setting the path for our children's future. We have that power to do that. And so, that's the importance of voting."

**"OUR VOICES DO MATTER.
FOR ME AS A PARENT, IT'S
IMPORTANT TO VOTE RIGHT
NOW BECAUSE I HAVE
CHILDREN. WE ARE ESSENTIALLY
SETTING THE PATH FOR OUR
CHILDREN'S FUTURE. WE HAVE
THAT POWER TO DO THAT. AND
SO, THAT'S THE IMPORTANCE
OF VOTING."**

- FALLON FARINACCI



KCI-NIWESQ

is a monthly magazine of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC). Its objective is to highlight the work of the organization and to tell the stories of the Indigenous women of Canada.

NWAC, which was founded in 1974, is a national Indigenous organization representing First Nations (on and off reserve, with status and without), Métis, and Inuit women, girls, and gender-diverse people in Canada. Its goal is to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well-being of Indigenous women within their respective communities and Canadian society.

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

LYNNE GROULX
NWAC Chief Executive Officer

EDITOR

JOAN WEINMAN

WRITER

GLORIA GALLOWAY

DESIGNER

KYLA ELISABETH

KCI-NIWESQ



NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA MAGAZINE

