

#IDLENOMORE

#IDLENOMORE

AND THE REMAKING OF CANADA

KEN COATES



University of Regina Press

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*This book is dedicated to Aboriginal children across Canada.
May they be inspired by Idle No More and understand
the potential for a better future.*

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Idle No More event: Elsipogtog Solidarity
rally in Vancouver on October 18, 2013.

Photo: Lukasz Szczepanski

PREFACE

QUIET NO MORE

Prairie winds often start gently. At first, the long prairie grasses and stands of wheat and canola begin to sway, almost imperceptibly. The softness in the onset of these winds is like a caress that, even on a cool fall day, carries more promise than risk. The movement of air is hardly noticeable, but it is there, possessing power and substance. Perhaps it is that, the absence of danger but the presence of real power, which makes prairie winds so invigorating.

Prairie winds rarely stay calm. At times, they die down completely, bringing near silence to the land and leaving the impression that the power has dissipated, that the threat has disappeared, and that all will stay as it is. More often, the breeze picks up slowly, the soft swaying of foliage replaced by a noisier rustling, a persistent background sound that heightens unease and speaks to an untapped power. You can feel the wind at these times; it is strong without being severe, bold but not ominous. You can see this iteration of the wind, or so it seems. It is that which pushes the prairie grasses and sways the roadside trees.

When it further intensifies, the wind can be staggeringly strong. In winter, it whips the dry, western snow into a frenzy, pushing a white wall across the landscape that obliterates the vast skies and reminds

humanity of its smallness and vulnerability. In summer, it picks dirt up off the farmers' fields, and thus the wind gains a body with taste and grit, driving dust into eyelids and through tightly clenched teeth. In this form, the wind can usher in a storm, complete with rainclouds and torrential downpours. Midday skies turn black. Rain or hail beats down ferociously. The wind can terrify us as it threatens to uproot safe and comfortable lives.

The temptation to hunker down, to avoid the threatening storm, is overwhelming.

Is it surprising that the prairie wind, with its many faces and great strength, also carries a transformative power that can allow us to see the world in a different light? The storm clouds pushed along by this wind provide relief for the lightning, sharp and powerful, that illuminates the sky with a subtlety that defies description. So soft and pervasive is the reach of this light that colours change hue and landscapes are seen anew. And the same wind that brought in vast banks of clouds also creates small openings: light peaks through in strange and beautiful ways. Fear is replaced by wonder as the storm clouds that moments ago seemed full of danger become things of beauty. Black and imposing on the top, they are radiant and sunlit on the bottom. It is here, in a landscape transformed, that one of the most fundamental lessons of prairie life is learned: consider the wind; do not turn away from it. Do not hunker down, and do not assume the worst. Turn toward it and wait for the light. In that moment of luminescence, those precious seconds during which the clouds part, you will see light, power, and beauty rise from below.

The world recently experienced a personification of the prairie winds: *Idle No More*, a movement as surprising and as transformative as a sudden prairie storm. Frightening for some, difficult for most to understand—including those at the hundreds of events that sprang up across Canada in 2012 and 2013—*Idle No More* arose as does a perfect prairie storm. Unleashed on a surprised nation, propelled by forces that, like the gentle winds, turn in a matter of seconds into a formidable blizzard, *Idle No More* swept across Canada with stunning speed and strength.

As a political movement, it had almost everything: a powerful message, legions of supporters, and a hungry media eager to forage off the turmoil. Everyone in Canada knew Aboriginal people were

angry. Aboriginal political leaders have described the poverty and despair that engulf many of their communities. Academics have described the hardships, cultural dislocation, and historical injustices that shape First Nations, Métis, and Inuit realities. Journalists have chronicled the glue-sniffing, health crises, domestic violence, over-stuffed penitentiaries, and political unrest that percolates across the country. In an Aboriginal political world defined in the public's eye by conflicts at places like Burnt Church (New Brunswick), Gustafsen Lake (British Columbia), Caledonia (Ontario), the Oldman River (Alberta), and Oka (Quebec), anger seemed both just and inevitable. That hundreds would take to the streets in protest was far from surprising.

But as political protests go, key elements were missing. Idle No More had founders but no leaders. There was no manifesto at first, no real organization, and an almost complete absence of an effort to manipulate, aggregate, or intimidate. At first glance, the arrival of hundreds of Aboriginal people in shopping malls and on street corners seemed deliberately threatening. Yet the people were singing instead of yelling. They didn't demonstrate but danced. They had a purpose, but to many people it seemed deeply buried or, at least, confused. This was a protest, if it was that at all, of mothers and children more than warriors and activists. All events associated with Idle No More were astonishingly calm. Culture mattered more than politics.

Idle No More started in Saskatchewan. Like a prairie breeze, it picked up strength, as fast as a gathering storm. The country hunkered down, preparing for and assuming the worst. This, it seemed, was the long-promised storm of the century, the much-anticipated Aboriginal uprising that had lain, for decades, in the grass, building into a dangerous and potentially violent crescendo that would shake the very foundations of the Canadian system.

But the violence never materialized. Instead, decades of anger manifested as celebration and determination, not denunciation and vitriol. Rocks did not fly. Buildings were not destroyed. The police were bystanders, even encouraging bystanders. There were no stand-offs. Hundreds of thousands of Aboriginal people and their supporters came into the streets in seeming anger with Canada and Canadians. But peace broke out. The lightning bolts that were Idle No More brought illumination not destruction. Canadians saw something that they had rarely seen before—conviction tied to culture,

hope arising from sorrow, determination wedded to a sense of injustice, family connected to political protest.

Canadians watched Idle No More with an odd mix of wonder, worry, and incredulity. Street protests have again become common in the Western world. This is, after all, the age of G-8 and G-20 protests, the inchoate Occupy movement, various and continuous environmental demonstrations, and mass uprisings in Europe related to the continent's economic despair, particularly among the young. Aboriginal protest is also commonplace. Each year, there are dozens of comparatively minor conflicts, including blockades and demonstrations, with occasional large struggles, like the long-standing standoff at Caledonia, Ontario, and the 2013 shale gas protests at the Elsipogtog First Nation in New Brunswick. But none of these protests foreshadowed or laid the groundwork for Idle No More.

Not much time has passed since the last wave of Idle No More demonstrations swept across Canada. Some observers have already described the movement as a spent force, somehow classifying it as a failed political gambit. After all, these critics might say, the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has not budged from its entrenched positions on key development, environmental, budgetary, or political matters. And the country seems to have moved on. In the winter of 2012–2013, Idle No More conversations engaged the whole nation. A year later, it seemed like a lost cause.

But Idle No More is far from that. It may prove to be the most important and transformative event in recent Canadian history, on par with the rise of women's rights in the 1960s, the sovereignty movement in the Province of Quebec, and the gay pride movements of the 1970s and 1980s. In the decades to come, Idle No More will be analyzed by hundreds of academics in theses, dissertations, and scholarly articles; and it will find pride of place in first-person accounts and journalistic renderings. These works will capitalize on the passage of time, the perspective produced by distance, and the opportunity to collect a great deal of additional evidence.

#IdleNoMore is not a book of the types described above. It is, instead, a personal reflection on a process that I think will redefine Canada and, most certainly, transform Indigenous politics and affairs in this country. It is inspired, as well, by the insights and passion of *The Winter We Danced: Voices From the Past, the Future, and the Idle No*

More Movement, a book that celebrates and shares Aboriginal views from and about the movement.¹ Let me put my thoughts—my bias, if you will—on the table at the outset. I believe that Idle No More *is* (not *was*) a process of fundamental importance. The collective events and gatherings that gained the nation's attention in 2012–2013 represent, in my mind, the largest and most sustained demonstration of Indigenous identity and cultural determination in Canadian history. The movement, powered by hundreds of loosely connected, largely young, and predominately female Aboriginal organizers and activists across the country, represents an assertion of cultural survival and political determination. The people of Idle No More will be quiet no more. Idle No More is far from gone, anything but temporary, and still relevant. It has, in my opinion, unleashed new power, confidence, and determination among Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

###

My first encounter with Idle No More came via the radio. I was driving south from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, heading back to Saskatoon. At the time, the Conservative government was pushing through its now infamous omnibus bill, Bill C-45, a true doorstopper of a piece of legislation, ostensibly designed to implement the 2012 budget. The program host was interviewing four Saskatchewan women, two of whom later became founders of Idle No More. I don't recall which two of the four founders—Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean, and Nina Wilson—were being interviewed that morning. But I do remember their message, and it was simple: Bill C-45 had gone too far, particularly regarding a series of environmental and First Nations issues. They—the four women—had had enough, and they knew that others shared their views. A teach-in was scheduled for Station 20 West in Saskatoon.

The interview was a low-key item. I thought little of it at the time and expected nothing to come of it. After all, mass movements and even successful political protests are rarely founded on a nuanced analysis of several sections of a massive piece of impenetrable federal legislation. Fundamental injustices bring people to their feet, not subtle rewritings of complex laws. Unease about the shortcomings of federal consultations is hardly the poetry of protest, the antecedent to

anger. This protest was about changes to the Navigable Waters Protection Act, a piece of legislation that fewer than one Canadian in a hundred had ever heard of, let alone read, before November 2012. Such is not, I reminded myself, the stuff of revolutions.

Gordon, McAdam, McLean, and Wilson had a name for their gathering—Idle No More—and a clear goal: to articulate western Aboriginal frustration with the Harper government’s legislative strategy, particularly relating to Indigenous and environmental issues. In this, they were hardly alone. Many Canadians were, in the fall of 2012, upset about the government’s cavalier approach to Parliament. The New Democratic Party and the Liberal Party of Canada were in high dudgeon about the prime minister’s determination to usher through sweeping changes under a single piece of legislation. Editorial writers and columnists across the country bemoaned the abuse of Canadian democratic traditions.

Idle No More. I remember thinking that the name was odd, when I first heard it. But then, like virtually all other observers, I also assumed that this protest—small, localized, and unfunded—would disappear overnight. It did not disappear. Within a few days, Idle No More had garnered nationwide attention. A couple of weeks later, Idle No More was known around the world. Virulently anti-Harper and anti-government at one level, it was also culturally rich, its participants articulate and passionate.

###

Idle No More is a highly significant movement whose full social impact and influence on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Canada will unfold over decades, not months. I struggle to understand the movement, even as I admire its strength, peacefulness, and transformative potential to mobilize and empower Indigenous peoples. As a non-Aboriginal man who watched from the sidelines and did not participate in any of the organized activities or demonstrations associated with Idle No More, I am, in many ways, far removed from the centre of the movement.

I have, however, worked on Aboriginal issues for decades. One of the most influential events in my life was the 1973 publication of *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow* by the Yukon Native

Brotherhood; it was the document that launched the Yukon land claims process and started the radical transformation of the Canadian North. I was in Grade 11 at the time, attending F. H. Collins High School in Whitehorse. My first publication—a letter to the editor of the *Whitehorse Star*—was a brief commentary on Aboriginal land claims. I wrote that the government should sign with the First Nations, not expecting it would take twenty years to get to the point of signing. I subsequently studied Aboriginal issues at university and have written about Aboriginal concerns, served as a consultant with Aboriginal organizations and governments, taught university courses on Aboriginal topics, and had hundreds of conversations with Aboriginal leaders, students, activists, and community members. I do not like being described as an “expert” on Aboriginal affairs. I am, instead, always a student, and I have been blessed by the willingness of many Aboriginal people to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives with me.

#

*IdleNoMore* has two origins. The book started with the arrival in Saskatchewan of Bruce Walsh, the newly appointed director of the University of Regina Press. I was re-introduced to Bruce, a renowned marketer of books, through a mutual friend, Aurèle Parisien, a professional editor, cultural critic, and Renaissance man of the highest order. Recently arrived at his new post and visiting me in Saskatoon, Bruce made it clear he was eager to revitalize academic publishing in Canada. In the spring of 2013 he asked me a simple question: “If you could write one book for the University of Regina Press, what would it be about?” “Idle No More,” I answered, without hesitation, not because I knew I had all the answers about this strange and remarkable movement but because I had so many unanswered questions. The contract arrived in the mail a few days later. It turns out that he was not kidding. Bruce also insisted on the book being ready within a year.

However, I didn’t set to work straight away. Instead, my decision to proceed came a few months later, over dinner with friends Mike Rudyk and Cherish Clarke in Whitehorse. I knew Mike from our work together on a series of television documentaries for Northern Native

Broadcasting. He was now working as a cameraman for CBC Television in Whitehorse. His wife, Cherish, is a talented young Aboriginal woman, a dancer and singer, a cultural leader among the Taku River Tlingit First Nation. These two are the kind of young Aboriginal people, well-educated, determined, and committed to their community, who are redefining the country from the inside. As we ate and chatted that evening, our conversation quickly turned to Idle No More.

Cherish, it turns out, was a local organizer for Idle No More events. She became a primary spokesperson for the movement in the Yukon, speaking to the press and to the crowds gathered at the Whitehorse meetings. The experience was empowering. Cherish has been politically active for some time, serving as the president of the Liberal Party in the Yukon and as the co-chair of the Aboriginal Peoples Commission of the Liberal Party of Canada. She is precisely the kind of young, engaged, powerful, and determined Aboriginal person who is working at the community and regional level to re-imagine the future of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Cherish related that she had mixed feelings about her experience organizing Idle No More events. She was empowered by the participation of young people and inspired by the wisdom and determination of the Elders. She took delight in the support Idle No More received from a small number of non-Aboriginal people. But she felt real pain from the attacks directed at her by critics of the Idle No More gatherings. Cherish experienced great pride in the peaceful and constructive nature of the events, and she had trouble comprehending how some people could be so furious at First Nations people for presenting their case to the community at large. More than anything, the angry words directed at her personally reminded her of the depth of anti-Aboriginal sentiment held by some Canadians.

That evening with Cherish and Mike reminded me of something very important: politics and political movements start and end with people. Ideas, words, documents, and policies are all part of the political process, for Aboriginal people and for others. But politics spring from lived experience, not simply from political structures and organizations. Cherish and Mike live in one of the most promising corners of the country in terms of Aboriginal aspirations and conditions. With the Yukon's modern treaty—The Council for Yukon First Nations Umbrella Final Agreement—as a base, the territory

is transforming the way Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people live, work, and interact. I grew up in Whitehorse and consider myself fortunate many times over to have been raised there; the Whitehorse that Cherish and Mike live in is a dramatically different and, in my opinion, better place than the town of my youth.

But the world for First Nations peoples in the Yukon—and in all of Canada—is far from perfect. Systemic cultural and economic struggles overlay personal crises and challenges. The resurgence of Indigenous cultures of which Cherish and Mike are part is offset by continued language loss, private tragedies, and poverty. To Cherish, in particular, Idle No More was an overwhelmingly optimistic process. Political protest was part of the movement, to be sure, and Cherish's frustration with the Government of Canada was evident to me that evening in her detailed critiques of legislation and policies. But Idle No More, to both Mike and Cherish, transcended politics, in both the small "p" and large "P" sense of the term. The movement was an assertion and demonstration of Aboriginal culture—even more, a celebration of cultural survival.

Cherish Clarke and Mike Rudyk are remarkable individuals, gifted with the talent and determination to put their ideas into action and the courage to display their values and commitments in public. They would be the first to point out that they are far from alone, and both argue that the brilliance of Idle No More lies primarily in bringing hundreds of young, powerful, and passionate Aboriginal Canadians into the public realm. The character and commitment of Aboriginal people—Cherish and Mike multiplied hundreds of times—is the real story of Idle No More. Forget, if you can, the high-profile elements of the Idle No More movement: the protests in Ottawa, the meetings with Prime Minister Harper, and subsequent efforts by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal activists to co-opt the name and power of Idle No More for legitimate, but narrower, purposes. Do not look for the meaning of Idle No More in the halls of Parliament or on the editorial pages of the nation's leading newspapers. Instead, connect the movement with an individual like Cherish Clarke—a dancer, singer, activist, and marvelous young Aboriginal person who simply wants a better life for her family and First Nations people in her community and across Canada. Find the real story of Idle No More in the hearts and minds of tens of thousands of Aboriginal people in Canada who

are determined to take control of the future, to reassert identity, and to celebrate cultural survival.

#

As readers will quickly see in what follows, my emotions relative to the movement, like most non-Aboriginal Canadians, have run the gamut. I was nonplussed by the launch, confused by the episode with Chief Theresa Spence, distressed by the January 2013 struggle between the Prime Minister's Office and the Assembly of First Nations, amazed by the resurrection of the spirit of Idle No More in the early months of 2013, stunned by the tenacity of young Aboriginals heading off on long marches to Ottawa, saddened by the lack of non-Aboriginal interest in these formidable journeys, intrigued by the complex and multifaceted messages in the rallies, and puzzled in the extreme when the promised demonstrations of "Sovereignty Summer" in 2013 fizzled out.

It is hard to explain a movement that was, intentionally, leaderless, inspired by remarkable founders, suffused with a decolonization critique, peaceful, largely comprised of young people, and far more cultural than political. Idle No More's rise and sudden fall seems, on the surface, to be like the amorphous and ultimately sadly irrelevant Occupy movement. The range and diversity of the rallies, however, bear no resemblance to any comparable movement in Canadian history. At the same time, the absence of a coordinating body and internal organization seems to doom it to political oblivion.

I must say that the general, non-Aboriginal Canadian response to the movement was not a surprise to me. For every person who has found common cause with the movement's environmental message and who supports Idle No More's cultural spirit, there are many others who mock the movement's name and express nervous fear about the scale and spontaneity of the uprising. As well, during Idle No More's upsurge, the media struggled to make sense of this emerging movement that lacked a manifesto, a fixed leadership, or deliberate intent and management.

In the pages that follow I will offer my view of what happened, gleaned from hundreds of YouTube videos, thousands of Facebook postings, and tens of thousands of tweets, newspaper accounts, and

other evidence of a movement that refused to follow the rules of both Canadian politics and global protest. For now, however, let me tell you what I think Idle No More was and was not. Some writers, such as Judy Rebick, have compared Idle No More to the Black Power movement in the United States and the struggles for gay rights and women's rights across North America. There is something to be said about these connections. The gay rights movement shares Idle No More's elements of pride and assertiveness, but it sprang from the reality of deep oppression and the outright suppression of homosexuality. The women's movement arose from a long history of marginalization, and the tactics bear some resemblance to Idle No More, but what Idle No More lacked in structure the women's movement offered in empowered leadership and organizational strength. The Black Power movement was spontaneous and lacked formal direction, but it was much more violent than Idle No More, which had peacefulness at its core.

Idle No More coalesced at a time of rapidly growing confidence among Aboriginal peoples in Canada. A series of political arrangements, including the constitutional entrenchment of Aboriginal and treaty rights in 1982, and dozens of favourable court decisions, from *Sparrow* and *Calder* to *Marshall* and *William*, have given real and substantial powers to First Nations.² Moreover, tens of thousands of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis young people have been attending colleges and universities, discovering common cause on campus and a lively critique of Canada in many of their classrooms, often as a result of the growing number of Aboriginal scholars and teachers. Many Aboriginal groups have money—the nosh that drives the power system in Canada—from recent land claims agreements and other settlements. As the court victories have mounted up, as corporations have begun collaborating with Aboriginal communities, as successful Indigenous businesses have risen to prominence, as governments have made concessions to gain support for development projects, Indigenous peoples in Canada have realized that a power shift is under way. In 2010, when Canada signed the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted by the United Nations in 2007), Aboriginal peoples in Canada saw that the whole world had embraced not just their rights but their very existence. If few non-Aboriginal Canadians paid much heed to this declaration, for Aboriginal people it meant a great deal.

Another contributing factor to the Idle No More movement is the collective and individual memory evident in Aboriginal communities: the people remember the stories of their parents and grandparents. In one of the most profound expressions of the power and effectiveness of collective memory, Aboriginal people have demonstrated a shared understanding of the oppressive effects of the Indian Act, the destructive influences of residential schools, and the lingering and painful impacts of systemic racism and discrimination. They know, even as Aboriginal achievements accrue, that many in their communities have suffered—and will continue to suffer—grievously. Refusing to turn their backs on their relatives and neighbours, these Aboriginal people seek to transform their personal accomplishments into collective rewards.

To be sure, Aboriginal Canadians were, by 2012, angry in many ways. They were furious at what they perceived to be disrespect from governments and non-Aboriginal people generally. They were angry at the poverty and social distress that plagued many communities. They were frustrated that non-Aboriginal people resisted rather than celebrated their rights, now entrenched in Canadian law. Many were upset with their community and regional leadership and wanted more and better governance within Aboriginal organizations. Despite what many Canadians think, Aboriginal peoples have displayed more distress about corruption and mismanagement in their leadership than any other group in the rest of the country.

But Aboriginal pride was also at the core of the Idle No More movement. Perhaps, I have wondered, it is as simple as this: learning the history of their peoples, both locally and nationally, Aboriginal Canadians came to realize that their very survival, including the persistence of their cultures and values, was one of the greatest success stories in this country's history. In 2012, they knew what happened in the past. They knew the realities of the present. And then they looked around. They saw young and old Indigenous people proud of their cultures, eager to preserve their languages, and determined to press for their rightful place within Canada. When they considered the history of oppression and cultural destruction in their communities and the resilience of Aboriginal cultures across the nation, they could hardly be anything but angry, and proud, and more than a little determined.

This is where non-Aboriginal confusion about the movement comes in. During the first six months of the rallies and celebrations, non-Aboriginal people kept asking what it was that the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples wanted. But that was just it. With the exception of the defeat of the omnibus bill, they were not asking for things. There was never going to be a list of demands or a set of specific complaints, although individuals and groups across the country offered powerful critiques of the nation, its policies and socio-economic systems. In fact, Idle No More was not meant for non-Aboriginal Canadians. It was not an attempt to persuade, convince, or direct political change.

Idle No More, it seemed clear as time went on, was by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people, and about Aboriginal people. For the first time in Canadian history, non-Aboriginal Canadians were relegated to the sidelines. This was not a hundred mini-Okas or mini-Caledonias, two events that pitted Aboriginal against non-Aboriginal people. Idle No More was a series of Aboriginal gatherings; other Canadians were welcomed as spectators and supporters. Herein lies its magic and power. It was the largest and most sustained public demonstration of Aboriginal confidence, determination, pride, and cultural survival in Canadian history. And what a remarkable series of events it was during its inaugural year.

###

Let me end this preface with a story. Early in 2014, I attended a government meeting with fifteen or so politicians and senior officials. The topic—a standard one in much of Canada—was how to produce greater Aboriginal engagement in resource development. The meeting was surprisingly upbeat in that everyone in the room (although some a tad reluctantly) agreed and recognized that First Nations participation was essential. On the several occasions that speakers referred to Idle No More, the reference was greeted by knowing nods from around the table. It was clear that the national conversation had shifted, that the spirit and values of Idle No More represented the new normal in Canada; governments and others quickly realized that Aboriginal assertiveness was the reality going forward. Idle No More had refashioned Canada.

PREFACE

There are those who have been quick to call Idle No More a failure, to describe the movement as poorly organized, unfocused, and without a real point. This view of the movement is wrong on all accounts. Idle No More was stunningly successful and has already shown remarkable staying power, albeit in unexpected ways. Idle No More captured and then unleashed the transformative power of Aboriginal Canada. It showed Aboriginal people that they had real and lasting power. It demonstrated that Indigenous Canadians had a common cause. It changed the vocabulary and the spirit of Aboriginal youth. In November 2012, I was bewildered by the speed of Idle No More. In the fall of 2014, I am amazed at how it has reshaped Canada so quickly. A movement allegedly without a purpose, seemingly without real leadership and organization, and consisting of more drumming and singing than manifesto writing, has most assuredly set this country on a different course.

Canada is changed, Aboriginal Canada is changed, and the country is not going back.



The Founders of Idle No More, from left to right: Sheelah McLean, Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon.

Photo: Marcel Petit of m.pet productions

ONE

MOBILIZING AN AWAKENING

In 2012, the level of frustration in Canada was growing. The Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, had introduced another omnibus bill, Bill C-45, ostensibly to implement the 2012 federal budget. Harper's government had done the same the previous year, lumping dozens of seemingly unrelated items into a single piece of legislation. Each of these bills attracted many critics, but the cacophony lacked focus and smacked, to the external observer, like a relentless series of self-interested complaints. The 2011 outcries across the country fizzled out, pretty much precisely as the Conservatives had hoped and expected.

The 2012 protests seemed destined for the same fate. The 450-page document that is Bill C-45 stuck out in multiple directions. Amendments to the Indian Act would give bands greater freedom to utilize their land. Members of Parliament and civil servants were required to pay a higher share of their pension contributions.¹ Changes to Employment Insurance gave Cabinet more control over program funding, and changes to the Environmental Assessment Act continued the process of "streamlining"—some would say fast-tracking—procedures. There were also shifts in the regulation of wheat; improvements to small-business tax credits; funding for a bridge between Windsor, Ontario, and Detroit, Michigan; changes to the management of hazardous wastes; and new regulations governing Maritime labour.²

The document was hefty, complex, and impenetrable for the average citizen. Political revolutions usually centre on clear and obvious targets: tax increases, program cancellations, major changes in government legislative commitments. Bill C-45 seemed, at worst, like death by a thousand policy cuts, a provocation aimed at many and diverse interest groups and highly unlikely to spark a vigorous national debate. This was Ottawa at its most convoluted. To critics of the Conservative government, the bill was an act of a political bully, forcing legislation that warranted detailed examination and debate onto an unwary country.

Supporters saw it differently. The majority government was committed to cutting the size of government, improving administrative and regulatory efficiency, and implementing the broad agenda set out during the 2011 federal election campaign. To the Conservatives and their fans, Bill C-45 was a piece of legislative house-keeping, tying up relatively small ends and moving forward with initiatives that the government wished to implement expeditiously. Before the middle of November 2012, most Canadians took the bill as the unstoppable and not particularly noteworthy action of a majority government that was eager to get on with business.

By November 2012, the Aboriginal complaints about certain pieces of the omnibus legislation—particularly the changes to band control over land and environmental regulations—seemed minor compared to the massive challenges facing Aboriginal peoples across Canada. There were many good reasons for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples to be upset about their position within Canada, ranging from education and health outcomes to the over-representation of Aboriginal people in prisons and difficulties with treaty and Aboriginal rights implementations. Bill C-45 seemed, even to long-time observers of Aboriginal affairs, like a minor irritant at best, and for most people, insignificant.

Four Saskatchewan women—Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean, and Nina Wilson—however, started talking about the legislation shortly after it was introduced into the House. To these women, the bill threatened to further erode Indigenous rights. They were frustrated by the government's policy and worried about the environmental and Indian Act provisions of the legislation. They were also disappointed by the lack of consultation with Aboriginal

Canadians. At first, their actions and behaviour paralleled discussions played out over dining room tables, in offices, and in pubs and cafés across the land. People complain about government. They get angry over new legislation. They have better ideas than the government and policy makers and wonder why their wisdom is ignored.

Gordon, McAdam, McLean, and Wilson decided to do something. This, among all the things that happened over the coming months, was the most radical step. Few Canadians outside of partisan politics step forward and turn their complaints and frustrations into public action. These women, however, organized a gathering in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, to take place on November 10, 2012. They described it as a “teach-in,” an airing and sharing of views about the government’s plans. Drawing a crowd for a non-partisan political event is no easy feat, although it is perhaps easier in the highly engaged political environment in Saskatchewan than in other places. The Aboriginal twist to the protest may also have given the teach-in greater currency; the First Nations and Métis political environment in the province has long been highly charged.

To draw an audience, the organizers set up a Facebook page, hoping that social media would help bring a crowd to the teach-in at Station 20 West, a Community Enterprise Centre in the predominantly Aboriginal community of Saskatoon West. Priscilla Settee, a member of the Cumberland House Cree Nation and a professor of Native Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, booked the space for the gathering. The organizers called the event “Idle No More,” a declaration of the women’s determination that they—and anyone who wanted to join them—would not sit silently while the Government of Canada transformed the foundations of environmental and Indigenous law. Their Facebook page was succinct and without an explicit mention of Aboriginal issues. The Facebook events page, which attracted more traffic than the number of attendees at the meeting itself, announced the upcoming event—one of considerable, but unknown, promise:

This is a grassroots movement for solidarity which welcomes all community members!

Location: Station 20 West, Saskatoon, SK.

Actions to take place:

- 1) Information on Bill C-45
- 2) Forums to voice questions/concerns
- 3) Petition demanding that Bill C-45 be stopped

A rally to oppose the omnibus Bill C-45 which will give far reaching and far sweeping powers to Aboriginal Affairs Minister. This bill also gives OIL and nuclear companies room to devastate the land and environment even further. Due consultation is needed in matters that affect all people.

Our silence is consent!³

Through Facebook, invitations were distributed to almost 3,800 people. Of that sizable number, 357 people indicated that they intended to come to the rally. Another 216 said that they might attend. This was not enough to fill a concert hall, to be sure, but there was a decent indication of interest for a nuanced and complicated political event. Moreover, the event was open to all comers, so the Facebook replies were more a sign of intent than a final tally.

Supporters of the event pushed invitations out electronically, especially via Twitter. Jessica Gordon tweeted on October 30, 2012, “Awesome day of laying the groundwork for rally and petitions opposing #omnibus #billc45 re #indianact please find our fb group #IDLE NO MORE.”⁴ On November 4, Gordon followed up with a critical note to Shawn Atleo, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations: “@shawnatleo wuts being done w #billc45 evry1 wasting time talking about Gwen stefani wth!? #indianact #wheresthedemocracy #Idle-NoMore.”⁵ Gordon kept spreading the word with additional tweets that same day, reaching out to individuals and connecting with other groups, including a number focusing on Aboriginal issues:

@EllenGabriel1 ready to fight #IdleNoMore need to
#wakeup our #grassroots

@jake_dakota @mfiddlercbc I've started a group #IdleNoMore rally to oppose #billc45 first step in mobilizing an awakening.

Mobilizing an awakening #IdleNoMore rally to oppose #omnibus #billc45 first step to larger #treatyrights #indianact #missingmurderedwomen

Others, including Tanya Kappo, a woman from Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 8 territory—who would become an active member of the movement and who was a friend of Sylvia McAdam—also used Twitter to spread the word: “Rally against Bill C45, specifically Indian Act changes. Saturday, November 10 at Station 20 West, Saskatoon, SK. 12pm–2pm.”⁶

A poster was circulated electronically. Not unlike any one of hundreds of such protest announcements circulating in communities across the country each year, it highlighted the event’s focus on environmental issues, Indigenous rights, and the authoritarian actions of the Government of Canada.⁷

The event organizers reached out before the November 10 gathering to generate support for their campaign. On November 7, 2012, Jessica Gordon notified supporters that a petition would be circulated before and at the rally, which would be presented to the House of Commons, and that e-mail addresses of MPs involved in reviewing the bill would also be made public. She wrote that the petition and e-mails sent to MPs would help “create a change in the dialogue and decisions,” and she urged people to “[f]lood the emails of the conservative MP’s who will be reviewing changes to your rights. Tell them you do not agree with the budget implementation Bill C-45 . . . MP’s Jean Crowder, Elizabeth May and Carolyn Bennett are good allies and along with others sit on the Standing Committee of Aboriginal Affairs. It’s your right and they welcome your concerns.”⁸

Nina Wilson offered a similar call for support when she was interviewed on November 19, 2012, at the Indian and Métis Centre in Winnipeg by Trevor Greyeyes, a freelance writer. Responding to a question on what their hopes were, Wilson replied:

The grassroots people . . . are hoping that we can get some talks going. We're also hoping that we can get more people inspired and motivated to speak and to not be afraid to learn . . . The Bill itself is really complicated . . . I can't imagine anybody would want to sit down and read that . . . just for the sake of reading something. So, we're trying to help people . . . to get their voices back so we can . . . have more of a First Nation voice and not just First Nation but an Indigenous voice and a grassroots voice because it [Bill C-45] affects everybody.⁹

Most of the local media paid little attention to Idle No More during the lead-up to the event. However, reporter Ashley Wills, from News Talk 650 CKOM in Saskatoon, reported on the impending rally, noting that the group was worried about how the bill was being rushed through Parliament and was thus "taking a stand," especially against proposed changes to the Indian Act and environmental protections. As Sheelah McLean told Wills, "We feel that we need to do something to slow this bill down . . . We also need to point out the fact that there are changes to Indigenous people's lives that they have had absolutely no consultation about . . . It is definitely taking away protections from our water, from our environment and from our land. It's opening up our natural resources to corporations and companies; these are things that previously had protections."

McLean noted that it was illegal for Aboriginal peoples not to be consulted about proposed legislation affecting the Indian Act, and she stressed that the bill would give "more power to the Minister of Indian Affairs to determine what happens on Indigenous lands . . . I think the biggest problem is, if this is going to be beneficial for Aboriginal communities, why aren't they being consulted on it?"¹⁰

Wills noted where the rally would be held, and she emphasized that MPs had six days to review the bill.

THE LEADERS OF A LEADERLESS MOVEMENT

The organizers behind Idle No More set the movement apart from most other protests and social movements. The four women—Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean, and Nina Wilson—may well be the most unassuming and spotlight-avoiding leaders of a significant social movement in Canadian history. It is the norm for protests to coalesce around a key individual or group, typically charismatic, high-profile, and outgoing individuals who understand that they embody the values and expectations of a broader social group. These four are nothing like that. They are Indigenous and non-Indigenous, motivated by what they viewed as aggressive government action and what their website described as a “legislative attack on First Nation people and the lands and waters across the country.”¹¹

Although the founders made the list of the top one hundred global thinkers of 2013, identified by Foreign Policy in its annual poll,¹² the organizers have deliberately avoided the limelight and have consistently indicated their desire for Idle No More to be understood as a collective and spontaneous action, as opposed to a response to the organizers’ efforts. They have given a surprisingly small number of media interviews and have typically turned attention to local event coordinators. Nonetheless, it is useful to understand a little more about the four remarkable individuals who decided that standing idly by in the face of unwelcome government intrusions on Aboriginal and Canadian interests was unacceptable.

Jessica Gordon, a Cree/Saulteaux woman from Pasqua, Saskatchewan in Treaty 4 territory, has had a long history of community engagement before she became involved in the Bill C-45 protests, working with groups like the Saskatchewan Urban Aboriginal Strategy.¹³ She has a background in business administration, and has completed studies at the University of Regina and the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, and she also has extensive experience in the not-for-profit sector.¹⁴ Like the others in the organizing committee, Gordon was

committed to rallies that were “peaceful, casual—not causing any trouble to the population.”¹⁵ Gordon was the original digital “face” of the rallies, drawing people to the event with #idlenomore.¹⁶

A *nêhiyaw* (Cree) woman from Treaty 6 territory in northern Saskatchewan, Sylvia McAdam was born on the Big River Reserve and is a direct descendant of one of the signatories to the original Treaty 6. Trained as a teacher and lawyer, fluent in Cree, McAdam is strongly engaged with First Nations communities, living on the Whitefish Lake Reserve.¹⁷ She received an undergraduate degree in Human Justice from the University of Regina and an LL.B. from the University of Saskatchewan. She has written and taught on First Nations culture and spirituality, and has published a book, *Cultural Teachings: First Nations Protocols and Methodologies*, for the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre in Saskatoon and the First Nations University of Canada.¹⁸ Her training in the law and her interest in Indigenous traditional practices and territories contributed to her being in a position to mount a powerful critique of Bill C-45.

Sheelah McLean, the only non-Aboriginal of the four women, was born and raised in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, a third-generation member of the settler community. She is a doctoral student at the University of Saskatchewan, and has taught both as a high-school teacher and a university instructor. She has a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education, and a Master of Education with a specialization in Native Studies and Critical Theory. She has been active with Students Against Racism. Her master’s degree, in Educational Foundations, focused on “colonization, racialization, and the effect of these forces on communities.”¹⁹ McLean, and others involved in the first meeting and early activities, highlighted the influences of University of Saskatchewan faculty, particularly Dr. Verna St. Denis, professor in the Department of Educational Foundations in the Faculty of Education, and Dr. Priscilla Settee, professor in the Department of Native Studies. McLean was drawn to the teach-in through discussions with Sylvia McAdam, Nina Wilson, and Jessica Gordon. As McLean later commented in an *Arts & Science Magazine* article in the

spring of 2013, "I knew Sylvia because I'd asked her to speak at a refugee rights rally I organized. She was impressed with its energy and contacted me to do the same against Bill C-45."²⁰

Nina Wilson, of the Three Pole People (Nakota, Dakota, and Lakota) and Plains Cree, is from Crooked Lake Agency, Kahkewistahaw First Nation in Treaty 4 territory in southeastern Saskatchewan. She was a graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan in the fall of 2012, and later went on to graduate school at the University of Manitoba.²¹ She was drawn into the original teach-in through discussions with Sylvia McAdam. She came to the Idle No More movement with a long history of activism. As she noted, "I am always working on things. Always. I guess to live the messages, to live in solidarity with the people, and live with unity, and live with the history, and carry that with me every single day so that there is something for our children to have a good sense of who we are. I am very lucky to have influence and so being able to do that, I do it from the very best place that I can."²²

Idle No More's rally to oppose Bill C-45 took place at Station 20 West on Saturday, November 10, 2012, from noon until 2 p.m. The purpose was clear: raise concerns about the bill, promote a petition calling on the government to back down, and build a community of like-minded Saskatchewan residents upset with the federal strategy. About forty or fifty people attended, well short of the number who responded positively on Facebook (a common occurrence in social media mobilization). The rally had all of the elements of a meeting of scholars, activists, and community members. The speakers at the event included Sylvia McAdam and Sharon Venne, a Cree lawyer who helped with negotiations related to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. There were two New Democratic Party MLAs: David Forbes, representing Saskatoon Centre, and Cathy Sproule, from the Saskatoon Nutana constituency. They were joined by others, including: community activist, Max Morin; Kho-di Dill, a Bahamas-born, spoken-word poet, artist, and University

of Saskatchewan graduate student; and Erica Violet Lee, a *nêhiyaw* (Plains Cree) undergraduate student from the University of Saskatchewan and the cultural coordinator for the Indigenous Students' Council.

The full details of the speeches are not available. Khodi Dill's speech, however, was distributed on YouTube. Dill, who said he was a "non-Aboriginal person but [there] in support," had some strongly worded questions about the bill and the government that wanted to implement it:

If our government values the environment, then why is it bundled into this omnibus implementation bill? If they value the environment, why are they removing protection? Why are we now only protecting one per cent of waterways in this nation? If the government values our First Nations people, then why are significant changes to Indian Act legislation again bundled, almost hidden, within this budget bill? Why was there no consultation, informed consent? And why was there no due diligence if they value First Nations people?

He also read from a poem he composed "in the style of a poet named Gil Scott-Heron who wrote [...] 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.'" Dill said that his poem was written "from the point of view of the Government of Canada, historically, currently, to the First Nations people of Canada," and it includes the following striking images and challenging assertions:

...
See white is the new good,
And brown is the new bad.
White is the new happy,
And brown is the new sad.
So sign this paper, sign this treaty,
We'll keep you around and keep you needy.
Yes sign this treaty, sign this paper