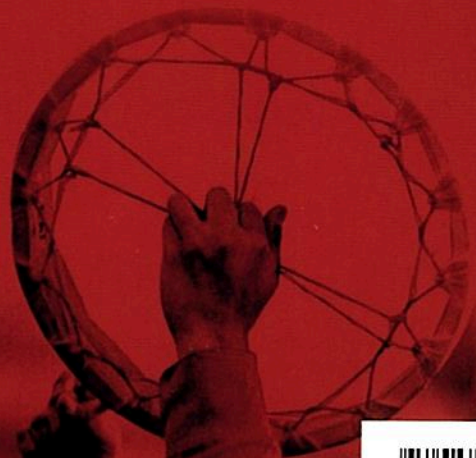


Launched in November 2012 by four Saskatchewan women, Idle No More quickly became the most powerful demonstration of Aboriginal identity in Canadian history. The movement was a rallying cry against generations of injustice, a triumphant song of cultural survival, and a reassertion of Aboriginal pride and self-determination.

**LE NO MORE BEWILDERED MANY.
FACT, MOST NON-ABORIGINAL CANADIANS
SSED THE POINT ALTOGETHER.**

Since the drums have slowed, outside observers have described Idle No More as a spent force. It is anything but.

In this insightful investigation, Ken Coates shows how Idle No More has sparked an empowered and confident generation of youth who will shape the country for decades to come.



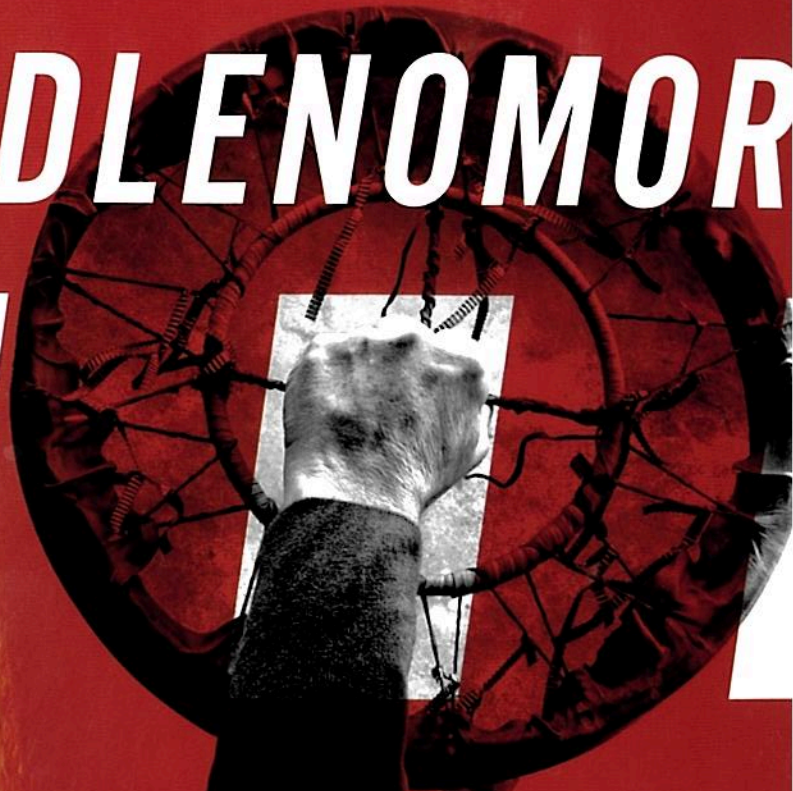
University of Regina Press



#IDLENO MORE AND THE REMAKING OF CANADA
COATES

"A sincere and insightful book."— OVIDE MERCREDI

#IDLENO MORE



AND THE REMAKING OF CANA

KEN COATES



A Round Dance forming on the lawn
of Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

Photo: Ben Powless

THREE **THE ROUND DANCE REVOLUTION**

“And I’m wondering, why is it quiet? Why aren’t our people talking about this? So, I said to myself, I’m responsible for myself, I’m responsible for my children, and my grandchildren one day that I will have. I am educated now. I can do this. I can come and I can share with our people what it is that I understand from this legislation, and let you know what it is that we’re facing. Because whatever we decide to do now, we have to decide it very quickly.” —Tanya Kappo, J.D., Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 8¹

It turned out that the need for a time-sensitive response to Bill C-45 was not the issue or the force around which Idle No More would be galvanized into a global movement. Instead, it would be the cluster of issues, hopes, and sources of frustration brought to the fore by the four founders, and, as it happened, many more women, most with university educations. Pent-up frustrations, unhappiness with traditional Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal politicians, dissatisfaction with “warrior” threats—Aboriginal women ran with the spark that was Bill C-45 and then suffused the Idle No More movement with deep cultural meaning and hope—each individual

event reflecting the particular concerns and cultural norms of the region's, locality's, or event's participants.

Sylvia McAdam, moving back and forth between Cree and English in a speech at Sturgeon Lake, Alberta, on December 3, 2012, discussed the prominent roles and responsibilities of First Nations women: "That's how come, at the time of treaty-making, we are always maintaining we never ceded and surrendered land because women did not give that authority to the men to cede and surrender the land, and that still exists today."² The newcomers, McAdam explained, had with aggressive intent targeted Aboriginal women: "There was something that the European nation brought over here, and I mean not to offend them, but this is fact; it's found in their documents. When they set out to hunt down foxes, rodents, rats, all these different things, they target[ed] the females; they poisoned the nests of those rats, those foxes, anything they considered rodents. . . . [B]ecause we were [thought of as] not human, they took that mentality and targeted the females, the women of the Cree Nation, of all the other Indigenous nations. And when you target the women, you target the nation, and that's what the Indian Act has been doing."³

As she underlined the significance of women to the movement, McAdam encouraged all of her audience at Sturgeon Lake to persevere, to stand up and take part in Idle No More events. And she emphasized the necessity of peaceful protests: "[W]e don't want anyone harmed; this is contrary to our laws."⁴ Thus, the movement continued to emerge quietly, with another meeting, in another town, with a similar message to Aboriginal people—and perhaps especially to women, whose marginalization McAdam emphasized at Sturgeon Lake. The message was succinct: stand up, be counted, and let the government know about Aboriginal anger.

Hundreds of times in the past, movements similar to Idle No More have formed, and then they have mostly collapsed and disappeared. The vast majority of these nascent movements began with a bang but were soon swallowed by existing organizations, had their causes taken up by political parties, evaporated after a flurry of media coverage, or simply vanished as the anger dissipated and the energy faded. This is clearly what happened to the Occupy movement, which capitalized on real angst within Western society but dissolved into irrelevance as quickly as it began. Sustaining purpose is challenging. Most social

uprisings, having captured the attention of a slice of the public's attention, look quickly for a figurehead or come under the sway of a charismatic leader. Many immediately form an organization, raise funds to sustain the activity, or create alliances and strategic plans to keep things moving forward. Movements like the Arab Spring and the anti-globalization movement never found a single leader capable of guiding a broad social group, nor did they coalesce around a single organization. The early environmental movement branched into several organizations, like Greenpeace and the Sea Shepherd Society, demonstrating a broadly based cause that grew and expanded in strength over time.

Other groups—the gay and lesbian rights movement, for example—combine many different elements, from personal support groups to media campaigns, individual and public demonstrations of the cause, and political lobby groups. The Aboriginal rights and justice efforts in Canada already have had a broad base, with arms extending into many areas of interest, including: Indian Act ban and elected chiefs and councils; traditional Elder and tribal governance systems; non-Aboriginal supporters; international advocacy groups; and Indigenous political, cultural, and professional organizations. The Indigenous rights movements have not lacked for spokespeople or access to the media and politicians. Indeed, it hardly seems as though they need any kind of movement or process to draw the plight to the attention of the Canadian public. But they do.

The manner in which the Idle No More movement leapfrogged elected Aboriginal leaders and the usual groups associated with Aboriginal rights in Canada is a significant part of its story, and, I would argue, its success.

This is not to say that Idle No More organizers completely ignore traditional ways of attracting attention to their cause. The first participants in Idle No More rallies and teach-ins clearly intended to persist, and so they soldiered on. Familiar tactics followed the initial meetings: the supporters calling MPs to lobby against Bill C-45, following up with letters and meetings to political and corporate offices. As well, coordinators called for a National Day of Action to occur on December 10, 2012, the International Day of Human Rights. Named also as the "Idle No More" National Solidarity and Resurgence Day, the National Day of Action was meant to help propel the movement

across the country. The day was meant to be much the same as other Idle No More events: peaceful demonstrations, a commitment to collective action, and a determination to bring the Government of Canada to heel. Turning to social media, particularly to Facebook and Twitter, to spread the message, supporters of the movement started to expand from their Saskatchewan base. Among the communities that indicated their plans to participate and organize a day of action event were: Calgary, Edmonton, Goose Bay–Happy Valley, North Battleford, Saskatoon, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Vancouver, Whitehorse, and Winnipeg. Idle No More was taking a bold step, without money, structure, or a formal agenda, but with a growing number of supporters. Early participants spread the word quickly, post by post, tweet by tweet, text by text. The message was clear:

A NATIONAL DAY OF ACTION!!!!

<http://www.idlenomore.com/>

Where: In your home town

When: December 10th

What: Call or send letters to your MP, Visit MPs' Offices, hold Teach-ins.

Demand that our government be accountable to the Treaties and to Mother Earth!

Our Silence is Consent!!!⁵

Although Idle No More was only loosely organized and did not have a top-down structure, it did have a clear value system. All events associated with the movement were to be part of “[a] peaceful call to action requesting acts of solidarity against government and industry actions that use legislation and disregard free, prior, and informed consent to further their agendas in the name of profit and progress disregarding the natural law to live as one with Mother Earth.” The organizers appealed to high international principles: “The government and industries have been failing to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. They have also been ignoring and pacifying the need to be responsible and live as one with Mother Earth. We as a collective must do what we as individuals feel is the best way to show the government and corporations that we will no longer be silent and apathetic to their activities.”⁶

Idle No More placed Aboriginal engagement on par with criticizing the government. The call to action also asked participants to remember their Aboriginal roots: “go visit your Elders, your family, tell your stories. Go hunt or fish, take part in your ceremonies, speak your language . . . TEACH your language, guide your young ones, sing your songs and embrace your nationhood in any way you can. Not only on this day but every day. LIVE IT.”⁷ Word of the National Day of Solidarity and Resurgence (National Day of Action) spread through national and Indigenous networks as Jessica Gordon began tweeting, connecting with prominent Aboriginal spokespeople—like Pamela Palmater, a Mi’kmaq faculty member in Indigenous Studies at Ryerson University and a former candidate for national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and Taiaiake Alfred, a prominent Mohawk thinker and Indigenous Governance professor at the University of Victoria—as well as Aboriginal organizations, including the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Some of Gordon’s tweets were sent out to people who were invested in the power structure associated with Indigenous rights, simple invitations to spread the word:

Jessica Gordon @Jessicapgordon 4 Dec 2012

@RussDiabo #IdleNoMore please help spread the word
December 10th National Day of Solidarity & Resurgence
@Taiaiake @Pam_Palmater @aptnews⁸

Other tweets spread the word to members of the Indigenous rights movement and included a clear critique of the existing Aboriginal power structure in place in Canada:

Jessica Gordon @Jessicapgordon 4 Dec 2012

@kekinusuqs @aptnews we have #IdleNoMore national
day of solidarity & resurgence to do such on the 10th.
Chiefs support or not⁹

This then is how the call went out though it was not at all assured that anyone would answer it. We know that people showed up, but that response was not guaranteed. Check out telephone poles and bulletin boards in urban centres, where splinter groups and protestors

routinely post signs calling for collective action. Most disappear without a trace, the posters fading and aging over time until someone, with a sense of mercy, rips down the failed attempts at widespread protest. It was more likely in December 2012 that the attempt to coordinate spontaneous uprisings in more than a dozen communities would splutter and die, with mediocre turnouts and less than impressive outcomes. There was, after all, no real money, no paid organizers, no cross-country network, no advertising budget for getting the attention of the right people to make it happen.

Saskatoon, however, was ready for the National Day of Action, not surprisingly. Indeed, the city has a large and active Aboriginal population, a reputation for public activism, and the University of Saskatchewan, an institution with a strong track record for engagement and leadership on Indigenous issues. Equally important, as the point of origin for the movement, Saskatoon had a prominent place in the planning of Idle No More activities. Young people organized the event, designed to draw attention to the Government of Canada's legislation and to convince participants to connect with Idle No More. On December 10, 2012, several hundred people showed up at the Rainbow Community Centre and marched to the office of local Conservative MP, Kelly Block, before re-forming in a room in the Ramada Inn that quickly filled to overflowing. Chief Simon Bird of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations kept the focus on the people: "On behalf of the Federation, we just want to make sure that we're not taking any credit away from the grassroots because this is a grassroots movement."¹⁰ Colby Tootoosis, the Nakota Cree councilor from Poundmaker Cree Nation in Saskatchewan, spoke passionately: "Never in all of our history are we more at risk, are we more in danger of becoming strangers in our own land, and that's not an option. This is a great opportunity for us to really humble ourselves, and to begin to re-evaluate who we are as Indigenous people."¹¹ Milton Tootoosis, also from Poundmaker and an economic development officer attached to the Office of Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan, celebrated the prominence of youth: "I saw a lot of young people walking that street, holding those signs, screaming. It's really powerful to see!"¹² In early November, Saskatoon was the site where the torch had first been lit. Now, one month later, it was the place keeping the torch alight.

On the same day, thousands of kilometres to the east in Happy Valley–Goose Bay, Labrador, the Friends of Grand River / Mistashipu drew a dozen or so people to a much smaller event.¹³ Here the focus was primarily on questions of the environment and the dislocation of Indigenous peoples. Protestors greeted passing cars with placards, proclaiming:

Colonization is alive & well in Labrador. Save Muskrat Falls. Stop the rape!! Protect Labrador.

MP [Peter] Penashue, Overspending? Conflict of Interest? ACCOUNTABILITY!!

Our land, our people demand respect.

The Happy Valley–Goose Bay meeting was significant because it not only showed concern about the omnibus bill—Idle No More's national spark—but it also gave voice to urgent regional concerns. This is where the movement encountered a shift, a move on the part of individual organizers and communities to allow the Idle No More movement to support a multitude of voices, concerns, hopes, and dreams. Instead of stalling under the pressure of so many voices, the movement flourished as a result of them, as the coming months would prove. The video report of the Labrador event carried undertones of the broader national campaign, to be sure, but it did so with a decidedly local feel:

Provincially, we feel we are not being heard as Muskrat Falls and area continues to be destroyed, Public Utilities Board oversight removed, and all independent studies skewed to the "Nalcor [Energy]" way of thinking! People's rights and Aboriginal concerns are being dismissed! . . . Rural and remote northern areas are being treated as the playground for politics and big development! . . . It seems this government both federal and provincial . . . [is] on a fast track to destroying all our beauty, our culture, our history, and our inheritance. . . . The divide and conquer of Aboriginal peoples,

of rural and remote compared to urban, of islanders to mainlanders, and of people to their elected politicians needs to be put right! Democracy needs to be restored! We stand in solidarity with others in the nation to say “NO MORE”; our resistance will continue to grow and we are gaining strength with other First Nations, environmentalists, free thinkers, land protectors, river keepers, democracy fighters, and those who know the destruction of our most precious lands is wrong!¹⁴

At the opposite end of the country to the west, in front of the office of Ryan Leef, the Conservative MP for the Yukon, about two dozen people showed up, waving signs, declaring, “protect the land & water,” “#idlenomore,” “Our Home and Native Land,” and “For our Children’s Children!!!!!!”¹⁵ Here, too, the national event provided a platform for local concerns in addition to concerns about the omnibus bill. Cherish Clarke wanted the MP to take action:

Ryan Leef is our Member of Parliament and he needs to know that we want him to vote against the legislation. We do have First Nations here in the Yukon that are still under the Indian Act and this is just the beginning of the Conservative agenda, this is just the beginning of the changes that are coming and if it’s frightening now, like we should just wait until 2013, 2014, 2015, it’s just going to go on and on and on unless we stand up as a grassroots movement and get it to stop.¹⁶

Leef responded, arguing that the Government of Canada had consulted with First Nations and that the Idle No More message about unilateral government action was inaccurate.¹⁷ First Nations were not convinced and remained to protest.

Similarly, on the same day, at a Winnipeg gathering, an unidentified man reminded everyone, “This is our land and we are not going anywhere.”¹⁸ The National Day of Action in this part of Canada drew close to three hundred people to rally at the Manitoba Legislature. They carried signs, waved flags, and listened to speeches lambasting Bill C-45. The informality of the politics stood out: “We don’t need

people with headdresses, we need the common, the common Aboriginal, the common Indigenous person to lead this charge,” the same participant said.¹⁹ Event coordinator Jerry Kim-Daniels connected the rally to the government’s actions, and at the same time underscored the multifaceted approach individuals across the country were taking to Idle No More events: “There’s a whole slew of issues that we can rifle off here. The impetus of why we’re here today is Bill C-45.”²⁰ Manitoba Grand Chief Derek Nepinak urged the people gathered to “continue to question everything,” and noted, “It’s been a long time in the making and it’s really coming together.” He also importantly called attention to the utility of social media, calling it “a powerful weapon and powerful tool when we need it to be.”²¹

And so it also went in northern Ontario. Around fifty First Nations people gathered outside the Federal Aboriginal Affairs Office in Thunder Bay on the same day. They flew the Canadian flag upside down, drummed, sang, and chanted “Idle No More” over the course of an hour-long event. Erin Bonnell, a passionate woman protesting at the event, declared:

We have to do something here in Thunder Bay. We have to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters across the island. But most importantly, I wanted to honour the call, summoning of all the pipes, all traditional people together. With what Stephen Harper is doing, with the legislative assaults on our people, it is an act of war. . . . All territorial people, all tribal people, by the laws of the creator, by the tools that [we] carry, the drums that we carry, we have a duty, a sacred duty to answer that call. As warrior men and women across the continent, these boundary lines mean nothing when it comes to the unity of our red nation. We will defend our territories. We are serious. We will stop any movement if it means bringing Canadians to the attention of their sacred duty which is to peacefully co-exist and to share the lands. First Nations people do not benefit from the extraction of the wealth of resources from our territories. We get scraps.²²

The participants were eventually asked to leave the area, moving a woman to declare that they deserved “[f]reedom to express ourselves.” She added, “It’s peaceful.”²³ Another was angrier: “We’re gonna take action. If you try and kick us out of here we’re going to take action. We’re going to take over this place and we’ll sit in just like people did in the 70s when they sat in at Indian Affairs. We’ll sit in. Don’t kick us out of here like the government kicked out our leaders at [the] department building. Don’t you dare do that to us!”²⁴

The intense commentary at this event was mostly directed at Prime Minister Harper and the Conservative government. As Bunnell commented, “If it means we have to wake up our brothers and our sisters because there is only one race, the human race stands to be annihilated with what Prime Minister Stephen Harper is doing. Prime Minister Stephen Harper must not be given that power to pass and make laws without consulting.”²⁵

Up until this point, and during the day of action on December 10, 2012, Idle No More generated public interest and support pretty much on its own; local and national press coverage from mainstream media was limited. Derrick O’Keefe, a reporter and editor with the progressive online news magazine, *Rabble.ca*, complained that even CBC’s usually reliable program, *The National*, which is generally supportive of Aboriginal causes, skipped over Idle No More’s National Day of Action. He declared himself “still shocked by the silence from the mainstream media on the ‘Idle No More’ Indigenous rights protests this week.”²⁶ Another commented: “Waubgeshig Rice @waub. It was exciting to follow #idlenomore on twitter today, but disappointing not to see coverage on national news broadcasts.”²⁷ Some supporters of the movement, however, viewed this lack of attention as an asset and an opportunity. As one observer tweeted: “RIIC News @riicnews RT @arnelltf: We can’t rely on mainstream media, we have to do it ourselves. Spread the word/photos/videos on yr social networks #IdleNoMore.”²⁸ And Ryan McMahan observed, “Comedy @RMComedy. No mainstream national coverage of today’s #IdleNoMore action speaks to the need for our own independent media. #IndigenousAlJazeeraTV.”²⁹

If the conventional media were not paying attention, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites were instantly on the ball. Photographs of activists gathering and YouTube videos of full rallies,

including drummers and dancers, circulated; videos of speakers and events, of placard-bearing protestors making their case against the government were uploaded and shared. The Aboriginal groundswell attracted international attention almost immediately. The hacker collective Anonymous—a pain in the backside of governments and special interests around the world—shouted out: “Anonymous @YourAnonNews Be sure to keep up with & support #IdleNoMore, indigenous peoples in Canada are rising up en masse against centuries of colonial oppression!”³⁰ Others piped up, too, not only voicing support but offering it: “Dakota J Lightning @dakotalightning. Who can put me in touch with the creator of the #IdleNoMore website? This native geek would like to help out!”³¹

The mainstream media now had something to report, and yet they still moved slowly at first. Their stories were perfunctory, describing the actions and capturing some of the key messages. A *Huffington Post* article by Lauren Strapagiel, for example, identified the multiple events and recounted the tenor of the complaints through one of the protestors: “‘The treaties were set by our forefathers,’ Clarence Whitstone of Onion Lake, Saskatchewan, told Global News. ‘They lit the path for us, and if the legislation is passed down to us, like Bill C-45, then we’ll be losing our lands . . . there will be nothing left for future generations. That’s what we’re protecting here, that’s what we’re here for.’ Other attendees said that for too long, bills with such far-reaching implications as C-45 have been debated behind closed doors and this day of action is a way for aboriginal people to demand a spot at the table.”³²

On several levels, the first National Day of Action marked the end of the attempt to coordinate or orchestrate the Idle No More protests. There is no evidence of a deliberate decision to take a new direction. Instead, it appears as though the people simply took over, just as the organizers of the first gatherings in Saskatchewan must have hoped would happen. Groups picked up on the Idle No More message and format, which was inexpensive, easily reproduced, and readily adapted to local conditions. As events started to pop up all across Canada, the movement grew enormously, seemingly overnight. Flash mob Round Dances, rallies, and blockades started to appear spontaneously, it seemed, throughout mid-December and on; in some cases, hundreds and thousands of people were in attendance. So, despite the

lack of national news coverage of the initial events, the movement grew rapidly, and by late December 2012, what had only a month earlier been a local protest against a remarkably complex and little-understood piece of federal legislation had evolved and attracted both national and global attention.

A rally in Halifax, for example, organized for December 14, 2012, was the handiwork of two Mi'kmaq single mothers, Molly Jean Peters (Paq'tnkek) and Shelley A. Young (Eskasoni), supported by other young women. Marchers, led by drummers and singers, ended at the Parade Square, where speakers encouraged the crowd, and dancers and drummers performed a Round Dance. It was the first time participants performed a Round Dance at an Idle No More event.

The Mi'kmaq, said Young, picked up on the national momentum: "[W]e saw that people in the rest of the country were standing up for it, and we were, like, how come we're not doing anything for it? We have to do something." The commitment to traditional culture at the Halifax event was evident: "One of the things we made sure that we were doing was infusing culture," said Peters. "We wanted to make sure our Elders were here; we wanted to make sure we had our songs here, our dance here, our medicines. It was most important that those were here. That helps to set the tone that this is a peaceful, positive rally. Our children are here, our Elders are here, and we are here to send a message, and we don't want that message to be overtaken by anything negative. We wanted to keep it positive."³³

Aboriginal women, key players from the earliest stages of the movement, figured prominently in the Halifax event. Peters declared, "Women are having conversations in communities, and one of the conversations is we need to raise strong leaders, and I think as mothers, that really stuck with us. We need to raise a generation of strong leaders, and the benefit that we have on our side right now is that we're the largest, fastest-growing demographic in Canada, our youth. So, we have volume. We have volume in numbers, volume in spirit, volume in heart. We're there, and the people are ready. All they needed was for somebody to just light the spark, and say okay, it's time to do this, we're going to do this."³⁴

That day in Halifax, Jaime Battiste, the citizenship coordinator for the Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn Mi'kmaq Rights Initiative, spoke about the multiple concerns Aboriginal people had, which Idle No

More was helping make public. He made it clear that the adults were rallying for the children who would follow them: "We're here for our communities so that we don't lead in every negative statistical category that makes life sometimes unbearable in our First Nation communities. We're here for our nation, united, saying that we're going to put aside all of our differences and stand together in solidarity."³⁵ The First Nations gathered in the Nova Scotia capital wanted much more: "We are also here to talk about what isn't in Bill C-45. There isn't a thing about the illegal confiscation of our lands and resources in that bill. There isn't a thing for reconciliation for the history of colonization and assimilation they've put on us. There isn't a peep about equalized education funding, safe drinking water, or an inquiry into missing and murdered women in our communities."³⁶

On the same day that this rally in Halifax occurred—December 14, 2012—the Canadian Senate passed Bill C-45. Aboriginal leaders condemned the decision—really a rubberstamping by the Senate of an action taken by the House of Commons—describing it as a betrayal of Indigenous interests. As Ontario Regional Chief Stan Beardy commented, "At no time in the nine months that Bill C-45 was being considered did the Government of Canada discuss any matters related to it with First Nations—this bill breaches Canada's own laws on the fiduciary legal duty to consult and accommodate First Nations. The Canadian government just gave birth to a monster."³⁷

Idle No More's primary cause had been passed into law. The rallies, speeches, and singing had not been able to overcome the Conservative majority in the House of Commons and Senate. However, because of the momentum the movement had already created, because of the other regional issues that Aboriginal people were bringing to their events, and because of the personal nature of Idle No More, none of the participants felt that the movement was dead.

When the national media did become involved, they gave their attention unsurprisingly to the large rallies held in the major cities where there was ready access to radio, television, and newspaper reporters. But many of the Idle No More events—and over time, most of them—occurred outside major metropolitan areas. On December 15, 2012, the day after the omnibus bill was passed into law, Tricia Beaulieu of the Sandy Bay First Nation in Manitoba drew close to two hundred people from Sandy Bay, Long Plain, and Swan Lake to the

Trans-Canada Highway near Portage La Prairie. Beaulieu provided a classic explanation of the manner in which the Idle No More message translated into action:

I heard there was a rally. Where was that? BC, I believe . . . They were getting progress there, and then I thought . . . Why don't we do something? Why isn't anybody coming together and doing something? So I slept on it Wednesday night. I woke up Thursday: "I'm doing it. I'm gonna do this for the people." So I went to work, looked at my employees, asked them first, "You think I should do it?" A few said, "Right, let's do it," they said. Then now here I am. . . . I'm not just doing it for myself, I'm doing it for everybody—giving them a voice. I'm standing here for the people that couldn't be here today, who've passed on. . . . I'm here for the Elders who couldn't get out of bed . . . to be here. So I'm here. I thought, "I'm 25, might as well just take control of it."³⁸

Carrying signs marked with "My Home and Native Land," "Oh Canada, Our Home is Sacred Land," "No 2 Bill C-45. Harper Sucks!" and "Idle No More," participants at the rally marched peacefully, under the close but friendly eye of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

RCMP Inspector Ron Russell worried about the safety of the marchers, who wanted to block the highway in protest. He tried to convince the protesters to keep off the wintry, busy road, telling them they were breaking the law but indicating that he had no intention of arresting them so long as they followed protocol and moved the assembly off the highway. Emotions ran high. Beaulieu, crying and upset at this point, responded to the RCMP and to the protestors gathered around her: "I'm willing to go this far, for you all. I do this for your treaty. I went this far, now I'm breaking the law for you all to get your treaty back. I'm doing this for all you people. Look deep in your heart, understand."³⁹ Others thought they had a reasonable point to make by slowing the traffic on the highway. As one male demonstrator put it:

First Nations people have been inconvenienced for decades and maybe even centuries . . . so it's a small price

to pay today for a little bit of inconvenience on behalf of Canada . . . to highlight some of, all of the wrongs, injustice that we are facing day in and day out. So this bill that was passed is very, very detrimental to First Nations people. From this point on, it's going to have a negative impact and the government doesn't seem to be listening. . . . There doesn't seem to be any partnership with First Nations people through the treaties. It's been disregarded, disrespected and trampled on. That is the issue. So to take about an hour, two hours, away from Canadians but still allowing them to go through doesn't seem to be a big inconvenience. I think Canadians should understand, and I think the majority of Canadians understand how this looks.⁴⁰

Tricia Beaulieu summarized the rally thus: "We will not be quiet no more. I speak for our ancestors, our Elders, our children, our future."⁴¹

Idle No More's Saskatchewan founders, who had no desire to control the rapidly spreading movement, encouraged the growing multitudes interested in airing grievances and celebrating Aboriginal cultures. They also kept the spirit of the movement alive and in the public's mind, using Twitter, the Idle No More website (launched on December 4, 2012), and Facebook to spread the word about the movement. And so, activity proceeded, without strong organization or centralized control but also without the anarchy and socio-intellectual diversity of the previous year's chaotic Occupy movement. Occupy had drawn large crowds, produced prolonged sit-ins, and garnered global media attention, largely related to the central critique of the growing wealth securely held by one per cent of the population and the inequality of the modern economy. But the Occupy movement generated an often critical response, particularly from the middle class and the business community. Both condemned participants for over-simplifying financial realities and ridiculed them for impossible utopian governance models and dirty campsites.⁴² That the Occupy events attracted all manner of critics, protestors, and special-cause activists diluted the core message and created conceptual disarray. In the months to come, Idle No More would be regularly compared to

the Occupy movement, largely as a way of suggesting that the absence of a formal organization would undercut its viability and impact.

Yet from its earliest days, Idle No More was different. Like Occupy, it allowed for individual sentiment, but because it was local, personal, and sprang from common experiences and values, the movement was strengthened by each individual and each unique event. It eschewed central control or coordination, and it did not fall apart for the lack of it. The message was extremely simple: stand up, be heard, and let the country know that Aboriginal peoples, communities, and cultures are alive. Certainly, there were common threads holding the movement together in some way: critiques of Bill C-45, environmental concerns, and anger at the Government of Canada. But these unifying elements, often and powerfully expressed, represented only the surface of Idle No More. As the country soon discovered, rally by rally, gathering by gathering, something much deeper and more meaningful was under way.

Rumblings of the movement's acceleration came, appropriately, from Saskatchewan, this time in the form of a Round Dance at the Cornwall Centre mall in Regina on December 17, 2012.⁴³ The flash mob—generated by a digital shout-out to local residents to head to the site—grew to over one hundred people who for fifteen minutes drummed, sang, and danced around the large Christmas tree in the mall. There were no speeches, but dozens of people stood and watched the peaceful event. The Regina gathering drew many families and children; it was more celebration than angry outburst, marked by happy cheering at the end. To a casual, outside observer, it may have seemed meaningless and unfocused. In a video of the event, a woman can be heard asking about the purpose of the event. In response, another woman identified the Idle No More connection and made a brief reference to the political protest. Another flash mob swarmed into the same mall two days after Christmas.

The flash mob idea—spontaneous, joyous, and celebratory—spread quickly across the country. Twitter commentators and contributing writers to *The Winter We Danced*, a valuable compendium of commentaries on and responses to Idle No More, deemed this iteration of Idle No More as “The Round Dance Revolution.” West Edmonton Mall, one of North America's largest shopping complexes, also hosted one of Idle No More's signature events. Hundreds of people

jammed into the mall. Hundreds more, including many non-Aboriginal people, watched on. Thirteen drummers played and sang; women, men, and children joined in the Round Dance. The huge hall echoed with the beat of the drums and the strident cadence of Plains singing. An older Aboriginal man, standing on the edge of the gathering, declared himself happy with the turnout and called on other Canadians—some 37,000 people watched the video in the two days immediately after the event—to join the movement, protect the land, and respect First Nations. He was pleased, too, that non-Aboriginal people showed up and stayed: “I think having this here today, it's a support that our people need to get from both sides. As we can see, our people coming together and other people are here supporting us. This is a good thing. You know, I think that the government officials should see this . . . I think that it is finally happening, but we need to be heard so things can move on the way they were meant to be—to be in balance.”⁴⁴

Flash mob Round Dances popped up all over the country, with Saskatoon following in the footsteps of Regina and Edmonton on December 20: “neeshy @neeshy 19 Dec 2012 Wuts this I hear about a Flash Mob Rounddance at Midtown Mall today in Saskatoon? 7pm if I'm not mistaken! SEE YU THERE! :) #IdleNoMore #RT”⁴⁵

Between 1,400 and 2,000 people, including approximately 400 to 500 Idle No More supporters and 1,000 or more onlookers, flooded into Saskatoon's Midtown Mall. More would have come had mall security not blocked a sizable number from joining in. There were a few signs and a Mohawk Warriors flag in evidence, loud cheering, and an air of celebration. In addition to many spectators recording the event on cellphones, the media showed up, clearly curious about the movement that was picking up speed and creating drama across Canada. The dancers had fun. When the drumming stopped, members clapped and cheered, chanting “Idle No More,” and then asking for more. The drummers started up again, and the largely youthful crowd did not need speeches to fire them up.⁴⁶ They clearly knew why they were there: to celebrate being Aboriginal.

As the Round Dance rallies proved, the power in the Idle No More movement truly rested with the people, who determined the when, where, what, and how of events. The flash mobs were quirky, purposefully aimless, filled with meaning, but lacking the standard

organizational elements of a well-oiled protest meeting. There was youthful energy, loud singing, and spontaneity. Idle No More's goal of empowering and representing the Aboriginal people of Canada was being met at each of the events. Other flash mobs and Round Dances followed, including ones held at the Rideau Centre in Ottawa; at the Mall of America in Minnesota; in North Bay, Ontario; and at the Polo Park Mall in Winnipeg.

And there were others still to come.

A SIMPLE DANCE WITH A PROFOUND MEANING

The Round Dance emerged as the most prominent symbol of the Idle No More movement. It is an uncomplicated dance, typically involving a group organized in a circle, singing and moving slowly to the beat of a drum. The dance is inclusive and welcoming, its deep rhythms inviting all comers into the act of celebration.

The Round Dance is a well-established cultural element among prairie First Nations, typically serving as a high point in powwows. It lacks the drama and flair of many Aboriginal dances, such as the elaborate and costumed performances of West Coast First Nations. As David Courchemé, Jr., an Anishinaabe cultural leader, commented, "Our people had this great faith that there was great power in the Round Dance. The dancing itself was calling the spirit to help in healing whatever the community was in need of healing."⁴⁷

The Round Dance serves many purposes; it helps a community deal with grief and sorrow, celebrates cultural strength, and provides a means for sharing joy and happiness. The dance is dominated by the simple beat of the drum and the accompanying singing; the shuffling steps ensure that no one is intimidated by performance requirements.

Like many Aboriginal cultural traditions, the Round Dance became less common over the years, a victim of efforts at assimilation and the suppression of Indigenous cultures. As Aboriginal peoples have gained confidence and gathered strength, public events,

including the Round Dance, have become more commonplace.

Idle No More, which itself represented an assertion of Indigenous self-confidence and determination, resurrected the Round Dance on a national scale. The rhythm of the dance was a simple, clear, and welcoming affirmation of Aboriginal resilience and determination. Combined with Idle No More events, the Round Dance returned to prominence throughout Canada.

To maintain the momentum, Idle No More founders announced a second National Day of Action and Solidarity for December 21, 2012, urging Aboriginal peoples across the country to take to the streets once more, in peace and with determination. They wanted the government and non-Aboriginal people to notice and to understand that the collective silence was over. In the first half of December, Canada took notice and was, to put it plainly, puzzled. By this time, the contentious omnibus bill, Bill C-45, had made its way through most of the parliamentary process. By the middle of December, it seemed there was no longer a great deal to be gained politically. But still the people came. They danced and sang and drummed. They spoke of their hurt and frustrations, of their dreams and their resilience. But mostly, they danced and sang and drummed. To most non-Aboriginal people, this growing Round Dance Revolution did not make a great deal of sense.

Just as non-Aboriginal Canadians were adjusting to this strange mobilization, this passionately peaceful set of rallies, it got bigger. Starting with the December 21 events, Idle No More became something much greater, a movement unlike any other in Canadian history, with rumblings sweeping across the reserves, through Canadian towns and cities, and, surprisingly, reaching out beyond Canada's borders.

Idle No More found new allies among protestors and activists across Canada and around the world. The Occupy movement, the loose coalition of anti-establishment forces that had launched earlier, joined with the First Nations protestors. Occupy Canada announced a series of rallies connected with the Idle No More National Day of Action, and they would begin these supportive rallies in Egypt, the symbolic heart of the Arab Spring movement. Other events followed, in a

curious mélange ranging from small First Nations reserves to major international metropolitan centres: Sioux Lookout; Denendeh; Owen Sound; Peace River; Prince Albert; Saskatoon; Winnipeg; Hamilton; Sudbury; Ottawa; Montreal; Toronto; Vancouver; San Francisco; Los Angeles; and London, England.

Idle No More had suddenly gone global, with Indigenous peoples and their supporters standing up worldwide in support of Aboriginal rights and Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The events were not centrally coordinated and certainly not orchestrated, but they shared certain elements: prayers and ceremony, singing and dancing, drumming, flags and placards, more than a few condemnations of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his government, angry speeches (but fewer in number, and less angry than one would think), and affirmations of Indigenous determination and persistence. The Montreal event, for example, featured guest speakers Viviane Michel, president of Femmes Autochtones of Quebec; Karine Gentelet of Amnesty International; Chelsea Vowel, activist/blogger @apihtawikosisan; and a Round Dance led by Marie-Ceine Charron, hoop dancer. In Edmonton, the December 21 event started with an assembly at Kinsmen Park and a march of several hundred protestors to Churchill Square.⁴⁸ The two hundred people who marched in Yellowknife were welcomed by Dene National Chief Bill Erasmus.⁴⁹ The group assembled indoors, where there was a presentation of gifts to the youth organizers and the Elders, who showed up in significant numbers, and a welcoming and thank you to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Although Occupy was involved, this was not an Occupy event; it was not, like Occupy, an anti-establishment movement with a rather uneasy relationship with authorities. Idle No More had the strength to join with Occupy while maintaining its unique identity.

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The public paid more and more attention to the events—their size, scale, crowd behaviour, political statements—and the media picked up on the trend. In a country where a gathering of a half dozen people is sufficient to attract television cameras and reporters, it is hardly surprising that the sight of hundreds of Aboriginal people, often with made-for-TV posters, colourful Indigenous flags, and more

than a few people wearing traditional clothing, drew the attention of journalists. The events were also tailor-made for grandiose headlines: “Idle No More Protests Hit Calgary and Southern Alberta,”⁵⁰ “Idle No More Sweeps Canada and Beyond: Aboriginals Say Enough is Enough,”⁵¹ “First Nations and Idle No More Push for Reckoning.”⁵²

Participants and organizers recognized that what they were doing was important; they began to see that their events could be “a spark that will ignite a thousand people,” as Métis artist and writer Aaron Paquette, a participant in the Edmonton rally, said passionately to those gathered:

You are a spark that is starting a fire that will spread across this land, and it will be a fire that doesn't burn, but a fire that cleanses; a fire that ignites in our hearts and creates light. No more living in darkness. Our time now is to be light in the world. Everyone who is here today, you are a spark that will ignite a thousand more people. We will be one million strong. We are here together, no matter your background, no matter your colour, no matter your history. You are here, we are here, one heartbeat. The road ahead will not be easy. They will try to stop you. They are becoming afraid of your power. We are here. We are still alive. This is our time!⁵³

In the same vein, Nocokwis Greyeyes, one of the December 21 event organizers in Peace River, Alberta, said, “Today was amazing. *Hai hai* for all who came. Everyone was needed and I am so grateful that you were all here. Our communities are filled with amazing . . . people and I'm glad to live in the same territory as you all.”⁵⁴ And Melaw Nakehk'o, a youth organizer of the Denendeh Gathering, active from the earliest days of the movement, spoke to the crowd in Yellowknife:

To me, Idle No More, it's also about a cultural revitalization. As a movement, it's an Indigenous resurgence. We have to maintain our land connectedness; we have to be strong in our culture; we have to be on the land and asserting our treaty rights because they can't do anything if we're on the land. Myself as a moose-hide

tanner, I think about the work that I want to do. I want to tan moose hide for the rest of my life, but if the water is poisoned and if the land is dying, then I can't do that and I can't teach my kids that when they grow up.⁵⁵

Of course, the rallies, while celebratory, were also nearly always political. Prime Minister Harper and his government were called out thousands of times across the country. Speaking in Dease Lake, British Columbia, a tiny community on the Stewart-Cassiar Highway, Hu Wani Dene (Sonia Denis) was blunt: "Stephen Harper, this is wrong . . . what you are doing to our people, to all people, to all nations. We are going to stand up to you and we are going to stay in charge because this is our land. You are just a visitor here and there is no reason why the government should have so much right over this. These youth that I brought here are standing up and they're going to stand with thousands of other people."⁵⁶

Another theme present at the rallies continued to be concern for the future and for Aboriginal youth. In fact, this concern was even more dominant than the anger expressed regarding the prime minister and toward Bill C-45. At one rally in Sarnia, Ontario, on December 24, 2012, Janelle Nahmabin, a mother protesting with her daughter next to her, declared:

I stand in front of everybody because I'm here to fight for my daughter . . . if Harper needs a face, this is a face: my daughter! I'm worried about our future. If you have children, you'll stand, too! We want a future for our children and our children's children. I am so scared of what this bill is going to do to them and I am here. . . . [My daughter] is going to have to grow up into this. She has no say, so this is our job. Every one of us here, all over Canada, all over the world. We have a voice and we're going to say it. "Idle No More!"⁵⁷

The crowd echoed her chant; "Idle No More" rang out over the assembly.

Ta'Kaiya Blaney, an eleven-year-old singer, songwriter, and activist from Sliammon First Nation, addressed the crowd at Simms Park in Courtney, British Columbia, on December 29, 2012. In this instance,

Bill C-45 was front and centre. The young girl celebrated the gathering of so many First Nations people: "we are standing on unceded territory and we have that right and that's what Idle No More is all about. It's about us standing up and speaking up. We've never really been asleep, and now more than ever we're awake and we're standing up." She continued, "I think it's so important that . . . we're standing here today because . . . we're not waiting for our governments to change things; we're not waiting for the authorities to change things anymore, because we know now . . . that if we keep waiting for change, it's never going to come."⁵⁸

Ta'Kaiya Blaney was not alone, as hundreds of other Aboriginal Canadians expressed their deeply felt views about the country. The Idle No More gatherings of December 21 and the ones spinning out from them had a common purpose and a shared language, and they continued to be powerfully peaceful. During the Winnipeg event on December 21, for example, the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO), an organization of northern chiefs, circled the airport terminal road in vehicles, cheering and proudly displaying their flags. While they slowed traffic considerably, they sought primarily to draw attention to their cause and not to disrupt travel plans. The group later regrouped for a ceremony at the Oodena Celebration Circle at the Forks in downtown Winnipeg, and then thousands marched to the Manitoba Legislature where they performed a Round Dance around the building.⁵⁹

When more than a thousand people formed a flash mob in downtown Toronto that same day, at one of the busiest intersections in the city (Yonge and Dundas Square), the city streets became snarled with traffic, much to the chagrin and anger of motorists. However, the mob moved on quickly without causing excessive delays and ended its actions with the first of a series of Toronto-based teach-ins, with Tantoo Cardinal, Hayden King, and Rebeka Tabobondung as featured speakers.⁶⁰

Others took more disruptive—but still peaceful—action. Again, on December 21, the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, protesting the movement of chemicals across their land along the St. Clair River in southern Ontario, blocked a railway track that crossed their reserve, walked through Sarnia, Ontario, and then, for several hours, shut down Highway 402, a busy Ontario thoroughfare.⁶¹ The Aamjiwnaang railway blockade lasted for almost two weeks, ending peacefully with the

First Nation having made their point about their concerns over the shipment of chemicals.⁶²

First Nations across Canada followed the emerging national and global developments with interest, fascinated and empowered by the fact that their rallies had garnered worldwide attention. Non-Aboriginal people from outside of Canada clearly connected with their cause and understood the need for solidarity and action. A series of tweets sent out in support of Idle No More captured the international sentiment that was growing rapidly.

Norlaine Thomas @Norlaine

Idle No More protest in Egypt. EGYPT. They are protesting our government in EGYPT. Doesn't that say something? #cdnpoli⁶³

Diana Day @DianaDaydream

Idle No More from Ukraine:
<http://youtube/9aevM1G9ddQvia> @youtube #idlenomore
 – brought a tear to my eyes to see the love and support from afar!!⁶⁴

Non-Aboriginal Canadians reached out in support:

Scott McF @ScottMcFad

As Cdns we pride ourselves in being progressive & open-minded which is ironic given our abysmal record on human rights. Props to #idlenomore⁶⁵

Arün Smith @arun_smith

For those of us who are settlers on this land, we must take responsibility to ensure that we are no longer idle. #idlenomore #solidarity⁶⁶

Luke Bradley @Lukeafbradley

Aboriginal communities must reach out and educate Canadians. We simply do not understand what is going on. #idlenomore is a great step.⁶⁷

As Luke Bradley's tweet suggests, there was support, but there continued to be confusion also in non-Aboriginal quarters. Perhaps most perplexing to onlookers were the rallies that on the surface seemed to have no political message or purpose. At such events, people gathered in large numbers, many young adults and children and often a significant number of non-Aboriginal people, simply to declare their presence. Two rallies in Moncton, New Brunswick, for example—one at Regent Mall⁶⁸ on December 24, 2012, and another at Champlain Place⁶⁹ the following year on December 27, 2013—consisted of drumming, singing, and a ten-minute Round Dance. There were no speeches recorded at either of these events. But there were indications of the broad intent that surrounded the rallies. The Moncton events attracted individuals, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, demonstrating against the natural gas fracking and exploration activity that was beginning in the province, one of many issues that intersected with Idle No More agendas.

And yet, the Canadian media and the people of Canada generally found it hard to locate a key message or demand in the scattered, complex, and varied rallies of Idle No More. They looked to key spokespeople and found some remarkable individuals who came forward, typically to explain the movement rather than to draw attention to themselves. The four women who founded Idle No More made a deliberate point of making sure that the story was not about them. While they modestly took some credit for getting things going, Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean, and Nina Wilson emphasized the grassroots nature of the movement. Speaking to David Gray of CBC Radio's *Calgary Eyeopener* in Calgary on December 21, McAdam said of the movement, "When I started reading [Bill C-45], I have a law degree, I had a hard time understanding it and I couldn't fathom how ordinary grassroots people could even begin to read this, not that I'm questioning their intelligence at all, but there is a lot of 'legalese' utilized in these documents, and it's a massive document. It's well over four hundred pages. So, I told Nina and Jessica, 'We have to do something.' There's a thing called acquiescence, which means your compliance is consent. We can't be silent; silence is consent."⁷⁰

More than a few critics mocked the name of the movement, declaring that they thought the idea was that First Nations would be looking for jobs.⁷¹ Quoting âpihtawikosisân, a Métis woman from the

Plains Cree-speaking community of Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta, Jessica Gordon fired back: "Idle No More' is not a chastisement or accusation of laziness on the part of Native peoples, many of whom have been labouring for years for their communities. It is a rallying cry that can be taken up by all of us living in these lands. It says, 'time to be active, time to put in the effort, time to learn, time to grow, time to make change.' For those who have been doing this work all along, it also means, 'you are supported, we will stand with you, you will not be alone in this.'"⁷²

In the midst of the first round of Idle No More gatherings, Sylvia McAdam spoke to Anna Maria Tremonti on CBC Radio's *The Current*. This interview marked the first national introduction to one of the founders and the cause they had triggered. McAdam started by commenting on Bill C-45: "We wanted to let people know that this is what's happening, and barely anybody knew about it, and it wasn't right. So, we started doing teach-ins." She specifically noted the changes to the Navigable Waters Protection Act as an example of their concern with the omnibus bill. The women had been upset with the scale and breadth of the bill, the lack of consultation, and the need to defend "ourselves against these bills that are going through because it does feel like we're being attacked."⁷³

As always, even as they articulated the logic and passion behind the protests, McAdam and others were quick to divert attention from themselves: "This is a grassroots movement. If they choose to voice their protest peacefully in whatever way they can, through music, dance . . . you're witnessing the grassroots people telling the Conservative government, 'you do not have our consent,' and if there were consultations done, they were obviously not done properly."⁷⁴ Even though the grassroots people were the actors in the movement, the founders were in contact with many of them: "We're getting contacted from the Yukon, from Whitehorse, from Vancouver. I know that Vancouver is having a rally or teach-in on December 23, and there's major rallies happening on December 21, as well as other events calling forth all the drums. Not just Indigenous drums, all of the drums, to join us on December 21 to make a statement saying that, through our music, 'you do not have our consent.'"⁷⁵

Idle No More had provided a pathway to a kind of public voice that was very different from the ones Aboriginal peoples were accustomed

to. Indeed, the presence of the movement spoke to Indigenous frustration not only with the Conservative government, but also with Aboriginal political representation, including the First Nations chiefs and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) representatives. The Aboriginal political leadership did throw their support, somewhat unevenly, behind Idle No More, although a few realized that the critique of leadership extended from the Prime Minister's Office to their very own Aboriginal governments. The relationship was an uneasy one, as is shown by one comment Saddle Lake Cree Nation teacher Shannon Houle made about the Aboriginal "Leadership" and Idle No More:

The Founders and many of the organizers of Idle No More from across Canada have been given word that the Leadership is calling for action in the name of Idle No More. They have also stated in a press release that they have met with Idle No More representatives that support this call. We would like to state that this is FALSE. The Chiefs have called for action and anyone who chooses can join with them, however, this is not part of the Idle No More movement as the vision of this grassroots movement does not coincide with the visions of the Leadership. While we appreciate the individual support we have received from Chiefs and councillors, we have been given a clear mandate by the grassroots to work outside of the systems of government and that is what we will continue to do. We are not trying to have division amongst this movement!⁷⁶

The frustration people had with the elected leadership was real. National leaders within the Assembly of First Nations, regional representatives, and band-level politicians were all criticized. One blogger, Ray McCallum, was direct and remarkably candid in his analysis of the situation:

Our First Nations Women founded the grassroots movement "Idle No More." The First Nations men stole the microphones. I was absolutely incensed that both [Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations Chief]

Perry [Bellegarde] and [National Chief Shawn] Atleo and some of the other chiefs [were] grandstanding in the media and many of them totally missing the point. . . . When the Assembly of First Nations was busy just over a week ago in Ottawa nothing was mentioned regarding Idle No More. They were busy pontificating with gusto that is sometimes associated with self-serving rhetoric of keystone chiefs who know naught what they do. It was actually a woman chief who suggested to Chief Wallace Fox, "What are we doing here, shouldn't we be on Parliament Hill demonstrating against the bills that are being fast tracked?", not exactly in those words, but close enough. Chief Wallace Fox brought to the floor of the Assembly and a few chiefs got up and they started the march towards parliament.

I applaud those chiefs who chose to march to Parliament Hill to state their demands and their right to be heard. This should have been foremost on the agenda at the AFN assembly two weeks ago. Instead they chose to proceed methodically on a set of priorities written months and weeks before. I know that executive bodies behave like bureaucrats and follow steadfastly their agenda items and fluster if there is a slight deviation in their ordered little lives. Some chiefs like to come looking "chiefly" and postulate with puffs of grandeur and play a little politics on the side. In this case, the AFN was not flexible enough to lay aside the agenda items and deal with the current crisis that is hitting First Nations communities.

These self-styled Homies who would play Chief totally missed the boat or the opportunity to challenge Minister Duncan's statement when he said, "Oh, we meet with First Nations over 5000 times a year." By my calculation that would make it 13.6 consultations per day and that is including weekends and holidays. Why, oh, why did not one of our little curmudgeons ask the minister to fess up and show us the details about these so-called consultations? Our leaders are about as slow

as molasses in January when it comes to responding to bald-face lies of the Harperites. Instead, if ifs and buts were candy and nuts, every day would be Christmas—just like our chiefs with too many excuses who opt to wait for the proverbial wooden nickel. Now we see them after the fact, with bluster and whistle farts, panning for the media and any fans who care to have them. You may want to ask them what their endgame really is about if they are just now getting on the band wagon.⁷⁷

Idle No More provided a forum and drew attention to Aboriginal issues and causes that had hitherto been given only passing mention in the mainstream media. It also allowed the grassroots a voice that could speak directly to the nation without going first through the traditional leadership. At the same time, the movement required interpreters, seasoned speakers, who could go on radio and television and who could speak to print journalists in response to the now-daily events taking place across the country. Pamela Palmater stepped forward to respond to media requests. *Democracynow.org*, identifying Palmater as a spokesperson for the movement, quoted her as saying, "We, First Nations people, have been subsidizing the wealth and prosperity and programs and services of Canadians from our lands and resources. . . . And that's the reality here that most people don't understand."⁷⁸ Palmater would remain prominent in the national commentary about Idle No More, but she was not the movement. Wab Kinew, from the Onigaming First Nation in Ontario, a CBC reporter and broadcaster, and director now of Indigenous Inclusion at the University of Winnipeg, also emerged as an articulate commentator on the Idle No More movement. His regular appearances in the media were marked by a calmness and Aboriginal pride that closely matched the spirit of Idle No More. But Kinew was not the movement, either. And neither was another figure who became prominent in the early days of the movement: Chief Theresa Spence of Attawapiskat, Ontario.

Around Idle No More's first National Day of Action, Chief Spence had started a hunger strike. She chose Victoria Island in the Ottawa River, a short distance from Parliament Hill, to carry it out. For a while, it looked as though this chief, using Idle No More as a scaffold for her own cause, was going to become the face, if not the entire

voice, of Idle No More. The national media turned its attention to Chief Spence because her protest was much simpler and easier to convey to the country at large than the myriad voices that had come to represent Idle No More as a whole. But as the nation soon discovered, Chief Spence did not equal Idle No More. In fact, in some ways, she detracted from it, becoming a distraction. The movement of Idle No More was much larger than one person, one community, and one protest, a point with which Chief Spence would later agree.

A succinct message—less than 140 characters as required by Twitter—captured the real essence of the movement up until this point. It was tweeted by JoyArc on December 1, 2012:

@pmharper The new generation of Educated First Nations people r knocking on your door and they won't walk away #IdleNoMore.⁷⁹