

The Indigenous youth fighting for Wet'suwet'en sovereignty

Resistance, resurgence, and renewal in British Columbia

by [Lyndon Sayers](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue



PARLIAMENT CAMP: Activists on the steps of the British Columbia Parliament building in Victoria; Indigenous leader Gordy Bear. (© Colin Smith Takes Pics)

As I approach the British Columbia Parliament building, I see a ceremonial fire burning on the steps. More than a hundred people spill across the steps and onto the lawn in downtown Victoria. Some are talking, some have brought dogs, some are doing coursework, others are preparing to give speeches. There is color everywhere: in banners, face paint, bandanas, red dresses for remembering murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls. I hear someone call out, “It’s great you are here today. We need you to keep showing up. Keep answering the call.”

Drummers and dancers in ceremonial dress draw my attention to a ceremony of Indigenous youth. They are gathered around the fire, giving speeches and leading us in song. Someone is offering smudging, inviting people to pull the smoke of purifying

sage toward them and over their bodies. This ritual points us to the ceremony the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs are leading more than 700 miles away, where they have constructed a healing lodge at the Unist'ot'en Camp, near the central British Columbian town of Smithers. The ceremonies there bless the water under threat from oil and gas development. "Heal the people. Heal the land" is a recurring phrase in both ceremonies, connecting Indigenous people and their traditional lands, in hopes of undoing the harm caused by centuries of colonization.

As it gets colder in Victoria, people share blankets and crawl into sleeping bags for the night. Many sip donated coffee or hot chocolate or eat a donut. An event tent becomes a shelter for dozens to sleep under. It is February 2020, and over the course of several weeks, hundreds of Indigenous youth and allies have set up camp in solidarity with Wet'suwet'en leaders defending their land. The hereditary chiefs have been fighting for Indigenous sovereignty on unceded, traditional land in northern BC since colonization, and this fight for recognizing Indigenous sovereignty is one in a long line.

Although this gathering is only a few weeks old, it started with a landmark BC legal ruling in 1997 that opened the door to Wet'suwet'en sovereignty and title over traditional land. Even so, industry and government have taken advantage of legal ambiguity in that decision. In 2018, Coastal GasLink received permits and began construction of a natural gas pipeline through Wet'suwet'en traditional territory. In response the hereditary chiefs reoccupied access points and set up blockades. CGL sought an injunction, which the Royal Canadian Mounted Police enforced in January 2019. Militarized officers forcibly removed the hereditary chiefs. A year later blockades were set up again, another injunction was issued, and RCMP raided the camp a second time.

That's when the Indigenous youth joined the fight. The movement gained national attention, inspiring actions among Indigenous leaders across Canada. "Shut Down Canada" was a coast-to-coast call. Indigenous leaders and allies shut down ports, railways, and highways; they occupied bridges and government offices.

Most of the blockades ended by mid-March as the global pandemic escalated. At their high point, however, blockades had shut down all passenger rail in Canada and disrupted much of Canadian National Railway's freight network. Indigenous leaders across Canada understood that the Wet'suwet'en crisis has the potential to set a new precedent for Indigenous sovereignty across BC, Canada, and beyond.

In Victoria, what began as the work of a few individuals soon coalesced into an organic organizational structure of students and other young people supporting Wet'suwet'en chiefs. Indigenous youth are aiming to disrupt Canada's long-standing lip service toward reconciliation. Reconciliation, they say, has never been enough. They are pushing instead for renewal, resurgence, and resistance, and they are calling for a response from Canada's government that helps improve the lives of Indigenous people in measurable ways.

The iconography of the Indigenous camp on the steps of the legislature building was arresting: an upside down Canadian flag with the words "Reconciliation Is Dead" scrawled over the top and a sign that read "RCMP Off the Yintah." (*Yintah* means traditional unceded lands.) The fire burned all day and night in the ornate entrance to the building, usually reserved for the queen's representative, and rousing speeches were delivered by Indigenous youth. The atmosphere was electric. I was there because I heard a call that was both spiritual and a call to justice.

For Indigenous youth the pipeline represents yet another incursion that threatens Indigenous sovereignty, taking from them land and water that the Wet'suwet'en Nation has relied on for countless generations. The gathering at the legislature was filled with love and joy, and the high energy was palpable. I stopped by on many of the days the camp was active over the course of several weeks. I stayed overnight when the youth feared being arrested. Several colleagues showed up to support the camp as well.

Over the course of the camp, the truth and reconciliation committee at the Lutheran Church of the Cross in Victoria, where I serve as copastor, sent a public letter in support of the Wet'suwet'en, addressed to federal and provincial leaders. We donated several boxes of fresh produce to the camp kitchen. But the conversations in our congregation and in the wider church were divided. There was a lot of unease, worry, misunderstanding, and sometimes anger.

One day on the legislature's steps, I ran into someone from our church. We were discussing the question of whether White Christians should take sides, given that members of the Wet'suwet'en Nation were themselves divided on the pipeline issue. The government and industry had already negotiated a deal with Wet'suwet'en elected chiefs to build the pipeline, whereas Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs had rejected any deal. Some thought it would be better to refrain from comment given the internal disagreement. But, I argued, these tensions were not accidental. They

have been part of Canada's divide and conquer strategy with Indigenous people all along.

Canada created the structure of elected chiefs through the Indian Act of 1876. They were given jurisdiction over reserves, relatively small parcels of land compared to traditional territories. The government's policy has driven a wedge between the elected chiefs and the long-standing hereditary chiefs. The latter never relinquished sovereignty and title over vast tracts of territory. Fast-forward to today, when Canadian government and industry strike deals with elected chiefs that run roughshod over the rights of hereditary chiefs. As we were having this discussion, we ran into an Indigenous community leader at the camp and asked how best we answer criticisms as allies. She replied, "Tell them you have been called to stand in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs and that you are answering that call."

On another day I sat down with a young Indigenous leader named Gordy Bear for a conversation at a neighborhood park in Victoria. He explained why he responded to the call of the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs.

"I am Cree Métis, and I have a lot of friends who are Wet'suwet'en and a lot of friends who are in support. But this was an all-nation call out from the Wet'suwet'en.

"I heard that youth were gathering to support Wet'suwet'en land rights and title and that this pipeline was continuing to be pushed through. It would be an amazing thing to do something in my lifetime that made my ancestors proud and also the youth that I am a part of. The more of us, the stronger our voices, the more chance we get heard."

Much of Gordy's work at the camp involved helping resolve conflicts. Occasionally people acted aggressively in response to the protesters and ceremonies. One day someone flew a Confederate flag; another day a driver threatened protesters. At one point a young White man showed up with a maul axe and declared it was time to start tearing things down. He was escorted away before he was able to harm people or camp infrastructure. Gordy said, "People were so adamant to have their way in passing through the camp when Indigenous people and supporters were just being peaceful. There was a young gentleman tearing through the camp on a one-wheel hoverboard. He wasn't stopping for anyone."

Nonetheless, Gordy came across as unflappable. He likened the actions of the Indigenous youth to a spiritual resistance: “Our ceremony is resistance, that’s the quote of this whole thing. Because traditional ceremonies had been eradicated by government, residential schools, and Christian missionaries, the mere fact that traditional ceremonies continue is a source of strength.

“Unist’ot’en people and Wet’suwet’en people went and occupied their own territory. They set up a beautiful healing camp, which was an opportunity to come together and try to heal what was going on in their nation. They were forcibly removed by armed RCMP—in SWAT outfits, from their own territory—when they were doing ceremonies. They were singing, drumming, and having water cleansing ceremonies at that time when RCMP came in and started removing elders, women, and children. And then the men who were left staked themselves to whatever was there to try to defend their right and ability to be on their own land. They got arrested for being Indigenous.”

In direct response to the protests, a memorandum of understanding was reached between the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs and government around recognizing Indigenous rights on some of the traditional territory. But pipeline construction, considered essential during the pandemic, continues—and some wonder whether the agreement was a stalling tactic in order to complete the project.

Despite the pipeline project moving ahead, Gordy and other Indigenous youth consider their camp as a high-water mark for local organizing and resistance. Gordy said, “I felt a lot of pride. I felt a sense of togetherness and community. If my nation asked for that help, why couldn’t I be part of that response? We are willing to sacrifice the simple comforts of life.

“Our community showed up. And I don’t just mean the First Nations community. When we think of our medicine wheel: black, white, red, and yellow, everyone is part of that circle of one being. When we asked, people showed up in different capacities. . . . Some people donated firewood, a meal, food, stories, song, blankets, sleeping bags, pillows, tents, tarps. It was a lot of donations from our community. Our community did an amazing thing in supporting the work we were doing. We were the ones sleeping outdoors, but we wouldn’t have been able to continue as long as we did without that support. We made what we had work.

“When they call for action and people respond, that’s what the media is afraid of. Now they see this big group of people standing up for something they believe is right. Throughout history, when large numbers of people stand up for what’s right, things change. And that’s not always necessarily better for people who are in power currently. When we change things it gets better for everybody.”

Gordy has been joined by Indigenous youth across Canada in a wide-ranging and ambitious movement. I spoke with another young Indigenous leader, Maddy Kelson, via Zoom. Maddy grew up in Smithers and is a member of the Haisla Nation. She is a political studies major with a minor in environmental studies at the University of Victoria. Maddy’s studies have helped her draw parallels between the threat of violence against Indigenous land and the threat of violence against the bodies of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people. For her the phrase “Heal the people. Heal the land” is essential. Indigenous bodies and land are interconnected in ways for which purely economic worldviews cannot account.

I asked Maddy what drew her to participate in this action. “Things just happened organically. It was a collective organizing effort. Roles came up and organically got filled. I was just supposed to be doing a school walkout. We all got on buses and headed down to the legislature, and we didn’t know the raid [on Wet’suwet’en territory] would happen that day. Some friends motioned for me to come up, so I did, and then I left seven days later. [Among Indigenous youth] everyone knows someone who knows someone. It’s great.”

Nevertheless, leading an outdoor collective action in the winter next to a harbor was challenging. “It was pretty cold and miserable sometimes, but it was nothing compared to the raids up here [in northern BC].” Maddy also described the ways that media coverage left people feeling miserable. “We were doing something that comes natural to us: defend our lands and the work we’ve inherited from our ancestors. For the media to portray us as violent and illegal or paid protesters, it puts us in real danger when we have the general public seeing that. There were violent White supremacists showing up at the legislature at night. It has real implications about what happens to us and our bodies. It’s pretty appalling how unwilling the media and reporters are to listen to us and hear our story. To understand why we are doing what we are doing. It was disappointing.”

I asked her about the community of the camp: “One of the incredible things unique about that action [was] the sheer amount of community support we saw. Victoria

showed up in a way that I don't know if it's been done before. . . . We could just focus on living through that really horrible time."

Maddy was able to continue some of her coursework directly at the legislature. Professors organized lectures and study groups met on the legislature steps and lawn. For Maddy the transition from the university campus to the legislature steps was a natural one: "It was like a little community got built at the legislature." A community that gathered together to keep people nourished and safe was also healing itself. "Heal the people. Heal the land" wasn't a metaphor but a lived reality.

Maddy talked about how the Wet'suwet'en crisis is part of a larger systemic history of government and industry violence toward Indigenous bodies and Indigenous women in particular. "I understand the devastating impact these industries have on our lands and in turn on our bodies." Occupying the ceremonial gate of the legislature is one more way Indigenous youth take up space to tell the story about how the health of land and the health of bodies are interconnected.

Maddy also highlighted something that is often touted by the provincial government: the government entered into consultation with the Wet'suwet'en Nation. But, said Maddy, it seemed determined to build the pipeline no matter what. "Consent means having the right to say no. Asking is just performative if you're going to do what you're going to do the whole time. Talk about patriarchy and rape culture—that's it."

Maddy offered some background about why elected chiefs often feel compelled to sign agreements when hereditary chiefs choose not to. "I think there's a nuance a lot of people don't really understand. We've all been dispossessed from our lands and forced onto reservations and have had to take the scraps that were given by the Canadian government. A reservation is a different view of Canada. There is extreme poverty. I understand where the people who have signed onto these projects are coming from, because of the extreme poverty I've witnessed, inflicted upon us by Canada.

"I understand why people sign onto these deals. It is very intentional on the part of the Canadian government. Because of the poverty, people are trying to eat. So they say yes to the projects and jobs industry is going to bring, without having the foresight and long-term vision that our ancestors had." Elected chiefs and band councils are put in a tough spot. They know the pipeline is going through regardless of what they say, so they are faced with either making a deal and getting some

resources and jobs for their community or walking away with nothing.

On February 11, the first day of the legislative session, Indigenous youth and allies formed a barricade in front of entrances around the building. Directives among the Indigenous youth were to be strong with their message but soft with their bodies. Maddy confirmed, "Any violence that was there that day was instigated by the police, because we were explicit that we were peaceful. We've always been peaceful. The people out being raided were peaceful."

Still, the escalation that took place with an increased police presence led Indigenous youth to disband the camp temporarily out of safety concerns.

A week later, on February 18, the camp reformed, this time for 17 days. On March 5, Scott Fraser, minister of Indigenous relations and reconciliation, invited a handful of Indigenous youth to meet with him inside the legislature. At the meeting he told them that he could not meet their demands. That meeting turned into a sit-in. Several hours later the police arrested the Indigenous youth inside the building, hauling them away through remote exits. Indigenous youth were denied immediate access to legal counsel, charged, and prohibited from reentering the legislative grounds. Maddy notes, "It's unacceptable for Indigenous youth to be used as a bargaining chip, and that's what the police were doing." Charges have since been dropped.

I asked Maddy what it felt like for Shut Down Canada to be happening at the same time as the camp. "It definitely was hopeful. It feels like people are waking up after a really long time, after being oppressed and having genocide inflicted upon us. And we're never going to stop. That same sentiment is shared among our communities."

Even as focus has shifted to the pandemic, Indigenous youth and organizers have continued their fight. They are now trying to keep hundreds of Coastal GasLink workers out of northern communities with few medical resources. Occasional blockades have led to clashes on remote highways, including White Canadians trying to drive through Indigenous communities as part of nonessential travel.

The upswell in US protests around Black Lives Matter has helped reignite public interest in Black and Indigenous communities in Canada. Maddy said, "It's important to make the connection between Black lives and Indigenous lives. That's what these so-called countries are built on: Black labor on stolen Indigenous land. We aren't liberated until we all are, and the two of them are tied."

“We should all be fighting alongside the Wet’suwet’en for their lands and inherent rights to govern themselves according to their laws,” Maddy said. “White settler allies should care. You recognize that your future and your family’s future is implicated in this too.” The call to “Heal the people. Heal the land” will be realized when all Canadians recognize that the healing of Indigenous bodies and land is necessary for everyone’s healing.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Indigenous resistance.”