

OPINION

Indigenous issues are, in fact, pivotal in this election

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CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 3 HOURS AGOUPDATED SEPTEMBER 20, 2021

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Some say that First Nations, Métis and Inuit people don't vote in high enough numbers in federal election campaigns, and so promises directed at us reap no rewards at the polling station.

But in 2021, that is proving to be far from the truth. Political winds are changing. Indigenous voices are finally being heard, and our issues do matter to Canadians in this election.

Yes, we do vote. Yes, some Indigenous people believe in abstention, as is their sovereign choice, but in 2015, 61.5 per cent of the First Nations on-reserve population voted, which was only slightly below the national number. It dropped a little in 2019, but we certainly turn out when it counts. And there is significant motivation to vote in this election.

First, look at the number of Indigenous candidates. There are 77 of them, representing parties of all political stripes. Second, Canadians care more than ever about the human-rights issues facing our peoples. Over 52 per cent of respondents to a Nanos poll conducted in August said reconciliation is important and would influence their vote in a federal election – more than twice the number of respondents who said it was not important. Interest in resolving the long-standing human-rights issues was undoubtedly heightened by the discovery this year of children's remains in unmarked graves at former Indian residential schools.

Those violations continue to this day. Clean water is a human right, according to the United Nations, yet many Indigenous people do not have access to it. The feeling of safety is a human right as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, yet Indigenous women and girls remain prey for killers in disproportionate numbers. Housing is a human right, Justin Trudeau [affirmed in 2017](#), yet many Indigenous families are still forced to live in squalid conditions. Food is a human right, according to an international covenant signed by Canada, yet obtaining healthy and affordable food is a challenge in the North and other remote parts of this country. And racial discrimination, as laid out by Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, too often stands in the way of accessing services such as health care.

Through many election campaigns, political leaders have spoken about all of these things. And yes, a significant amount of resources have been dedicated over the years trying to address Indigenous issues and dismantle colonialism, particularly when they become a human-rights crisis that cannot be ignored.

But the approaches taken by successive governments have simply not worked. There are more Indigenous children in foster care today than there were children in residential schools when those institutions were at their peak. Boil-water advisories are still in effect on too many reserves. Health care remains unavailable for many Indigenous people.

What are governments doing wrong? They're still controlling the agenda, the decision-making and how the money directed for Indigenous people is spent. They refuse to let us be leaders or even true partners in solving these problems, in particular when it comes to Indigenous women.

The calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the calls for justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls established a plan for reconciliation and for ending the violence against women. Yet governments have done little to implement the calls to actions and the calls for justice.

Those reports call for transformational change, a true paradigm shift, and decolonization. The next prime minister of Canada must commit to these calls to address the concerns of Indigenous people if there is to be true reconciliation.

In this election, Canadians may very well cast ballots on principle. They may be tired of being citizens of a country that prides itself on its reputation as a human-rights leader while Indigenous people's rights are routinely breached.

There has been a collective awakening and a call to consciousness happening in Canada. Indigenous people are no longer a small group fighting on their own. Others have joined us in numbers large enough to have an impact on the outcome of this election.

Political leaders would be wise to pay attention to that awakening, both before and after election day. Otherwise, they may very well find themselves seated in their living rooms watching parliamentary debates, rather than participating in them.