

The Vector Poll™

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Indigenous issues on trial

By Marc Zwelling
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Does the acquittal of a Saskatchewan farmer on trial for shooting Colten Boushie mean “a breaking point in the already frayed thread of trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people”?

A *Maclean's* magazine writer says that's the impact of the decision by “a jury consisting entirely of white people” in Gerald Stanley's February trial for second-degree murder in the death of the 22-year-old Cree from the Red Pheasant First Nation.

How bad are relations between white and Aboriginal people in Canada? In general Canadians sympathize with Indigenous people and want governments to address past wrongs to the Indigenous population and improve their lives.

In Justin Trudeau Indigenous people arguably have their most vocally supportive prime minister in Canada's history. The public is fine with that. In a 2016 Ipsos poll, 65% approved of the Trudeau government's performance on “managing issues concerning First Nations and Aboriginal people.”

A 2013 Nanos Research survey asked, “Have First Nations, Inuit and Métis people been treated fairly or unfairly?” Unfairly, said 39%.

Why hasn't the distress of Indigenous Canadians instigated more action? As the opinion polls reveal, Indigenous people's conditions are a concern but not a cause. So they remain a low priority for the non-Indigenous public.

- In a 2010 Ipsos national poll 62% agreed (but only 21% strongly agreed) that “the federal government must act now to help raise the quality of life of Canada's Aboriginal peoples.”
- In a 2013 Nanos poll just 22% said “the need for change” was urgent “in terms of the government of Canada's policy towards First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.”
- In an open-end question (without prompting responses) on the “most important issue facing Canada today” in a 2016 EKOS Research poll, 33% said the economy, merely 2% said First Nations issues.

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- From a list of six issues, in a December 2017 Nanos Research poll, 42% said the economy should be the federal government's top priority for 2018, just 5% chose "Indigenous relations."
- In a 2017 Vector Poll™ just 3% said — among 10 issues — improving the lives of Canada's Aboriginal and First Nations people "should receive the greatest attention from the country's leaders or be their highest priority."

Canadians concede they've minimized Indigenous people's problems. In a 2010 Ipsos poll more than half (52%) agreed that governments don't do enough to help "the Aboriginal peoples of Canada" because "we as Canadians don't pressure them enough to take serious action."

Importantly, Canadians acknowledge there is racism directed against the original peoples of Canada. Researchers at Environics concluded from a 2016 poll that "an increasing majority" of Canadians "believe Aboriginal peoples experience discrimination today on a regular basis.... Many believe they also experience systemic discrimination at the institutional level, especially in the education and criminal justice systems."

- In a 2016 Ipsos poll 38% of the public said the criminal justice system generally treats Aboriginal peoples worse than other Canadians.
- In the Environics poll 69% agreed that "most Canadians are prejudiced against Aboriginal peoples, whether or not they are conscious of it."

In a 2005 Ipsos poll 31% of the public said Aboriginals and First Nations people are the "most likely to be targets or victims of racism in your community." Just slightly more (38%) said Muslims and Arabs are the most likely to be victims of racism.

Opinion had barely changed in 2016 when an Abacus Data poll found 46% saying there is "a lot" of discrimination towards **Muslims** in Canada, 31% a lot of discrimination towards **Indigenous** people, and 25% a lot toward black people.

The Idle No More movement emerged in December 2012, but its demonstrations didn't push Indigenous people's hardships into the ranks of urgent issues. A month afterward, 62% of Canadians told a Nanos poll that Idle No More demonstrators blockading railways or roads would not "advance the cause of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people." In the same poll 46% had a negative view of Idle No More.

What will make Indigenous people's conditions a cause for the general public instead of only a concern? Indigenous Canadians will have to bridge a demographic partition.

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There are only 1.4 million Indigenous people in Canada, barely 4% of the population. They are dispersed across the country (around six in 10 live off the reserves). They can't swing more than a few electoral districts in provincial and federal elections. Turnout among Indigenous eligible voters in federal elections typically runs 20 percentage points behind other eligible voters.

In contrast, there are nearly 9 million millennials, people 18 to 38 years old. There are 8 million Baby Boomers (the 53-to-72-year-olds). Millennials have a cause: it's jobs. Baby Boomers have a cause: health care.

How can Canadians who support Indigenous Canadians make Indigenous issues urgent for non-Indigenous people? Instead of isolating them as Indigenous issues it requires connecting the problems to show the common cause between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests.

For instance, providing clean water on reserves should be a component of a water-safety strategy for all Canadians. In 2015 officials issued 10 times as many drinking-water advisories outside First Nations communities than on reserves. Fixing substandard housing for Indigenous people should be in programs to guarantee a sturdy roof over everybody's head.

Treating Indigenous people's problems as just their problems weakens the strands of affiliation between Indigenous people and other Canadians. Without feeling they are part of the same struggle, other Canadians will not make Indigenous Canadians' problems urgent.

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Marc Zwelling is the founder of the Vector Poll™ (www.vectorresearch.com) and author of *Public Opinion and Polling For Dummies* (Wiley, 2012).