

Canada's First Nations Confront Ottawa: "Expect Resistance"

By [Eric Walberg](#)

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"Respect Existence or Expect Resistance", chant First Nations as a showdown 11 January looms with Prime Minister Harper.

Sparked by Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike on tiny 'Victoria' Island near Ottawa's Parliament Hill, now in its third frigid week, the native uprising across Canada is in fact the latest manifestation of the world's colonized peoples trying to throw off the shackles of imperialism. An exciting moment, one of vital import for us all.

Their warrior path brings to mind Egyptian Muslims fighting their westernizers and Mubarakite old guard since the revolution in January 2011, or the struggle by Palestinian natives against Israeli theft of their land. It is a continuation of the Iranian people's struggle in the face of unrelenting subversion from the West. It's no coincidence that Cairenes were some of the demonstrators at Canadian embassies, or that native activist-leader Terrance Nelson recently was offered support in Tehran for his efforts to gain a seat at the OPEC table for the real owners of Canada's oil and gas resources.

This struggle has been going on for more than two centuries. In Canada, it really got underway in the 19th century, as the trickle of colons became a deluge and the theft of native lands accelerated. In Egypt it began in 1798, when Napoleon invaded, and crescendoed in 1875 when British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli 'brought' the Suez Canal — built by indentured labor at the cost of tens of thousands of Egyptian lives. In Iran, it also began in the early 19th century, when Russia seized northern Iran (present day Azerbaijan), and picked up steam when Reuter and other western businessmen bribed the Shah to grant them lucrative economic concessions. Palestine has been at the center of the anti-imperial struggle since the western powers imposed illegally a Jewish state at the heart of the Muslim world.

Canada's natives fought for their land, but were overwhelmed by the wily and land-hungry colons, and today represent only 3% of Canada's population, living for the most part short, bleak lives in dire poverty on the dregs of land allotted them by the victors.

But resistance is alive and well. "Idle No More" has swept Canada since Spence pitched her tent near Parliament Hill. Egyptians have risen up four times since Disraeli's coup, eventually taking back the Canal and today are fashioning a new political order inspired not by western imperial dictates, but by the Quran. Iran finally had its revolution in 1979 and has been affronting the imperial monster ever since, telling truth to the world's would-be masters.

The ploys of the imperialists were all variations on the program to steal others' lands, and

tie their economies to a world order policed by imperial guns and money. There are many weapons in the imperial arsenal, including nuclear weapons capable of destroying all life on Earth many times over, the latest being the armed drone, deploying 'depleted' uranium bunker-buster bombs (guaranteed to 'keep on giving' for hundreds of thousands of years).

Postmodern imperialism, the latest fashion, cloaks itself in 'human rights' and the fight against WMDs and terrorism. That this is mere subterfuge is revealed by the invasion of Iraq (and planned invasions of Iran and Syria) on the pretext of WMD eradication. Instead, hundreds of thousands of innocent people have been killed by US-led invasions, with no one guilty, no WMDs and no end in sight.

Israel's flagrant violation of all international norms similarly goes unpunished, indeed is subsidized by the US and enthusiastically endorsed by Canada.

Imperialism is alive and all too well, and Canada is fortunate to at last have a clear voice shouting this grim truth to other Canadians and the world. The alarm went off for Harper last year when native activist-leader Terrance Nelson went to Tehran, defying the Conservatives' unprovoked cutting of diplomatic relations with Iran last November. Nelson was pilloried as a traitor, though it should be clear by now to Canadians who is trading away Canada's sovereignty and our reputation.

Attawapiskat Chief Spence was inspired by four native women in Saskatoon who began a hunger strike also last November, protesting the Harper government's omnibus bill C-45, which:

- *abrogates the Indian Act, ending native sovereignty,

- *gives band councils greater municipal powers,

- *makes reserve lands "fee simple property" (which can be bought and sold, not only leased),

- *allows taxes to be charged and collected by the new Native governments.

The battle lines are drawn. The Harperite status quo is now being mobilized to push through his agenda. Commenting on the 1905 treaty governing Attawapiskat, the *National Post's* Jonathan Kay wrote: "The whole basis of the treaty was destroyed as soon as traditional native hunting life came to an end. This is the fundamental reason that the Idle No More message on treaties is irrelevant: The great challenge of native policy in the 21st century will be to integrate natives into the larger economy that is based in Canadian population centers. You can't turn the clock back to 1905, or even to 1930." The only answer, the assimilationists claim, is to push the remnants of the natives into urban ghettos, where they can live like other Canadian poor on welfare handouts.

The *Globe and Mail's* Jeffery Simpson lectures natives for "living intellectually in a dream palace", built on "mythology about environmental protection and the aboriginals' sacred link to their lands". Harper was correct in refusing a face-to-face meeting with the native chief, since a prime minister should not be "blackmailed" into doing what any lobby group or individual wants.

As a First Nations chief devoted to her people, it is the "lobbyist" Spence who has the creds as a Canadian leader, not the scheming power-hungry Harper, who clawed his way to the top of the Reform/ Conservative Party over broken promises and lies.

The “scattered incidents” Simpson sneers at are taking place spontaneously from coast-to-coast by First Nations protesters, closing rail lines, roads, flashdancing in malls, even disrupting and closing several bridge border crossings with the US. Demonstrations have been held around the world — Palestine, Cairo, London, the US, Aotearoa (New Zealand).

Despite media disdain, there has been an outpouring of sympathy from Canadians native and non-native. NDP MP Charlie Angus visited Spence in her tent, as did Justin Trudeau: “It was deeply moving to meet Chief Theresa today. She is willing to sacrifice everything for her people. She shouldn’t have to.”

The struggle has quickly been taken up by band leaders trying to co-opt the protests. Shawn Atleo, head of the Assembly of First Nations, has called for a renewed campaign of civil disobedience beginning 16 January with “country-wide economic disruptions” and “breach of treaty” declarations. This should climax with the proposed Crown-First Nations Summit 24 January, a repeat of last year’s meeting, when the appalling housing conditions on the Attawapiskat reserve first hit the media.

Idle No More may well act as a catalyst and ignite a broader struggle against Harper’s agenda, his hollowing out of environmental protection laws and Canada’s declining record on human rights. Perhaps Harper’s grudging agreement to meet with native leaders 11 January is too late for him. Starving a native women leader at the heart Canada’s democracy, at Christmas no less, is not conducive to good PR for a leader whose hold on power is shaky. Spence agreed to attend but refused to end the hunger strike she began 11 December until she is convinced this isn’t just another PR stunt. She insisted that Governor General David Johnston and Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty be at the meeting.

Canada is at last redeeming itself in the world’s eyes after seven humiliating years of kowtowing to the US-Israeli agenda both abroad and at home, and we have the First Nations people to thank, their resolve “a conduit for the pain of the world”, comments Naomi Klein. Idle No More speaks for all Canadians against the 1% who so eagerly sell out Canada’s resources and smirch its reputation in the world. “The greatest blessing of all is indigenous sovereignty itself. If Canadians have a chance of stopping Harper’s planet-trashing plans, it will be because these legally binding rights – backed up by mass movements, court challenges, and direct action will stand in his way.”

Not only do Canada’s natives empower all Canadians against the 1%, they also help us understand Canada’s actions in Palestine and Iran, countries whose people love Canada and root for our natives, whose struggle against the imperial order is their struggle too. Victory against Canada’s Mubarak helps Egyptians shake off the legacy of neoliberalism, helps Palestinians in their struggle against Jewish colons in Israel, and Iranians dying in hospitals for lack of medicines due to the embargo intended to crush their independence.

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