In this issue of *Northern Public Affairs*, we seize an important moment in Canadian history to honour the richness of Indigenous and Western traditions embodied in modern treaties.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the *Royal Proclamation* (1763), the 40th anniversary of the Supreme Court of Canada’s *Calder* decision (1973), and the 20th anniversaries of the Nunavut (1993) and Yukon (1993) treaties.

These events have profoundly shaped the political and economic relationships governing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, and they should be recognized for their contribution to Canadian public life, both past and present.

Unfortunately, these anniversaries may seem obscure to many Canadians. Treaty scholar J.R. Miller notes that “although [treaties] have been an important feature of the country since the earliest days of contact between Natives and newcomers, relatively few Canadians understand what they are or the role they have played in the country’s past.” They are, he argues, “part of the foundation of the Canadian state.”

If true, this would be more than unfortunate, for it would suggest that many Canadians lack basic knowledge about the Indigenous and Euro-Canadian aspects of their history and their political institutions. Civic duty — the basic commitment of citizens to their democracy and to each other — suffers as a result.

A brief history is in order. The *Royal Proclamation of 1763* — sometimes referred to informally as the Indigenous “Magna Carta” — is the earliest statement of imperial policy recognizing Indigenous rights to lands in northeastern North America. By forbidding colonial governments from granting unceded lands, prohibiting private individuals from purchasing them, and establishing principles governing the procedure for subsequent treaty-making, the *Proclamation* created the basis for Canadian political and economic expansion into Indigenous lands. It also created the honourable and enduring “nation-to-nation” relationship between Indigenous people and the Crown.

Between 1781 and 1921, over four hundred treaties, adhesions, and land surrenders were negotiated, first in Upper Canada, and then in the areas that would become Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. The last of these so-called “historic treaties” was signed in the Northwest Territories in 1921. The provisions of the *Proclamation* also stood in the way of American expansion, exacerbating tensions that led to the War of 1812. Today, the *Royal Proclamation* echoes in our constitution, which recognizes and affirms Aboriginal and treaty rights, and creates a basis for the negotiation and settlement of modern treaties.

The *Calder* decision of 1973 is also worthy of commemoration. At a time when Canada’s official policy toward Indigenous people had been one of assimilation, the Supreme Court in *Calder* reaffirmed the existence of “Aboriginal title” in Canada and helped to bolster a growing Indigenous movement.

As a result of this decision, and in the face of overwhelming change in public values, the federal government was forced to recognize Indigenous claims to title over lands that had not been extinguished by the historic treaties or in subsequent legislation. And so began a period of treaty-making that continues to this day. Since *Calder*, we have seen the settlement of 27 comprehensive land claims and self-government agreements in B.C., Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Labrador. Two of these — the Nunavut and Yukon final agreements — turn twenty this year.

Increasingly, modern treaties are shaping regional politics and economies by assigning negotiated rights, benefits, and obligations to Indigenous peoples, government, and third parties. However, the articles in this issue of *Northern Public Affairs* suggest the implementation of these agreements falls short of the solemn promises exchanged between Indigenous people and the Crown.

This situation must be rectified. But if recent public reaction to Indigenous demands for honourable recognition are any indication, perverse attitudes toward Indigenous institutions will no doubt get in the way.

Take Idle No More as an example. This movement erupted in Indigenous communities across the country against a backdrop of longstanding grievances against the Crown, including its failure
to fully honour historic treaties. Indigenous people argued that their lands and livelihoods were threatened by the imposition of the federal omnibus legislation, which substantially removed environmental protection over lands to which many Indigenous people are economically, culturally, and spiritually connected.

Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence lodged a long list of demands, using personal sacrifice as leverage. But amidst the calls to address longstanding issues of poverty, hunger, overcrowded housing, basic education, and healthcare, one demand stood out: the federal government should respect the treaty relationship.

But mainstream public opinion turned against Spence. Commentators derided agents of the movement for living in a “dream palace of memory.” The federal government had already diminished the community leadership’s moral authority the year before when it imposed third party management in response to a state of emergency called because of an ongoing housing crisis. Spence — an elected representative of her First Nation — was cast as a corrupt and incompetent administrator, rather than a national leader whose calls for support deserved respect.

Of course there was also support for Spence and the Idle No More movement. But it came from the Indigenous, religious, environmental, and human rights groups whose influence has so far been unable to affect substantive change in government policy.

Clearly, for change to happen it must be accompanied by a shift in the way the Canadian public understands the historical continuity of Indigenous nationhood in all aspects of public life. To achieve this, ongoing public education is needed on a national scale.

Last year, the Prime Minister was keen to commemorate the War of 1812 with a host of activities and expensive messaging. He invited all Canadians join him in celebrating what he called “a seminal event in the making of our great Country.” But recent calls to commemorate the historic relationship between Indigenous people and the Crown — by recognizing the Royal Proclamation in Canada’s anniversary celebrations or renaming Victoria Day “Victoria and First Peoples Day” — have so far fallen on deaf ears.

This, again, is unfortunate. Canadian institutional life owes as much to the past as it does to an ongoing Indigenous presence. We recognize this as we honour the anniversaries of these four remarkable events in Indigenous and Euro-Canadian history.

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