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Joint Truth and Reconciliation Action Group

Bill C-39: Expediting Development at the Expense of Indigenous Rights

By Kate Gunn, First Peoples Law

Make sure your MP knows what you think about this bill!

In September 2026, the Government of Canada introduced Bill C-39, the *Building Canada Strong Act*. The Bill is the federal government's latest effort to enact legislation to accelerate the pace of resource development in Canada. Bill C-39 has been touted by federal officials as a prerequisite to strengthening Canada's economy by attracting investment in large-scale resource projects. Unfortunately, it also marks the most recent example of the federal government prioritizing its economic agenda over the rights of Indigenous peoples. If passed into law, Bill C-39 will result in dramatic changes to the federal process for the review and approval of major infrastructure projects.

The proposed legislation would streamline federal reviews for major projects, impose a one-year legislative timeline on project approvals, and consolidate Crown consultation. It would also establish a process whereby certain projects can be pre-approved in geographic areas designated as "Regions of National Interest." Critically, the Bill makes no mention of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* or the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent. First Nations and Indigenous organizations have also raised serious concerns that the Bill will undermine consultation and sideline their inherent and constitutionally protected rights.

Bill C-39 passed second reading at the House of Commons last week. It is now being fast-tracked through a special senate committee rather than the typical standing committee review process. The Bill could receive royal assent as early as December 2026. In the 1980s, Indigenous leaders and grassroots organizers fought a long, high-profile battle to ensure protections for Indigenous rights were included in the patriation of Canada's Constitution. The result was section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, which "recognizes and affirms" the existing Aboriginal and Treaty rights of Indigenous peoples of Canada.

In the decades that followed, the Supreme Court of Canada issued a series of landmark decisions that clarify both the source and scope of those rights, and the Crown's responsibilities to protect them. Taken as a whole, the decisions recognize that Indigenous peoples were here on the land long before colonization, that their legal systems continue to exist today, and that governments have constitutional obligations to ensure those rights are recognized, protected, and respected.

Canada's rush to enact Bill C-39 – and to hasten the development of resources which are subject to Indigenous peoples' Aboriginal title, rights and Treaty rights – disregards the fact that passing new federal laws does not, and cannot, alter Canada's constitutional obligations to Indigenous peoples.

Only a few years ago, Canada made repeated, lofty commitments to achieving reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. In many cases, those public-facing statements failed to result in meaningful

progress. At other times, they were accompanied by action, including the passage of the federal *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*.

Fast forward to 2026, and much has changed. Political and economic uncertainty, both domestically and south of the border, has led the federal government to shift its focus from restoring its relationship with Indigenous peoples to expediting the extraction of resources from Indigenous lands.

It remains to be seen whether Bill C-39 will be passed into law, and whether Canada intends to introduce further initiatives which undermine Indigenous rights in the name of economic security. What remains certain, however, is that constitutional protections for Indigenous rights will continue to exist regardless of the political landscape.

Canada cannot unilaterally develop resources on the lands of Indigenous peoples, nor can it use its legislative process to bypass its constitutional obligations. The federal government would do well to remember these fundamental principles as it rushes to enact Bill C-39.

Canadian astronaut takes Indigenous Knowledge to new heights

By Kerry Benjoe, EFN News June 2024



Artist Henry Guimond, Leader of Turtle Lodge David "Sabe" Courchene and CSA Astronaut Jeremy Hansen at the official unveiling of Hansen's person patch. Hansen commissioned Guimond to create a special patch that paid homage to Indigenous Knowledge.

The stars lined up when Canadian Space Agency astronaut Jeremy Hansen met David "Sabe" Courchene from Turtle Lodge. As a result, Canada's first astronaut to travel around the moon as part of the Artemis II Mission will do so while carrying the Seven Grandfather Teachings close to his heart. It is to be the first crewed mission on NASA's path towards establishing a long-term presence in space specifically for science and exploration. Hansen will be carrying the Seven Grandfather teachings on a badge created especially for him by Courchene's brother-in-law Henry Guimond.

Their worlds collided last fall during a chance meeting at a ghost ceremony on the east coast. While preparing for the Artemis II Mission one of Hansen's Earthly goals was to connect with Canadians from all walks of life. He felt this would not only help him to expand his horizons but also help him focus on the gravity of the mission. At the time, neither Hansen nor Courchene knew how profoundly their lives would be impacted by each other. It all started when Hansen expressed an interest in learning more about Indigenous people. He contacted Turtle Lodge the international centre for Indigenous education and wellness located on the Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba. "I didn't get a direct connection right away," said Hansen.

Having previously participated in pipe and sweat-lodge ceremonies, the astronaut was invited to the east coast for a Ghost Ceremony. Coincidentally, it was being reintroduced to the area by Courchene and other members of Turtle Lodge. "It was one of those serendipitous things where someone suggested it and I ended up in a place and they were there," said Hansen. While at the ceremony, Courchene heard an astronaut wanted to meet him and was immediately curious. From the very beginning, the two men formed a bond of mutual respect.

“When you meet someone like Jeremy with that stature…it’s special,” said Courchene. He said it’s been a humbling experience being involved in this leg of Hansen’s journey. “Our people have so much to offer,” said Courchene. “The knowledge that our people carry it’s an ancient knowledge and we can help.” He believes Hansen can bring more awareness about the importance of Indigenous Knowledge, which is needed especially now considering the current climate crisis facing humanity.

Hansen said making the connection with Indigenous Knowledge has strengthened his core belief system and has also introduced some new ideas. “Indigenous knowledge has cemented things I have learned from my parents,” he said. Hansen was raised on a farm and always felt a deep connection with nature. Although he didn’t grow up around Indigenous people, over the years he’s had many opportunities to sit with Elders and learn from them.

Hansen said there is “great truth” in what he hears from Indigenous Knowledge Keepers. “I love what Sabe from the Turtle Lodge has taught me many times, and it seems very true to me, that is Indigenous people haven’t been treated with equal value,” he said. “They have long held that if they are patient then eventually their gifts would be needed and respected. That time really seems like now. We need to reverse what we are doing to Mother Earth and learn how to tread more lightly on this planet.”

Hansen says space data has been collected for decades and impacts of climate change can be tracked. He believes space exploration is not so much about looking beyond Earth, rather it’s about being able to look back on the planet to better understand it. “The best way to take the heartbeat of Mother Earth is from space,” he said. Hansen says it’s hard to ignore hard evidence when it comes to climate change. “There is just endless amounts of things you can take from these datasets that we’re capturing from the RADARSAT (satellite system) at the Canadian Space Agency,” he said.

Hansen does see the connection and value of Indigenous Knowledge in his line of work, which is why he chose to honour it while on his space mission. Courchene, Hansen and Guimond unveiled the Seven Grandfather’s patch at the First Nations University of Canada in Regina. According to the CSA, when an astronaut belongs to a space agency other than NASA, that agency is allowed to create a personal patch for its crewmember. The patch often reflects the mission objectives and some personal preferences of the astronaut who wears it.

Hanson’s patch depicts the Artemis II mission as it travels around Grandmother Moon. Also on the patch is the turtle to represent truth, the buffalo to represent respect, the eagle to represent love, the bear to represent courage or strength, the bigfoot to represent honesty, the beaver to represent wisdom and the wolf to represent humility. Both Hansen and Courchene believe Indigenous Knowledge holds the key to creating a better future on Earth for all people.

In the fall of 2026, Matt Galloway interviewed Jeremy Hansen after his return from the mission. Listen to the interview here and hear the moving account of his experience described through an Indigenous lens:

https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-63-the-current/clip/16209723-jeremy-hansen-trip-around-moon-why-cant-concentrate

Canada By Canoe – 8000 km + 200 days

When Nolan, Georges, and Will sent an email to True North Aid almost two years ago, the team was curious, impressed, and honoured that they cared so much about Indigenous communities in the north. And they were also little skeptical *"are they really going to pull this off?"* This exceptional group of young men spent 5 years planning the trip, and had such passion for tripping and northern communities.

On April 11, 2026, the trio set out from Tadoussac, and the small staff at True North Aid started the tracking of their progress. They posted on social media to help out, updated fundraising pages, arranged media opportunities. heavy lifting was done by the paddlers themselves. Despite a difficult start, it was evident that this team was going to complete this trip. No question. Tenacity and strength despite many obstacles, shone through in all three of them.

And gratitude. Every time the team spoke to one of the paddlers over the phone (to get an update, to send out a replacement Garmin tracker, to get new paddles delivered), they always expressed thanks. A regular True North Aid donor in Halifax, aged 96, regularly sends notes to 'the boys' and has even downloaded Instagram for the first time, just to watch the videos. Just one example of the impact that Will, Nolan and Georges have had. To date, they have raised $125,000 for True North Aid.

Read more here: https://www.canadabycanoe.com/

Tomson Highway's Massey Lectures
by Kip Ip

Tomson Highway's 2022 Massey Lectures explore basic questions about human life. The series, Laughing with the Trickster: On Sex, Death, and Accordions, compares Cree, ancient Greek, and Christian mythologies. Highway argues that Indigenous mythologies offer lasting answers to modern problems. He describes these three mythologies meeting in North America.

Language and Understanding: Highway argues that language shapes how we see the world. It helps us create mythologies: stories about who we are and why we exist. His comparison of languages with birdsong celebrates how they make our planet beautiful and fascinating. A familiar family saying offers a simple example of meaning carried by language. Its words may recall a person or place as well as express an idea. A translation can explain the words yet miss the affection or humour we associate with them. Care also matters when we hear a language we do not understand. Our difficulty following the words tells us little about the speaker's knowledge. I find this a useful reminder when something unfamiliar takes time to understand. You can pause over a word and consider the author's explanation. It may reveal a connection with land or family. That explanation can help us understand why the author kept the original word. A quick English replacement may leave part of its meaning behind. Creation and Our Place Highway explores how the universe began and the divine presence behind creation.

Death: In the Greek account he describes, creation comes through sex. Life in that story is for enjoyment rather than suffering. He compares this with a linear Christian story that has a beginning, middle, and end. The Indigenous perspective he describes keeps departed loved ones among us today. He includes earlier generations and children who have died. They remain present, even in the

air around us… This means more than remembering a person who has died. Highway describes a continuing presence in the world itself. Our memories may help us approach that idea, but remembering and believing in that presence are not the same. His comparisons do not describe everyone's beliefs. Such stories connect people with family and place. A shoreline may be scenery to one visitor and hold family memories for another. The view alone cannot tell us everything that matters there. In conversation, we can share what a place means to us. Someone else's memories may change how we see a familiar shoreline. I do not have to share a belief to listen carefully to the person explaining it.

Room for Laughter: Highway introduces a Cree world of wild laughter. The Trickster's humour can be rude and surprising. The figure is ridiculous yet wise. Through these stories, Highway invites listeners to experience life with joy and pleasure. Those qualities belong together. A character can make us laugh and still offer a different way to see life. Enjoyment has a place in these serious lectures; it does not have to wait until the discussion is over. The CBC overview also describes humour about the body and its functions. Some listeners may find this tone unfamiliar. We can notice our reaction and still give the story time. Feeling surprised need not end our interest. Stories about injustice remain important. A funny play or poem can sit beside them. You can notice what the characters enjoy, as well as the difficulties they face. This allows more of their lives to enter the conversation. Sharing a favourite scene with a friend can make a discussion easier to join. There is no need to find a lesson in every joke. Laughter does not mean caring less about painful history.

Sex, Gender and Belonging: Highway questions how belief in one God can limit our understanding of gender and the body. He compares this with pantheism, which finds the divine throughout the world. In his account, this view makes room for many genders. His contrast connects beliefs about the divine with ideas about human life. It invites me to notice when a familiar belief limits what I consider possible. It does not give me a label for someone else's gender identity. You can consider how beliefs shape the welcome you offer. A friendly greeting alone does not show whether someone feels accepted. What matters is whether they can speak without fear of ridicule or rejection. Using the name someone gives us is one small way to show respect. At a gathering, each person can choose what to share. Those who prefer to listen can still belong. Nobody should have to reveal private details or speak for a whole community. Death and

Our Responsibilities: Highway finds the Christian account of the afterlife dismal and the Greek view somewhat more positive. He then describes an Indigenous view in which the dead remain on Earth. They stay within the circle of the garden. Care for that garden is entrusted to us when we are born. The garden represents our shared Earth. In this image, the place that receives new life also holds those who have died. I understand this as a connection between beliefs about the afterlife and responsibility across generations. Your beliefs may differ from Highway's. You can still consider what you hope to leave for others. A local garden or park gives that thought a familiar setting. Learning from those who care for it can reveal useful ways to help. Respect matters in grief too. A friend may value a short message, quiet company, or time alone. Their wishes can guide our support. We should not use Highway's account to tell them how to feel. These five themes leave me thinking about how stories shape our treatment of land, bodies, and each other. You could begin with one lecture and share a thought that surprised you. That conversation can hold both difficult truths and joy.



Kip with John Olthuis – our guest in Kingston in Sept '26

Listen to these lectures here: ***CBC Massey Lectures 2022: Tomson Highway. CBC. https://www.cbc.ca/radiointeractives/ideas/cbc-massey-lectures-tomson-highway***

Can we find any guidance in the Bible on the issue of returning the land? Here are two passages that offer some fodder for reflection:

The Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee (From Leviticus 25)

25 The Lord said to Moses at Mount Sinai, 2 “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the Lord. 3 For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. 4 But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. 5 Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. 6 Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you—for yourself, your male and female servants, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, 7 as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.

8 “‘Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. 9 Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land.
10 Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. 11 The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. 12 For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields.

13 “‘In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to their own property.

14 “‘If you sell land to any of your own people or buy land from them, do not take advantage of each other. 15 You are to buy from your own people on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And they are to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. 16 When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what is really being sold to you is the number of crops. 17 Do not take advantage of each other but fear your God. I am the Lord your God.

Zelophehad’s Daughters (From Numbers 27)

27 The daughters of Zelophehad son of Hepher, the son of Gilead, the son of Makir, the son of Manasseh, belonged to the clans of Manasseh son of Joseph. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah and Tirzah. They came forward 2 and stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders and the whole assembly at the entrance to the tent of meeting and said, 3 “Our father died in the wilderness. He was not among Korah’s followers, who banded together against the Lord, but he died for his own sin and left no sons. 4 Why should our father’s name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father’s relatives.”

5 So Moses brought their case before the Lord, 6 and the Lord said to him, 7 “What Zelophehad’s daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance among their father’s relatives and give their father’s inheritance to them.

8 “Say to the Israelites, ‘If a man dies and leaves no son, give his inheritance to his daughter. 9 If he has no daughter, give his inheritance to his brothers. 10 If he has no brothers, give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. 11 If his father had no brothers, give his inheritance to the nearest relative in his clan, that he may possess it. This is to have the force of law for the Israelites, as the Lord commanded Moses.’”



New Online Reading Group

JTRAG will be organizing its next online reading group in January 2027. We will be reading books, the first of which will be Tomson Highway’s Permanent Astonishment. We encourage you to get the book and begin reading as soon as possible. Watch for an announcement with dates and times in December.



JTRAG’s Online Reading List

This month features **Tomson Highway’s 2022 Massey Lectures**, a series of five audio talks from CBC Radio’s *Ideas*. The Cree writer explores language and life through stories and humour.

JTRAG’s monthly list includes books for children, teens, and adults, plus audio and video resources. Summaries, discussion questions, and access guidance support learning, reflection, and group discussion.

Open the **JTRAG Reading-list Collection** and select **November 2026**. For questions or help finding a resource, contact Library Reading Coordinator Kip Ip at kip.ip@queensu.ca.

PLEASE share this information in your networks so that it is available to a wide range of interested individuals and groups. Kip also welcomes your suggestions of other print or audio resources that should be added to the list.

Let us know what you think

We invite/need your comments and suggestions. We welcome material from our readers and are pleased to include comments and reflection pieces here as catalysts for more reflection and dialogue. The submissions we include do not represent any official position by JTRAG members or our readers.