



OPINION

# Who do the national Indigenous organizations really represent?

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Last July, Roseanne Archibald was elected as the Assembly of First Nations' first female national chief. Just one year later, the person in charge of the country's most influential First Nations organization found herself facing suspension by the executive committee for speaking out about AFN internal matters and for allegedly bullying and harassing four of her staff members. Ms. Archibald, in response, challenged the legality of the suspension.

That leadership crisis was a significant focus of the AFN's annual general assembly from July 5 to 7. In duelling speeches, Ms. Archibald made allegations of corruption in the organization and called its structure a "threat" to Indigenous sovereignty, while two regional Chiefs, speaking on behalf of the executive committee, said that Ms. Archibald's actions have put the AFN in a bad light and that the decision to suspend her was in the "best interests of the company." A majority of the AFN-member Chiefs, however, challenged that decision as beyond the authority of the executive committee and harmful to the organization's collective advocacy.

But the AFN is not the only high-profile Indigenous group having political troubles recently.

In 2019, just months before the release of the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) descended into chaos over staff mistreatment concerns. In recent years, the Ontario Native Women's Association and Quebec Native Women – once the heart and soul of NWAC, as the organizations comprised the largest memberships – have withdrawn from it.

And in 2021, the Métis National Council was badly damaged when the Manitoba Métis Federation pulled out of the organization over concerns about whom the Métis Nation of Ontario allowed to register as Métis. "We view this not as MMF leaving MNC," MMF president David Chartrand said at the time. "Rather, it is the MNC that has abandoned the

The AFN, the MNC and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami are the three primary national Indigenous organizations today. Each of them claims to represent one of three distinct political groupings: First Nations in Canada, those descended from the historic Métis Nation and the Inuit in Canada, respectively. The other national Indigenous organization sometimes included among this group is NWAC, but more often than not, NWAC is excluded from the nation-to-nation political tables with the federal government.

When Ottawa speaks about “distinction-based approaches” to government law and Indigenous policy, it means approaches that are supposed to be individually tailored to First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, which has historically made the organizations important advocacy voices at the table.

But while the ITK has proven relatively stable, the other two organizations have struggled. The AFN has been in conflict with its own members for well over a decade, at least since the resignation of former national chief Shawn Atleo, who may have faced a non-confidence vote, had he not chosen to leave in 2014 over his controversial support of Stephen Harper’s government’s Bill C-33, the First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act. (I was the runner-up to Mr. Atleo in the election for the AFN national chief in 2012.) Critics of the legislation, which was aimed at aligning education standards on reserves with provincial standards, said that it ignored First Nation treaty rights to education and put too much control in the hands of the federal government.

Grassroots Indigenous peoples, who were upset about leaders’ failures to protect Indigenous rights, then started the Idle No More movement, calling out the federal government for breaches of rights, systemic racism and injustices while also criticizing the AFN for acting like an arm of the government and propping up federal initiatives.

Instead of taking stock, being transparent and doing the hard work to really assess the efforts, value and governance of the AFN, its own executive – which is composed of the regional Chiefs – now appears to have launched a public attack on Ms. Archibald. They clearly didn't read the room, though. At the annual general assembly, the majority of the AFN-member Chiefs not only backed the national chief by rejecting a resolution that would see her temporarily suspended with pay until an investigation into the complaints was concluded, they also supported her request for a forensic audit of the organization, and called out the regional chiefs for their actions. And so, instead of celebrating Indigenous History Month and National Indigenous Peoples Day, Indigenous advocates and commentators had to field questions about the AFN's political circus – prompting many grassroots members to say that the AFN does not represent them.

For the Métis National Council, the issue of citizenship appears to be at the heart of the current political upheaval. With increasing reports of non-Indigenous peoples fraudulently claiming Métis identities, the issue of Métis Nation citizenship is front and centre for the organization. The Manitoba Métis Federation raised concerns about the Métis Nation of Ontario expanding its citizenship to include non-Métis Nation people – something to which the MNO has admitted – but while the MNC originally suspended the MNO, it later reversed its decision. In response, the MMF left the MNC.

Litigation by the MNO and other regional affiliates of the MNC against former MNC president Clément Chartier has only compounded the upheaval, as have allegations of financial irregularities and questionable contracts.

Even the NWAC has lost its way. Established in 1974, NWAC was at the forefront of advocating for an end to inequality, discrimination and violence experienced by Indigenous

Even after they replaced Ms. Joe as president, the infighting did not stop, leading them to miss the opportunity to push hard on the MMIWG national inquiry's recommendations and keep the issue front and centre. As a result, individual Indigenous women advocates – without the funding and staffing of organizations such as NWAC – had to take up the slack.

Indeed, that's what makes this political chaos even worse: that there is so much work to be done. There are multiple, overlapping crises facing First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, including the disproportionate murders and disappearances of Indigenous women and girls; the foster care crisis; the alarming rise in Indigenous incarceration rates; and the ongoing lack of access to safe housing, clean water and health care for too many Indigenous people. On top of all these issues are governments' continued breaches of our treaty rights, land rights and basic human rights. Police shoot and kill Indigenous peoples at shocking rates, while the RCMP continue to criminalize peaceful land defenders and water protectors – all part of the ongoing genocide experienced by Indigenous peoples, which was called out by the MMIWG national inquiry. Even the United Nations has called on Canada to end human rights violations.

So if ever there was a time to prove their relevancy as advocacy organizations, it's now. But each one has failed the grassroots peoples on the ground and affected their families, communities and Nations. Ultimately, it is the grassroots people who suffer the consequences of their infighting, because while these organizations are not to blame for systemic racism, oppression and violence from governments, industry and some segments of society, their failure to make life-and-death issues a priority over their political squabbles leaves individuals to shoulder responsibilities – from research, public education, litigation and strategic organizing – that larger groups should be better equipped to handle.

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rights of Aboriginal peoples – with the three distinct political groups already represented by the AFN, ITK and MNC – it tried to rebrand itself as the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples in 1993, changing its mandate to represent all Indigenous people, including all off-reserve status and non-status Indians, Métis, and Inuit living in the south.

But with a much broader mandate than it had in its NCC years, the CAP floundered. The final political straw came with the election of Patrick Brazeau as CAP national chief. While members were originally hopeful that the passionate Mr. Brazeau could lead the rebuilding of CAP, he eventually became an anti-First Nations mouthpiece for Stephen Harper's Conservative government. This proved to be a devastating political choice for CAP; it still operates today, but largely in obscurity. Mr. Brazeau, however, came away with a Senate appointment.

The AFN, MNC and NWAC need to ask themselves some big questions before they get to that point: What purpose do they currently serve? Do they need to reconsider their governance structures and roles? Can they repair the damage that has been done? Or have they outlived their original purpose and must they reinvent themselves entirely? After all, none of them are governments or rights-holders. They are corporations representing advocacy groups – and right now, they seem to be more focused on their own internal issues.

The only way these organizations could revive themselves would be to reconsider their purpose and restructure their organizations accordingly. That means engaging directly with the grassroots – whether they're members or not – and taking their input to heart about what is working and what is not.

In the meantime, this political dysfunction makes the job of individual Indigenous

Lane, Cheryl Maloney in Mi'kma'ki – among many others – have been powerful leaders on the ground defending our rights alongside our families, clans, houses, villages, communities and Nations.

Canadians are now fully engaged in truth, justice and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, in large part because of the determined advocacy of powerful Indigenous individuals and grassroots groups on the ground. Some national organizations can learn from these powerful social movements – and either support them, or get out of the way.

It's hard to say whether any of these organizations will take stock and try to repair themselves. But I put my faith in our people on the ground, who are working with our Canadian allies to forge a better future for all of us. Let's hope these organizations do the same.

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