
The Canadian Government's Response to American Tariffs, Indigenous Rights, and the Sermon on the Mount

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In March 2025, Canada was confronted with a national economic crisis. The Trump administration's imposition of steep tariffs on many Canadian imports to the United States disrupted deeply entrenched patterns of manufacturing and trade in major sectors of Canada's economy. Automobile, steel, aluminum, and lumber exports were all affected. Subsequent Chinese tariffs on Canadian canola and seafood products also affected the Prairie farm and Maritimes' economies.

The imposition of American tariffs was accompanied by President Trump's suggestion that Canada should become the United States' 51st state. All this created a sense of threat to Canada's economy and sovereignty that helped get Prime Minister Mark Carney's Liberal party elected in the Canadian federal election on April 28, 2025. Upon assuming office, the Liberal government's agenda focused on responding to the crisis created by American tariffs.

What follows will examine how the Canadian federal government's response to this economic crisis disregarded Indigenous Peoples' inherent right to self-determination. This was a major setback to seeking right relations between Indigenous Peoples and settlers in Canada and a moral failing on the federal government's part regarding its commitment to uphold Indigenous rights. We will then show how the Sermon on the Mount warns against this kind of moral failing and works to create a will to a different future. In this case, this would be a future in which the rights of Indigenous Peoples are respected and upheld.

The Federal Government's Response to the Economic Crisis

The sense that Canada faced a national economic crisis in the spring of 2025 as a result of American tariffs was shared by settlers and Indigenous Peoples alike. Much of Canada's economy has been deeply entwined with that of the United States and is heavily dependent upon trade with Americans. The realization that Canada could no longer rely on trade relationships with the United States, its largest trading partner, shocked many Canadians. The federal Liberal govern-

ment responded quickly, tabling the *One Canadian Economy Act*, Bill C-5, on June 6, 2025. This bill has two parts. Part 1 is the *Free Trade and Labour Mobility in Canada Act*. It was designed to strengthen Canada's economy internally by enabling goods, services, and workers to move more freely across provincial and territorial boundaries by removing federal barriers to trade and labour mobility within Canada. Part 2 is the *Building Canada Act*. This was designed to expedite the construction of nationally important economic and infrastructure projects by streamlining the regulatory approval processes for these. It was projected that under Bill C-5, such projects could be approved in two years rather than the usual five.

The Throne Speech delivered by King Charles III on May 27, 2025, stated that the federal government would uphold its commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. As the government embarked on nation-building projects, it would be guided by the principle of seeking Indigenous Peoples' free, prior, and informed consent regarding these initiatives.¹ This commitment was reiterated in the preamble to the *Building Canada Act*.² Unfortunately, it was downgraded in the Act to a commitment to consult with Indigenous Peoples who might be adversely affected before approving a project. The Act places the power to approve projects solely with the Major Projects Office of the federal government, which will decide whether these projects are in the national and Indigenous Peoples' interests. The free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples whose lands, waters, or resources may be affected by a project will not be required for projects to go ahead. Indigenous leaders and commentators judged this relinquishment of the obligation to seek their consent for such projects to be a betrayal of the federal government's commitment to seek right relations with Indigenous Peoples. They were right.

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent

Seeking Indigenous Peoples' free, prior, and informed consent regarding legislation or projects that may affect them is central to seeking right relations with

them. On June 21, 2021, the Canadian government passed Bill C-15, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*. This committed the federal government to align Canada's laws and practices with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the Declaration) and to develop and implement an action plan for this work. Indigenous leaders across Canada lauded this as a major step toward right relations between Indigenous Peoples and settlers.

The notion that Indigenous Peoples must give their consent to undertakings that may affect their lands, waters, or well-being is fundamental to the Declaration. It fleshes out Indigenous Peoples' right of self-determination and the Declaration includes this right in articles 10, 11, 19, 28, 29, and 32. Articles 19 and 32 explicitly mandate states to seek the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples before adopting legislation or administrative procedures that may affect them or before approving projects that may affect their lands or resources. This kind of consent is meant to ensure that Indigenous Peoples and their governments are accorded nation-to-nation status in dealing with Canadian governments and that their rights and interests are acknowledged. It is not intended to be a veto but to stimulate collaboration, working by consensus, and new ways of working with settler governments and businesses.³ Upholding Indigenous Peoples' right to consent is essential to repudiating the ethics of the Doctrine of Discovery, ending Canada's colonial relationship to Indigenous Peoples and entering into right relations with them.

In consultations that the federal government held with Indigenous Peoples in preparing its Action Plan to implement the Declaration, many Indigenous groups stressed the importance of the government upholding its duty to seek their free, prior, and informed consent in the Action Plan and in all aspects of the Declaration's implementation, and to work with Indigenous Peoples to develop a definition of consent. The Action Plan was released on June 21, 2023. Many commitments made in it and much of its rhetoric suggested that the federal government intended to take seriously this recommendation and the inherent right of Indigenous Peoples to self-determination.⁴

In a news release dated June 8, 2025, the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations argued that the proposed *Building One Canada Act* directly violated Bill C-15 and Canada's obligations to Indigenous Peoples under Section 35 of Canada's Constitution. During a National Virtual Forum on Bill C-5 held by the Assembly of First Nations on June 17, 2025, a number of participants noted that the bill conflicted with the federal government's commitment to obtaining Indigenous Peoples' prior consent to projects

that might adversely affect them and that this was a significant step backward in Crown–First Nations relationships. Indigenous leaders emphasized that Indigenous Peoples were not opposed to development or national projects, but they expected to be treated as full partners in decisions and legislation that affected them and their lands. Throughout the public debate on Bill C-5, Indigenous commentators also expressed concern over the way this legislation concentrates decision-making power regarding projects of national interest in a single government office. Senator Paul Prosper proposed an amendment to the *Building Canada Act* that would have embedded Indigenous consent in it, but this was defeated in the Senate, and Bill C-5 passed on June 26, 2025.

The outcry from Indigenous leaders and commentators may not have gone completely unheard. In September 2025, Prime Minister Carney announced that an Indigenous Advisory Council would be created. This will be part of the Major Projects Office, which will provide government oversight for projects deemed of national interest under Bill C-5. The Council has 11 members from across Canada, with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis representation. It is intended to ensure that Indigenous partnerships and economic participation are part of approved major projects and to advise on how to integrate the Declaration's principles in the Major Projects Office's workings. How the Advisory Council will function and what influence it will have in the Major Projects Office remains to be seen. While the Council may bring Indigenous perspectives to bear in helpful ways on the decisions of this office and the ways in which it works, an advisory council does not automatically guarantee free, prior, and informed consent.

The Doctrine of Discovery Model of Reconciliation

Canada has a history of contradictory behaviour in regard to Indigenous rights. On the one hand, Canada has enacted domestic legislation and entered into a number of self-government agreements with specific Indigenous Peoples that have brought it into partial compliance with the Declaration.⁵ Indigenous leaders and commentators have acknowledged that in the past three decades, progress has been made toward right relations. The work of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, plus the work of Indigenous activists and leaders and Indigenous and other scholars, has not been in vain. Canada has been willing to grant Indigenous Peoples soft rights to the preservation and enhancement of their cultures, languages, education, and religions. Yet, Canadian federal and provincial governments have repeatedly

balked at relinquishing control over lands and natural resources.

Sheryl Lightfoot has dubbed this “the Doctrine of Discovery model of reconciliation.”⁶ The Doctrine of Discovery granted European nations sovereignty over lands that they claimed to discover, without regard for the rights of Indigenous Peoples living there. This doctrine presumes European superiority to Indigenous Peoples and underlies Canada’s history of colonialism. In the Doctrine of Discovery model of reconciliation, Canadian governments seek reconciliation between Indigenous and settler peoples by recognizing the value and worth of Indigenous languages and cultures and by aiming to close the socio-economic gaps between Indigenous Peoples and settlers. Yet, these governments have typically sought to maintain control of Indigenous lands and waters and frequently refuse to recognize Indigenous Peoples’ “hard rights” to sovereignty over their territories, self-determination, and consent.⁷ While Canadian governments at times sincerely claim to want to aid Indigenous communities’ economic development, their efforts and vision in this regard have typically operated within the Doctrine of Discovery model of reconciliation.⁸

Canada theoretically repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery when it passed Bill C-15 in 2021. When Pope Francis rejected the Doctrine of Discovery in 2023, Marc Miller, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services, and Daniel Vandal, Minister of Northern Affairs, issued a statement acknowledging that this doctrine had been used to justify Canadian colonialism and atrocities against Indigenous Peoples and that Bill C-15 repudiated and condemned the prejudices that the Doctrine of Discovery represents and the colonial practices that it underlies.⁹ Yet Bill C-5’s refusal to acknowledge Indigenous Peoples’ right to free, prior, and informed consent regarding legislation and projects that will affect them continues the Doctrine of Discovery model of reconciliation.

Much of the rhetoric in and around Bill C-5 speaks of how the bill aims to preserve and enhance economic prosperity for Canada and notes that Indigenous Peoples will be included in this. While economic prosperity is important for Indigenous Peoples’ well-being, right relations with settlers will also require Indigenous Peoples’ liberation from colonial rule and prejudices. The Declaration recognizes that for Indigenous Peoples to survive and thrive, their inherent right to self-determination and to consent needs to be recognized and respected in states’ relationships with them.

The economic and social disparities between Canadian settler populations and Indigenous Peoples are related to the structural violence of colonial economic domi-

nation. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and subsequent scholarly research have demonstrated that positive transformation of the economic conditions of Indigenous Peoples results from breaking with Canada’s history of colonial practices by respecting the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples to self-government and consent in decisions relating to them.¹⁰ As noted above, Canadian federal governments have recognized these rights in legislation and public statements. Yet, to date, they have typically resisted respecting them in practice and have sought to maintain liberal versions of colonial sovereignty.¹¹ Bill C-5 is an example of this. By continuing to operate within the Doctrine of Discovery model of reconciliation, the government is continuing colonial practices that it has condemned and repudiated and that harm Indigenous Peoples.

The contradictory behaviour of Canadian governments in relation to Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination and consent reflects residual colonial attitudes in Canada’s settler population and Canadian governments. It also reflects the corrosive effect that capitalism can have on the moral values of democracies. In capitalist democracies, the social good of economic prosperity tends to assume a predominance that can undermine other moral values, like the rights of minorities and social solidarity.¹² Indigenous activists and leaders have recognized that this tendency can be double-edged. For example, in the 1980s, Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia gained leverage to pressure governments sworn to economic growth to recognize their inherent rights by creating economic uncertainty through their land claims.¹³ However, since the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s, capitalist imperatives have been undermining the moral values and institutions that foster solidarity and respect for others in Western democracies.¹⁴ In the economic crisis of March 2025, concern for Canada’s economic well-being swept aside the rights of Indigenous Peoples that had been ratified in Canada’s Parliament by Bill C-15.

This bore out Murray Sinclair’s observation, made a year or so earlier, that when it comes to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, Canada’s federal governments have other priorities.¹⁵ At a time when Canadians were being exhorted to pull together, ignoring Indigenous Peoples’ right to consent exacerbated internal tensions within Canada. While many settler Canadians condemned the colonial arrogance expressed in President Trump’s talk of Canada becoming the United States’ 51st state, Bill C-5 continued Canada’s “existing colonial property regimes”¹⁶ in relation to Indigenous Peoples. The disregard for Indigenous Peoples’ right to consent in Bill C-5 reveals that for all the good intentions professed by Canada’s federal government about strengthening Canada’s economy and benefiting Indigenous Peoples, there is

a lack of respect and concern for Indigenous Peoples in it and in the hearts of settler Canadians.

For this economic colonialism to end, a will to a different future needs to be created among settler Canadians and their governments. We turn now to examine how the Sermon on the Mount can contribute to this.

A Warning Speech

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is a warning speech.¹⁷ It announces that the future can be different and summons people to act on the basis of Jesus' proclamation of salvation. A greater justice, a deeper peace, a more diverse and harmonious community can be realized in history. It also warns how commitments to justice and right relations can be undermined and perverted and makes a number of calls to self-examination to guard against this.

The Sermon begins with the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–16), Jesus' proclamation of salvation, and describes the calling of those who heed this proclamation. Then follows ethical teaching to guide people in following this calling. First comes a section on Torah interpretation (Matthew 5:17–48), then a section on prayer and spiritual practices (Matthew 6:1–18). Then comes a section, verses 6:19–7:12, dealing with how disciples should comport themselves in relation to social issues.¹⁸ This section begins with verses 6:19–24, which discuss how people should relate to material possessions, money, and financial matters. These verses focus on a person's or community's fundamental orientation in life. The Sermon does not advocate the renunciation of possessions or valorize poverty. It presumes that some who follow its teachings can give alms and have access to private rooms where they can pray (Matthew 6:2–4, 6). Its concern in these verses is with the "heart," the light that is within a person, the primary loyalty that directs a person's course in life.

Matthew 6:19–20 warns against prioritizing financial and material gain over following divine teaching. The next verse, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (v. 21), sharpens this warning by describing what such prioritizing indicates and the perverting effect this can have on a person's moral outlook. It directs its audience to reflect upon what goal they seek in their dealings with possessions and wealth.¹⁹ In life situations, choices must be made between serving God or seeking wealth.²⁰ These choices are determined by where one's heart is. They reveal where one's loyalty lies. Over time, prioritizing financial gain can create a love and a habitus that undermines one's commitment to God and makes one captive to seeking profit. A concern with the pull that material possessions and wealth can exercise on people's hearts

runs throughout Matthew's gospel.²¹ The Sermon calls settler Canadians to self-examination on this point, regarding how concern for national economic prosperity has overruled Canada's commitment to uphold Indigenous Peoples' rights.

Verses 22–23 continue the preceding warning. They teach that a person's and community's humanity and moral character are at stake in their dealings with money.²² These verses use the metaphor of the eye as the lamp of the body, following ancient physiology, to speak of the ethical quality of a person's heart.²³ Who one serves, where one's heart lies, becomes visible in how one relates to financial matters. Does concern with wealth shape one's outlook and actions, or is this concern subordinate to care for justice and the rights of others?

The dichotomy Matthew 6:19–24 sets forth between love of wealth and possessions and love of God culminates in a stark warning: "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). The Greek word *mamnas* (mammon), translated here in the NRSV Bible as "wealth," recognizes the captivating allure that money and material possessions can exercise: how desire for wealth can become a demonic force, an enslavement that crowds out or undermines all other concerns and values.²⁴ The Golden Rule—"Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12)—is the basic principle underlying the Sermon's ethical teachings, and verse 24 warns that love of money can lead people to violate this principle.

A Moral Failing

The Sermon's warning in this regard can be extended to Canadian society as a whole when the right of Indigenous Peoples to consent was downgraded in Bill C-5. It also applies to the deeper moral values underlying Canadian democracy. Modern liberal democracies derive their moral legitimacy from their adherence to fundamental principles of human rights.²⁵ These principles also underlie the Declaration. Approximately 60 member states of the United Nations, Canada included, participated in the negotiations leading to the development of the Declaration. These states contributed to these discussions the basic principles of "non-discrimination, self-determination, and cultural integrity."²⁶ Indigenous Peoples from around the globe made the claim that they were human and wanted respect for their "inherent dignity and self-determination, as enjoyed by other peoples."²⁷ The Declaration fused these two contributions, extending the principles that member states brought so as to articulate the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples pertaining to their cultures, territories, traditions, and communal identities. The extension of these principles in the

Declaration was intended to promote cooperation and respect between states and Indigenous Peoples.²⁸

The Sermon's warning, "You cannot serve God and wealth," illuminates what is at stake in the conflict between Canada's acknowledgement of Indigenous Peoples' rights as articulated in the Declaration and the current federal government's prioritization of economic prosperity over these rights. The federal government's response to American tariffs has failed to uphold Canada's commitments to Indigenous Peoples and is undermining the respect for the rights of others that is fundamental to Canadian democracy. By refusing to respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples regarding major projects that will affect their lands, waters, or well-being, the federal government is sowing seeds of conflict between it and Indigenous Peoples that could create problems for Canada's economy in the future.

A number of Indigenous commentators and leaders argued that upholding Indigenous Peoples' right to consent should not be seen as an obstacle to facilitating new major economic projects. What Indigenous leaders requested was that they and their rights become part of the new streamlined approval process in an appropriate way.

The evil threatening Canada at present is not only American imperialism. It is also Canada's own servitude to economic growth and an entrenched colonial vision of how to pursue this. By allowing these to overrule its legislated commitments to the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Canada is jeopardizing its economic future, its moral basis as a democracy, and the work toward reconciliation done by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

A Will to a Different Future

The Sermon on the Mount condemns and warns against this kind of behaviour. It also teaches that the future can be different and works to create a will to seek this different future. Through its opening invitation in the Beatitudes, its repeated exhortations, its exaggerated imagery, and its concluding warning parables, the Sermon calls for conversion to the salvation promised by God and demands that people live accordingly.²⁹ The principle that is to guide people in living this way is the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12). Underlying all this is the message that a better future is possible. The Sermon is meant to be creatively and contextually put into practice.³⁰ It teaches that Canada can rise above its past and present colonialism.

Canadian churches need to call Canada's failure to uphold Indigenous Peoples' rights into question in light of the Sermon's teachings and the legislative commitments that Canada has made to Indigenous Peoples. The gospel's message of the crucified and risen Christ is the transcendent principle of expectation underlying the Sermon's call to seek a different future.³¹ The religious basis of this transcendent hope creates problems for communicating the Sermon's message in a pluralistic and secular society. However, this transcendent hope can prevent the Church from relinquishing the Sermon's unexhausted ethical insights and can strengthen the resolve of Christian settlers to uphold the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Jürgen Habermas has warned of a "defeatism" lurking in Western secular rationality.³² In the clash between what seems economically expedient and necessary on the one hand and egalitarian notions of morality and justice on the other, the latter often lose their motivating power and fail to sustain an awareness of the violations of solidarity in secular society and the moral imperative to address these.³³ This is the failure of the Canadian government's response to the Trump tariffs in the spring of 2025 in regard to the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Sermon, with its grounding in the crucified and risen Christ, can help Christians retain the awareness that this failure is a violation of solidarity – a moral outrage and a sin. In contrast to a sense of urgency that elevates seeking economic prosperity above the rights of others, the Sermon teaches that there is no peace without justice and that people cannot serve God and mammon simultaneously.³⁴

The Sermon does have a way of communicating its moral insights and concerns to those outside the Church. The Golden Rule's widespread dissemination in various forms throughout history indicates that it has a rationality that can be appreciated from different religious and cultural perspectives.³⁵ Its meaningfulness is not limited to adherents of the Christian faith. It can communicate the Sermon's ethical insights to non-Christians and express its ethical imperatives in a pluralistic culture and secular society. By doing this, it can help form the basis of a will to a different future in Canada.

The Golden Rule implicitly recognizes the often violent character of human interactions. The potential aggressor it is primarily concerned with is ourselves.³⁶ Settlers in Canada need to take this to heart. Its admonition, "do to others as you would have them do to you," invites reflection about basic human goods,³⁷ such as self-determination and dignity. These are the kinds of goods that the Declaration affirms as inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples. This kind of reflection

could lead to the realization that while economic prosperity is good, it is not the only good. Pursuit of it must be balanced by respect for the rights of others and by concern for the moral integrity of one's community and oneself as a human being.

The relationship of the Canadian state to Indigenous Peoples is a test case for the moral character of Canadian democracy. The Declaration was adopted as an attempt to restore Canada's moral legitimacy in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission bringing to light the cultural genocide Canadian governments and churches had practised against Indigenous Peoples. The adoption of the Declaration made moral and legal commitments to uphold Indigenous Peoples' collective rights that are in keeping with the Golden Rule. But simply making these commitments has not solved Canada's crisis of legitimacy. The Sermon demands that the Golden Rule be put into practice. This is where Canadian governments continue to falter.

The Declaration's affirmation of Indigenous Peoples' inherent rights to self-determination and free, prior, and informed consent requires Canadian governments to relinquish their hierarchical colonial relationships with Indigenous Peoples and enter into nation-to-nation relationships with them.³⁸ Fulfilling Canada's commitment to these affirmations will require rethinking and moving beyond Westphalian notions of political sovereignty in which a state typically exercises exclusive control over a given territory. New "plural, overlapping and multiple types of sovereignties"³⁹ will need to be developed in which Canadian governments and Indigenous Peoples share control over territories in ways that accommodate Indigenous rights to self-determination. Sharing sovereignty does not mean giving it up. It means exercising it with respect for and through cooperation with other peoples.

Philosopher Seyla Benhabib argues that states are being pushed by international developments to rethink sovereignty in certain matters in terms of forms of interdependence. Economic globalization and the creation of the World Wide Web have led to large sectors of the economy and electronic media being beyond the control of individual states.⁴⁰ Also, the threat of climate change cannot be adequately responded to by individual states acting alone. The self-determination of individual countries can only be maintained in the face of these developments by the creation of new forms of interdependent and cooperative sovereignties through which individual states act together to address these transnational realities.⁴¹ Such international relationships are also necessary to uphold the human rights of vulnerable migrants and refugees. In addition, Benhabib notes that Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia have moved to intercultural and plurinational models of sovereignty within their borders that incor-

porate respect for the self-determination and other rights of Indigenous populations there.⁴² She describes these versions of cooperative governance as forms of cosmopolitan sovereignty.

If settler Christians in Canada are to live out the Sermon's injunction to "do to others as you would have them do to you," some versions of shared sovereignty between settler governments and Indigenous Peoples will be necessary. The Declaration and the Sermon agree on this. These forms of shared sovereignty could create the kind of ethical space⁴³ needed to facilitate cross-cultural partnerships and cooperation that respect the different identities, worldviews, and histories of Indigenous Peoples and settlers in Canada. As Benhabib's observations and arguments indicate, this kind of shared sovereignty is not an outlandish idea.

Conclusion

Since the passage of Bill C-5, Prime Minister Carney has continued to meet with Indigenous leaders and to insist that the federal government is committed to seeking right relations with Indigenous Peoples. He has maintained that under Bill C-5, there must be consultation consistent with free, prior, and informed consent before a major project initiative can be designated as being in Canada's national interest.⁴⁴ However, he has yet to affirm that if the consent of Indigenous Peoples who will be affected by a project is not forthcoming, it will not be approved.

Building new international economic relationships has been the main focus of the federal government since March 2025. This is an important government priority at this time, but it should not push aside recognizing and respecting the extent of Indigenous Peoples' rights to self-determination and consent. Economic prosperity depends upon peace, and peace is built on justice. If Canada's economy is to weather future storms, its democracy needs to be built on solid moral foundations (Matthew 7:24-27). Fully implementing the Declaration's insistence on respecting Indigenous Peoples' rights will be essential to this.⁴⁵

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