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Trudeau should negotiate directly with hereditary chiefs to find a lasting solution for 'the defining issue for this government,' say parliamentarians and pundits

'This is a situation where there is no winning hand to be played,' says Clive Veroni.

Abbas Rana

Prime **Minister Justin Trudeau** should sit down and negotiate directly with hereditary chiefs to find a lasting solution for the "defining issue for this government," say some current and former parliamentarians and pundits.

Manitoba ISG Sen. **Mary Jane McCallum**, a First Nations woman of Cree descent, told The Hill Times that nation-to-nation reconciliation, which is a signature promise of the **Liberal government**, can happen only between heads of nations. She said Mr. Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) should agree to this demand from hereditary chiefs, and it will likely deliver a long-term solution for irritants between the government and the Indigenous Canadians.

"When you have a conversation between nation to nation, it should be done with the heads," said Sen. McCallum, who was appointed to the Red Chamber by Mr. Trudeau in 2017, in an interview with The Hill Times. "So, there's certain authority and responsibilities that go with the positions that the hereditary chiefs have. And it's something I think that Canadians don't really understand."

Since getting elected as party leader in 2013, Mr. Trudeau has made Indigenous reconciliation a key priority and a core value of his brand. This is also included in all **cabinet** ministers' mandate letters as a top priority.

The Indigenous protests that started early last month in support of some of Wet'suwet'en First Nation's hereditary chiefs opposed to the construction of the \$6.6-billion Coastal GasLink pipeline project continued on even last week. These protests have led to the disruption of passenger and freight rail traffic in a number of regions across the country, including Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec. The rail companies have claimed about 1,500 temporary layoffs from the blockades. The Ontario and British Columbia, provincial courts have issued injunctions allowing police forces to bring down the blockades, resulting in the arrest of several in British Columbia.

On March 1, The Canadian Press reported that a Wet'suwet'en hereditary chief and government ministers said they had reached a proposed arrangement over the pipeline dispute, but the government would not give details until the proposal was reviewed by the Wet'suwet'en people first.

With the ongoing tensions between the two sides, some well-respected Indigenous leaders have called on both sides to go to the negotiating table to sort out the outstanding issues.

"We're calling for calm, we're calling for creativity, and constructive dialogue," said Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde in **Ottawa** on Feb. 18, at a joint press conference with Mohawk leaders from Ontario and Quebec. He also said that he has been talking to Indigenous leaders and the provincial and federal governments to encourage them to resolve the contentious issues through a dialogue.

When these protests first started, Mr. Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) was travelling abroad lobbying for **Canada's** bid to win a seat on the UN Security Council. He came back on Feb. 14, and was scheduled to go on a two-day visit to the Caribbean two weeks ago, but changed his mind to deal with the protests dominating the news cycle and affecting the economy and the law-and-order situation.

Since the House returned back on Feb. 18, the opposition parties, especially Conservative Party Leader **Andrew Scheer** (Regina-Qu'Appelle, Sask.), have gone after the prime **minister** for not being aggressive enough in addressing the situation. That same day, Mr. Trudeau met with opposition party leaders to discuss the situation and get their feedback about the government's strategy to find a solution, but he did not invite Mr. Scheer for the meeting because he didn't like Mr. Scheer's

speech in the House.

As the Conservatives pushed the government to be more forceful in resolving this conflict, Mr. Trudeau said he wanted to find a solution through negotiations. The chiefs had two main preconditions to sit down with the government: the **RCMP** must move off of their territory and the gas pipeline construction must stop.

On Friday, Feb. 21, Mr. Trudeau, accompanied by five **cabinet** ministers, held a press conference in **Ottawa** to announce that the government tried to negotiate with the Indigenous chiefs but never received a positive response. He said "the barricades must now come down" and the court injunctions have to be obeyed.

But Mr. Trudeau also said that the government is still open to talk with the Indigenous leaders any time they decide to change their minds.

Early last week, the police moved in at some locations in Ontario and Quebec to dismantle the barricades, but several new blockades popped up in other regions.

Late last week, the chiefs agreed to sit down with Crown-Indigenous Relations **Minister Carolyn Bennett** (Toronto-St. Pauls, Ont.) and her B.C. counterpart Scott Fraser after the **RCMP** agreed to temporarily pause its patrolling and the gas pipeline construction was suspended for two days. As of deadline last week, it was unclear if the negotiations yielded any concrete results. If successful, this could be the first step in the hereditary chiefs directly meeting with Mr. Trudeau.

Meanwhile, Sen. McCallum told The Hill Times that she has been raising questions about the situation in the Senate Chamber during Question Period but has not received any satisfactory answer. She, however, said she would continue to raise these questions in the coming weeks.

Former two-term Quebec **NDP MP Romeo Saganash** told The Hill Times that if the prime **minister** does not negotiate directly with the chiefs, the situation will continue to escalate.

"So as soon as they did [the police action], these rallies kept popping up throughout the country, and that's going to continue," said Mr. Saganash, who did not seek re-election in 2019. "It means what's going on right now will continue on. I mean, he's got to do the right thing, it's very simple."

Pollster Frank Graves of EKOS Research said he's in favour of the prime **minister** meeting directly with the hereditary chiefs. He denied that it would be politically risky if the prime **minister** is unsuccessful in resolving the issue. Mr. Graves also described this as a politically sensitive file with different complex layers.

"There's so many contradictory pressures, and there's no path which is not going to leave a lot of people deeply unhappy," said Mr. Graves, president of EKOS Research.

"The issues have become complex in the sense it's not simply pipelines, climate change versus energy and the economy. That's certainly a core issue. But it's now become superimposed with other layers of complexity, in particular, relationships with indigenous peoples, and the whole reconciliation agenda. So he's kind of got two incredibly difficult issues that are interdependent here."

Liberal MPs declined comment requests for this article, and the **Prime Minister's Office** referred to Mr. Trudeau's comments in the daily Question Period about his refusal to sit down directly with the hereditary chiefs. On Wednesday, opposition parties questioned Mr. Trudeau why he doesn't want to directly negotiate with the Indigenous leaders, but he did not offer any specific reason.

"It is very easy for the opposition parties, both the Conservatives and the New Democrats, to propose simplistic solutions," said Mr. Trudeau. "We have been working on finding complex solutions to complex problems for weeks, or even years, now. We have been working with the hereditary chiefs for several years to address child protection issues, and British Columbia has been working with the hereditary chiefs on matters of rights and land. We will continue our work," said Mr. Trudeau. Clive Veroni, author and an expert on marketing and brand positioning, said the Indigenous protests issue is a "defining issue" for the Trudeau government as it is a very complex and politically sensitive file with far-reaching implications for the government and the country at large. He said all factors considered, Mr. Trudeau so far has handled this file well.

"It's going to be the defining issue for this government through the rest of its term, as it will be for all Canadians," said Clive Veroni, author of Spin: How Politics Have the Power to Turn Marketing on its Head, in an interview with The Hill Times.

"This is a situation where there is no winning hand to be played. Because, you know, whatever move the government makes, is going to be problematic. And what Trudeau did is he delayed action basically and asked for, you know, discussions and then finally move towards action. So, at the beginning of this issue, there were basically two routes to be taken. One was to try and

negotiate a settlement and the other was to try and take police action. And basically, he's done both," said Mr. Veroni.

He said that the Indigenous protests are a subset of a bigger debate at this time, which is choosing between resource development and our environmental future. He said this debate will continue on for the government throughout this mandate.

"So this absolutely is critical, because it's part of the kind of central debate that Canadians are having about our economic future and our environmental future and it's not going away, and it's only going to become more complex over time," said Mr. Veroni. "And there will be no easy answers to any of these questions and whatever government is in power will have an enormously difficult time negotiating between these two, you know, between this rock and a hard place."

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