

Why Indigenous nationalism is not to be underestimated

In American author Fukuyama's latest book, he says U.S. politics is fracturing because of identity politics – but Canada is different

PAUL CHRISTOPHER HENRY WEBSTER

When Justin Trudeau swept to power in 2015 with a mandate to unify a perennially schismatic country, his vision of a pro-feminist, environmentally conscious government bent on Indigenous reconciliation was widely applauded by liberal democrats. Unlike in the United States, where bitter divisions among powerful interest groups fractured Democratic voters and propelled Donald Trump to power, Trudeau neatly glued together a progressive consensus of the sort American liberal democrats such as Francis Fukuyama – one of liberal-democratic capitalism's best-known champions since his 1989 essay *The End of History* made him famous – could only dream of.

In his latest book, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), Fukuyama ascribes Trump's election to identity politics, which he describes as “one of the chief threats” to liberal democracy. Faced with activist movements for women, racial minorities, the disabled, immigrants, gays, lesbians, transgender people, disgruntled white people and Indigenous people, liberal democrats are too divided to cohesively win and hold power, he warns. “Unless we can work our way back to more universal understandings of human dignity,” he writes, “we will doom ourselves to continuing conflict.”

Canada is different, Fukuyama thinks. “Multiculturalism was born in some sense in Canada,” he affably writes while discussing Quebec's current reconciliation with the rest of Canada over separation.

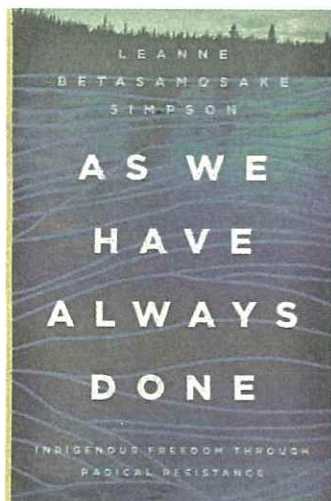
“Even a separation would not have represented a fundamental threat to democratic values,” he declares, “since an independent Quebec would have remained a high-quality liberal democratic state.”

But is it too soon for Canucks to gloat? As Trudeau's recent run-in with Indigenous MP Jody Wilson-Raybould indicated, reconciliation always seems to be the hardest word. Suddenly, Canadian liberals are worrying about being trumped in a whole new way.

If Fukuyama seemed a little bemused by the Indigenous territorial acknowledgments before a speech he gave in Toronto recently, who could blame him? Territorial acknowledgments are an all-Canadian symptom of our growing national angst about the theft of Indigenous lands. But south of the border, as Fukuyama put it to me on the phone shortly before his Toronto visit, few people are sweating over Indigenous issues of any sort at all. It's true that his new book pays some heed to Indigenous identity issues, Fukuyama noted.

“But compared to everything else in U.S. politics,” he said, “I just don't think it's an issue that really registers.”

That contrasts sharply with Canada, where Indigenous issues currently command centre stage. The Missing and Murdered Indig-



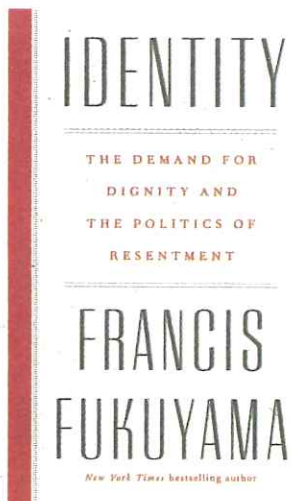
enous Women's Inquiry has shown the problems and systemic biases that exist in policing across the country. Wilson-Raybould's demotion and departure from Trudeau's cabinet has put the Prime Minister's commitment to Indigenous people under scrutiny. In the West, Indigenous-led pipeline resistance is rocking Canadian history – all those dusty tomes about European settlement in unpopulated wildernesses – is also getting a reboot. “We're calling into question Canada's entire narrative,” says Hayden King, an Anishinaabe essayist and professor of Indigenous nationalism at Ryerson University in Toronto.

Now that the “Quebec question” seems to have been resolved, as Fukuyama suggests in his book, it's tempting to think a national accord – our very own *Pax Canadiana* – is finally doable in this country. But hold that thought, says King: Canadian Indigenous people are singing an increasingly discordant tune. And the Canadian courts – which are charged with determining Indigenous economic, cultural and social rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms – are busily amplifying it.

In King's view, the time is coming for Canadians to concede a very substantial transfer of land, resources and wealth. If he's right about that, our next national meltdown will make the crises triggered by Quebec separatism look like a mild case of the hiccups. With the Trudeau Liberals riven by their Indigenous dilemmas in much the same way Fukuyama describes the splintering of the liberal vote south of the border, the next step may well be the election of Andrew Scheer and the Conservatives.

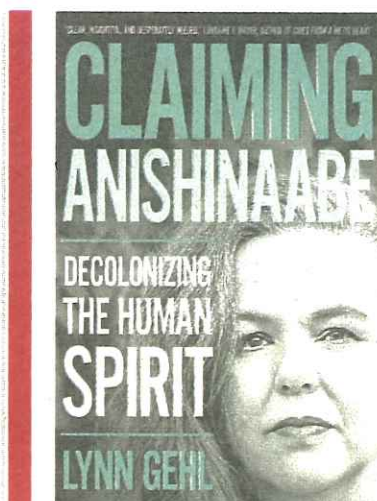
King's not the only Indigenous writer signalling that Indigenous nationalism is not to be underestimated. Perhaps the best-known of these is Pamela Palmater, an Indigenous legal scholar who, similar to King, holds an academic perch at Ryerson. In her latest book, *Indigenous Nationhood: Empowering Grassroots Citizens* (Fernwood, 2015), Palmater argues that Indigenous nationalists should insist on their rights as Canadian citizens while at the same time disavowing them. Specifically, she suggests, Indigenous people should insist on their right to vote while refusing to actually do it.

Yes, having the right to vote is at the core of Canadian citizenship, she acknowledges. But being “a Canadian citizen has been historically tied to having to give up one's Indigeneity, language, culture, laws, governance and ways of being and adopt Canadian ways of life.” In contradiction to Fukuyama, she argues that rather than participating in Canadian liberal democracy, Indigenous



“Multiculturalism was born in some sense in Canada. ... Even a separation would not have represented a fundamental threat to democratic values, since an independent Quebec would have remained a high-quality liberal democratic state.”

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA FROM HIS BOOK *IDENTITY: THE DEMAND FOR DIGNITY AND THE POLITICS OF RESENTMENT*



Canadians should pursue their right to be “self-determining and free from interference or control by another nation” – including Canada.

And she's supported by a 1996 decision from the Supreme Court of Canada that ruled that the doctrine of Indigenous rights exists because, when Europeans arrived, Indigenous peoples “were already here, living in communities on the land and participating in different cultures, as they had done for centuries.”

In the Court's words, Palmater emphasizes, that fact separated Indigenous peoples from all other minority groups in Canadian society and “mandates their special legal, and now constitutional, status.”

In a chapter on cultural politics and nation-building in her book *Claiming Anishinaabe: Decolonizing the Human Spirit* (University of Regina Press, 2017), Lynn Gehl, who describes herself as an Algonquin Anishinaabe-kwe, echoes Palmater's argument that Indigenous Canadians must determine their own distinctive forms of nationalism.

“Indigenous nations need to seriously consider and reconsider our own strategies of nationalism on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis,” Gehl writes, after pointing out that countries such as Canada spend an enormous amount of energy, time and money in shaping the hearts and minds of their citizens. “This process is commonly referred to as ‘strategies of nationalism,’” she notes, “and the careful and strategic manipulation of symbols, rituals and songs, such as the story of two founding nations, national anthems and a national flag.”

Sylvia McAdam, author of *Nationhood Interrupted: Revitalizing nēhiyaw Legal Systems* (UBC Press, 2015), argues this won't be easy.

A co-founder of the Idle No More movement who earned a law degree while working for the Saskatoon police force and raising six kids on her own, McAdam points out that the very terms nationhood and self-determination “are from the European language.”

Although they can still be applied to the circumstances of Indigenous peoples, “overwhelming challenges invade every aspect of Indigenous nationhood, terrible myths such as the Doctrine of Discovery, which is the basis of European claims to Indigenous lands, water air and resources,” she writes.

In McAdam's vision of the past and future for Indigenous nationalism, historical justice is defined by “giving it back in a manner that gives back the livelihood, gives back the freedom and the truth to be told about colonial history.”

Maybe these achievements, she suggests, will breathe life back



into Indigenous sovereignty, which, in turn, will protect the lands, animals and water based on the concept of sacred conservation.”

Just in case any residual doubt remains that Canadian Indigenous identity politics could ever be conveniently squeezed into Fukuyama's framework, there's Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Simpson, who completed her PhD in zoology, anthropology and native studies at the University of Manitoba, teaches at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning in Yellowknife.

The introduction to her latest book provides a fascinating ethnographic account of her own ancestry within Southern Ontario's Nishnaabeg Nation – a people with a diplomatic history every bit as complex as that of the French or the English. Or the Portuguese, Ukrainians and Chinese.

“We have fought back as our homeland has been stolen, clear-cut, subdivided and sold to settlers from Europe and later cottagers from Toronto,” Simpson laments about her ancestral lands in Ontario's Kawartha region.

But in her vision of Indigenous nationalism, the most important struggles are within the mind and the imagination: “From this standpoint, it doesn't matter who is president or prime minister, because our most important work is internal.”

Powered from within, she argues, Indigenous nationhood is a “radical and complete overturning” of the nation state in which Indigenous people are imagining their ways out of domination, and “not afraid to let those imaginings destroy the pillars of settler colonialism.”

On the phone from his office in Carmel-by-the-Sea, Calif. (the traditional territory of the Esselen-speaking people, and after the 6th century, the Ohlone people, before they peacefully surrendered it to Europeans), Francis Fukuyama seems bemused – once again – as I relay Hayden King's warnings about the growing economic potency of Indigenous Canadian nationalism.

“I don't see it as a scenario where existing property owners in Canada will surrender land out of the goodness of their hearts,” he says. “It would be the first time in history where a voluntary transfer of wealth happens on that kind of scale. It's just impossible to imagine.”

Special to The Globe and Mail

Paul Christopher Henry Webster has written from more than 30 countries about environmental and human rights.