

## The Wet'suwet'en Pipeline Crisis

### Summary

This podcast explores the Wet'suwet'en Nation's battle against the Coastal GasLink pipeline infrastructure project – which is supported and facilitated by the Canadian government and the RCMP. By going through the project timeline, clearly colonial moments are revealed, such as imposing governance structures, taking land without consent, infrastructure projects and violence against indigenous women, as well as removing land defenders from their own land. Time is taken to explain how this project is an example of politics of recognition in Canada, where Indigenous People are recognized as distinct while at the same time their autonomy is continually undermined and ignored. The underlying motives of the project are examined and exposed as equally colonial as it supports a future of fossil fuels and does not offer any benefits to the people and land it exploits. Possible futures are suggested through exploring “alimentary infrastructure” and what that could mean for all people. At this time there is no conclusion, however, as the struggle is still ongoing.

### Script

Welcome back everyone to the Clearly Colonial podcast. This week we are going to be taking a deeper look into the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline Crisis. Why is it such a big deal? What is it about? How is it related to colonialism? What is the situation now?

As we review this case, keep in mind that infrastructure can be colonial. Settler colonialism is an ongoing event that is manifested through built infrastructure. These projects remove people from their land, export resources and wealth, are constructed without the consent of local Indigenous Peoples and effect people's wellbeing and health. Not to mention, the power dynamics that are reinforced through this non-consensual process. So, I'll stop throughout this story to help point out the clearly colonial moments, and how they continue the colonial narrative in Canada by suppressing Indigenous autonomy and rights. But most especially how this project demonstrates politics of recognition in Canada, where indigenous culture is recognized but their political autonomy is ignored.

This pipeline project began in 2012. Coastal GasLink (which is owned by TransCanada corp., now called TC Energy) proposed a route for its 670km pipeline transporting natural gas

from BC to “a terminal near the town of Kitimat, where it [would be] prepared for export overseas” (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020). According to the Coastal GasLink website, “numerous meetings were held with Indigenous communities, local governments, landowners and community residents to gather feedback” (Coastal GasLink, n.d.).

At this time, Wet'suwet'en Elected Band councils signed agreements and supported the Coastal GasLink project. However, *all* Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs were very opposed due to cultural, environmental and economic impacts (Sterritt, 2019).

Okay. Pause here. The distinction between Elected Band councils and Hereditary Chiefs is very important. First Nation Communities have elections for their Band chief and council every two years, but this type of governance is not the traditional form of governance. It was imposed by the federal government in the Indian Act of 1876 as “part of a post-Confederation assimilation policy” (Sterritt, 2019). Elected band councils are mainly charged with the task of taking care of federal business such as healthcare or education (Sterritt, 2019). Traditional forms of Hereditary leadership in the Wet'suwet'en First Nation was not honoured or understood by the government in 1876 (Sterritt, 2019). Instead of trying to understand the traditional system, the federal government just replaced it. Colonialism still operates today in much the same way, destroying and replacing. It is clearly colonial to impose a system of government on a nation and then only negotiate with that government body and say it is all consensual. It wasn't then and it isn't now. But that is the myth of Canada, isn't it? That it was all consensual. That Canada was made in a spirit of sharing.

An important point in this crisis revolves around land ownership. In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada judged a vitally important legal case – the Delgamuukw decision. They ruled that the “Wet'suwet'en never ceded their rights or title to [the] vast swath of territory” now proposed for pipeline development (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020). Additionally, “that decision found that Indigenous land rights and title were not extinguished at the time of colonization. The case was framed around traditional, *hereditary* [emphasis added] leadership, according to lawyers” (Sterritt, 2019).

This decision established that choices about land use were only to be made by Hereditary leaders who had the proper authority. Coastal GasLink didn't even ask the right people. The

elected band leaders had no right to sign away permission for the company to use the land. Recognizing the need to consult Indigenous Nations but ignoring their traditional governance (also called politics of recognition) - is clearly colonial.

But here we are, 2012 and Coastal GasLink is proposing route options and the band councils are all for economic development and support the project and none of the Hereditary Chiefs agree to its construction. While there are many reasons this project is opposed by the chiefs, one of the most important reasons is land protection. Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chief Namoks told a reporter from Al Jazeera news that "Beneath the Morice River bridge [near the pipeline route] flows...untarnished water – pristine enough that people can still drink straight from the river. The remote area is environmentally intact and untainted by human activity – making it one of the last of its kind in the world" (Morin, 2020b). But colonial infrastructure has never cared for the land. Land that doesn't have economic profit is just a wasteland, ready for development. And ignoring the Indigenous critical infrastructure, such as water, food, and land, is clearly colonial and promotes Indigenous extinction.

Another reason the project is opposed, which is mentioned in this Al Jazeera article, is that "violence against Indigenous women has in part been linked to industrial activity" (Morin, 2020b). I want to take a moment to address this. In 2019 the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) published a final report. They explain that there is a structure of colonial violence, "which looks to the complete destruction and assimilation of Indigenous Peoples." They also include the symbolic violence structure, which includes "practices of exclusion and the idea that Indigenous cultures and peoples are inferior" (MMIWG, 2019). This inquiry also affirmed the connection between resource extraction, the "man camps" set up to house the workers (who are majority men), and "violence against Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people" (Zingel, 2019). The inquiry recommended that all resource extraction projects be evaluated to assess the potential harm to Indigenous women and girls. As Michele Audette - formerly the commissioner of the MMIWG National Inquiry – stated, "There are attitudes in the industry that are still there since colonization: that Indigenous women are considered Indians, savages and prostitutes. It's sad to see and unacceptable" (Morin, 2020c). Violence against Indigenous Peoples in all its forms propagates the discourse of Indigenous subjugation and inevitable extinction. Violence is clearly colonial.

[SOUND CLIP: [Wet'suwet'en women lead ceremony on pipeline's path and are threatened by RCMP](#) - October 13, 2021]

Now, we need to look back again. This time to 2007 (5 years before the route is proposed). That was when the United Nations General Assembly adopted its Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2007). Fun, or rather sad fact, there were only 4 votes against its adoption - Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and (you guessed it) Canada (United Nations, 2007). While all four have now turned to support it, I can't help feeling it's an ominous sign of where Canada truly stands.

Fast forward to 2012, when the project is being proposed and Indigenous Peoples in Canada are citing this declaration, which states in the 10<sup>th</sup> article, "Indigenous Peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent." Canada is slow to honour this declaration (the one it didn't really want) and quick to decree the displacement of the Wet'suwet'en Nation without their consent. Actually, with their clear dissent. And as the United Nations declared, taking control of land without consent is clearly colonial. Removing people from their land and removing their control is clearly colonial.

In October 2018, the pipeline route is approved and the construction begins. [SOUND CLIP: [Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced a new 40 billion dollar liquefied natural gas project that will transport natural gas from Dawson Creek in northeastern B.C. to a Kitimat processing plant.](#) - October 2018]. By this time groups of Wet'suwet'en land defenders have already set up roadblocks on their own land to prevent construction workers from accessing the sites. By November 26, 2018, these roadblocks are seriously affecting TC Energy who decides to apply for a court injunction to give the RCMP permission to clear out these checkpoints (Bellrichard, 2018b). In mid-December 2018, the injunction is approved. Instead of clearing themselves out, the Wet'suwet'en land defenders builds a second checkpoint "on the Morice Lake Forest Service Road, in the traditional territory of the Gitdimt'en Clan of the Wet'suwet'en" (Bellrichard, 2018a). Obviously, this move did not impress Coastal GasLink nor the RCMP. In the early morning of Monday, January 7<sup>th</sup> 2019, at the Wet'suwet'en Gitdimt'en camp near Houston, B.C., an armed RCMP police raid ended with 14 people being arrested [SOUND CLIP: [RCMP officers climb over a barricade and start making arrests to enforce the Coastal GasLink](#)

[injunction at the Gidimt'en camp in northern B.C. on Jan. 7, 2019](#)]. They then turned towards the Unist'ot'en camp (Baker, 2019). [SOUND CLIP: [Welcome to the battleground British Columbia](#) - 2019]. In response, people across the province took to the streets to stand with the Wet'suwet'en First Nation, and it was not just Indigenous People.

Police presence remained constant this whole year and, in December 2019, the “BC Supreme Court granted Coastal GasLink [a permanent] injunction to continue work on the pipeline.” (Morin, 2020a)

In January 2020, the RCMP established an “access-control checkpoint” in the Wet'suwet'en Nation's territory. This was treated as an act of war by land defenders. Remember, this land was still owned by the Wet'suwet'en Nation. On January 20, 2020, as reported in The Walrus, “members of the Mohawk Nation in Ontario sent a letter to the Crown. It warned that the Silver Covenant Chain, one of the earliest treaties between Canada and First Nations, was in danger of breaking. The chain is not a physical object but rather a 343-year-old system of diplomacy. Its provisions call for leaders to meet whenever discord causes the pact to “tarnish.” Should the chain not be polished, the sides cease being allies—which can lead to violence or worse” (Gollner, 2020). This set the stage for the announcement on January 30th that there would be a seven-day de-escalation negotiation period between Hereditary Chiefs and the government of British Columbia. During this time, work on the pipeline was halted “after Hereditary Chiefs issued an eviction notice to the company, citing Wet'suwet'en trespass law” (Uguen-Csenge, 2020). By the evening of February 5<sup>th</sup>, the negotiations had broken down (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020).

On February 6<sup>th</sup> - *the very next day* - the RCMP began forcibly removing land defenders again (Gollner, 2020). Al Jazeera and the group's website reported, “Dogs were used, media was banned from filming arrests. Militarised police with night vision and automatic weapons raided the camp in the dead of night” (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020). Immediately, protesters across the nation responded by setting up similar blockades on streets, railroads, and ports, remaining there for weeks. This solidarity brought much of Canada's transportation network to a halt (Morin, 2020a). [SOUND CLIP: [Wet'suwet'en support blockades 'must come down'](#) – Feb 21, 2020]. On February 24<sup>th</sup> a blockade made in solidarity by Mohawk protesters was cleared by the Ontario police force (Gollner, 2020). Removing unarmed land defenders from their own land is

clearly colonialism. The fact that it is normal or okay for the government and police forces to treat Indigenous communities and land defenders this way is clearly colonialism. Prioritizing pipeline building and economic development while disempowering indigenous communities is clearly colonial. This type of treatment continues to reinforce colonial power structures in Canada.

[SOUND CLIP: [Gidimt'en Matriarch Confronts CGL and RCMP](#) – September 24, 2021]

Delee Nikal of the Witset Nation in northern BC, in an interview with Al Jazeera news, recounted their experience with the Coastal GasLink project. Delee said, “There used to be a massive huckleberry patch where they built one of the man camps near the Unist’ot’en healing camp. It’s an area where I and my ancestors harvested our medicines. It’s an amazing terrain, close to the water – now it’s just decimated. This is really hard for people who have grown up there.” In regards to the increasing presence of workers and man camps, Delee expressed, “It’s scary because they’re transient workers who have no connection to us, but they have the backing of the police,” as these workers have police escorts due to rising tensions (Morin, 2020c).

On March 1<sup>st</sup> 2020, an announcement was made that the Wet’suwet’en Nation’s Hereditary Chiefs and the Canadian government would sign a memorandum of understanding later in the month (it turned out to be May 14<sup>th</sup>) (Gollner, 2020). The hope being the Hereditary leadership will eventually be recognized by the Canadian government (Bellrichard, 2020). Hereditary chiefs still oppose the pipeline but Coastal GasLink nor the workers acknowledge their authority. During the worldwide pandemic, there was little progress on either side. However, the Covid-19 virus has disproportionately affected Indigenous People who report double the cases compared to the rest of the population (Trumpener, 2021). But that may be another episode. And the pipeline? It is about 50.4% complete, according to the last monthly report (Coastal GasLink, 2021). But it is about a year behind schedule and way over budget (Hosgood, 2021b).

Most recently, in late September 2021, blockades have been established to stop drilling under the Morice River where Coastal GasLink wanted to put the pipeline (Hosgood, 2021b). There have also already been contaminants spilt on the stolen territory. Two in May 2020 and two in August 2021 (Hosgood, 2021a). The ongoing occupation of their land has impeded the

Wet'suwet'en Nation's ability to hunt, led to the clear-cutting of trees, and has polluted the water. The pipeline has impacted the Wet'suwet'en Nation's ability to thrive. Stealing and degrading a people's food, water, and land is clearly colonial.

The awful structure of economic development and capital expansion - seen in this crisis - keeps colonialism thriving. An underlying issue, as well, is the aim of this infrastructure project. It is exporting resources for money that will benefit people other than those whose land the pipeline occupies. The pipeline will also support a future of fossil fuels. Climate change is a real issue, and yet the government is pouring resources into "critical" pipeline development that will only aggravate the climate change issue. This affects not only indigenous communities but all of us – including our non-human family. This project is another chapter in the myth of Canada, where reconciliation is promoted but Indigenous Peoples are forcibly removed from their land. Where equality and opportunity are promised and yet where Indigenous women and the land are ignored and exploited.

Why aren't more resources being put towards building better "alimentary infrastructure?" It is amazing how fast Coastal GasLink was able to work with the courts' systems to legally remove people from their homes. Why doesn't the government move that fast to supply drinking water to northern communities? To find missing women? To restore Indigenous autonomy? LaDuke and Cowen in their work "Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure" (2020) look to what the future could be if we shifted our goals to bringing life and not destruction in infrastructure projects. What if we switched from exploiting and extraction and invading to respecting and providing and sustaining life.

[SOUND CLIP: [Wet'suwet'en women lead ceremony on pipeline's path and are threatened by RCMP](#) - October 13, 2021]

You can find out more about this ongoing struggle at <https://www.yintahaccess.com/> or by following Gidimt'en Checkpoint on Twitter and Facebook.

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