

# As federal election approaches, First Nations still waiting for promises to turn into action

Chrystal Désilets likes to remain hopeful when she hears promises flow from the mouths of would-be MPs on the campaign trail.

But too often, particularly surrounding Indigenous issues, it becomes the same old story. There's plenty of talk while her vote is sought, but then all that talk gets lost in the ether.

"What's going to happen after the election? It's always to be seen," said Désilets, Indigenous rights co-ordinator with the ecumenical organization Kairos.



**Chrystal Désilets**

It's not that she goes into the Oct. 21 election without hope, it's that she's heard the promises ad nauseum only to see no action. She looks no further than the Grassy Narrows First Nation in northern Ontario, where a huge number of its population suffer from mercury poisoning due to contaminated water, an issue first recognized half a century ago.

For years there have been promises to clean up the mess, including a 2017 commitment by the Liberal government to build a treatment plant that has failed to materialize.

"We know that these Indigenous issues like Grassy Narrows, it's an intergenerational, modern-day trauma to Indigenous people in that community," said Désilets, an Algonquin from the Pikwakanagan First Nation in Ontario.

This election campaign has seen many of the same promises made in the past. The

Liberals have stressed their commitment to reconciliation, implementing the Indigenous Languages Act and the UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

The NDP wants to develop an action plan on reconciliation based on the TRC report and has vowed to bring an end to water advisories on reserves by 2021.

The Conservative platform is more vague, though leader Andrew Scheer has said he's eager to work with Indigenous communities that embrace developing energy resources.

It's a long way from the 2015 election, when Canadians were swept up in the second round of Trudeaumania and elected Justin Trudeau. The Indigenous file was front and centre as Trudeau swept to power with his progressive agenda where he said fixing Canada's relations with its First Nations was priority number one.

It was a rare and brave move by the Liberals and many voters bought into it. There was even a shout out to Trudeau from Gord Downie, the late singer of The Tragically Hip, at the band's nationally-televised final show where he praised Trudeau and professed a belief that he would get reconciliation with Indigenous people right.

"Indigenous folks were super-amped-up and involved in the last election," said Désilets.

She doesn't expect that same engagement in 2019. The intervening years and lack of progress on clean water and housing issues, moving forward on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry have brought things back to as they've been in the past.

"It's a tale as old as time for us," she said of the broken promises.

Désilets relates the story of an elder she met who said he doesn't bother with the process any more.

"I've been at these tables, I was all in in the '90s, and it went nowhere," he told her.

"Here it is 30 years later and we're nowhere," she said.

Deacon Rennie Nahanee, a member of the Squamish First Nation in British Columbia, pulls no punches with what he sees from the two parties with the best chance of forming the next federal government.

Neither the Liberals nor Conservatives get high marks from Nahanee, who is also the co-ordinator of First Nations ministry with the Archdiocese of Vancouver,

though he spoke on his own behalf and not the archdiocese.

"The Conservatives have continued their attacks on Indigenous people by having two of their Senate members kill the UNDRIP bill, so it leaves no doubt in my mind what their agenda is should they win the election," said Nahanee in an e-mail.

"The Liberals appealing the compensation ruling on children shows their attitude against Indigenous children. The hatred continues long after the Indian Residential Schools have closed, still trying to kill the Indian in the child."

The NDP, Nahanee said, has at least acknowledged water issues on reserves, but for the most part UNDRIP and other Indigenous issues aren't on anyone's radar.

"Without these rights it's business as usual for the big corporations to come and take the resources which rightfully belong to native Canadians," he said. Despite the past behaviour of parties, Désilets tries to maintain hope. But it's a tempered hope.

"As an Indigenous person working in these circles ... everybody's got a hope that something special can happen. But I always have to keep coming back to that Indigenous perspective that for me what's going to happen is going to happen," she said.