Reconciliation's reckoning: For Indigenous people in Northern Ontario, election season brings disenchantment and defiance; First Nations, Métis and Inuit voters helped propel Justin Trudeau's Liberals to power in 2015. Now, some feel that his promises of a nation-to-nation relationship haven't been fulfilled - and they're going to say so at the ballot box

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Body

Past Caribou Island and over the Nipigon River bridge, past the Red Rock Indian Band's hitching post and gas bar, up the Trans-Canada Highway and down a bush road lies Loven Lake.

It is there, about a two-hour drive north of Thunder Bay, that a group of Red Rock members set up camp for the annual moose hunt that will fill their freezers and bellies for the months to come. For this community and others across the country, the fall harvest is under way. Chiefs, elders and youth are out on the land setting traps, fishing, hunting, picking traditional medicines and talking around fires under a twinkling Father Sky.

Joel Haskell's eight-year-old son, Draven, is among the boys at the camp at Loven Lake. "They're getting our kids into our old traditions and back to our roots," said Mr. Haskell, as he stacked logs for his wood-burning stove in the basement of the house he built on the reserve 30 years ago.

Those traditions were forbidden under the Indian Residential School system that forced First ***Nations*** children off their reserves and into church-run, government-funded institutions.

That is the truth that was illuminated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which in 2015 released a report detailing the atrocities.

Just as children such as Draven are reconnecting with the culture that the Canadian government worked for decades to eradicate, voters like his father are deliberating which federal party is most fit to govern.

Mr. Haskell was part of the groundswell of First ***Nations***, Métis and Inuit voters that turned out in unprecedented numbers to elect Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau in 2015. Mr. Trudeau rose to power on the promise of a new ***nation***-to-***nation*** relationship and a commitment to reconciliation. The past four years have seen advancements on some Indigenous files, but Mr. Trudeau's term in office is open for criticism. Beyond policy decisions, there have also been questions of character, including as it relates to the high-profile disintegration of Mr. Trudeau's relationship with Canada's first Indigenous attorney-general, Jody Wilson-Raybould, and the release last month of photos showing Mr. Trudeau wearing blackface and brownface. On the latter issue, Mr. Trudeau said he now realizes the makeup was racist and that he was blinded by his privilege. The Liberals have asked Canadians to judge their government on its record.

On Oct. 21, that is what voters will do.

Mr. Haskell gives the current government a failing grade. Mr.Trudeau, he said, has not lived up to his claims to feminism, nor to his pledge to embrace "sunny ways." The Liberals have lost his vote. "There were lots of lies," he said.

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, an Indigenous lawyer and former judge who served as B.C.'s children's representative for a decade until stepping down in 2016, said the Liberals' scorecard is not "attractive" at this point. "You can't unwind 140 years of colonialism overnight - I understand that," said Ms. Turpel-Lafond, the director of the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at the University of British Columbia. "But the entire process never really got going ... Did we just have a post-reconciliation government? I would say we didn't."

In their platforms and public statements leading up to and during the current election campaign, the main parties have all promised some version of a commitment to reconciliation.

The Liberals and NDP say they will end boil-water advisories on reserves by 2021. The Liberals, NDP and Greens all say they will implement the United ***Nations*** Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The NDP, under Leader Jagmeet Singh, says it will launch a national action plan for reconciliation, and then create a council to oversee it and report to Parliament. The Liberals say they will eliminate tuberculosis in the North by 2030. Elizabeth May's Green Party says it will dismantle the Indian Act, calling the legislation racist and oppressive.

The Conservatives, under Andrew Scheer, say they will review the Indian Act "to remove barriers to prosperity." The party, which had a tense relationship with Indigenous peoples under Stephen Harper's leadership, culminating in the Idle No More movement, says it will pursue resource development in a way that is respectful and economically beneficial to Indigenous communities.

The promises go on and on.

Just as the various political parties have their own definitions and visions, so, too, do Indigenous people.

Ahead of the election, The Globe and Mail interviewed three dozen Indigenous people across the country, asking what reconciliation means to them, whether Canada has made great strides and if reconciliation is even possible.

For Sam Achneepineskum, reconciliation is personal and internal. He was torn from his family on Treaty 9 territory in Northern Ontario and flown south to McIntosh Indian Residential School when he was 11 years old.

There is no role for Ottawa in his healing journey.

For Cindy Blackstock, a childwelfare advocate from B.C.'s Gitxsan First ***Nation***, reconciliation is about the federal government no longer "wilfully and recklessly" discriminating against on-reserve children, as the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled earlier this year.

For Tannis Kasteris, a recently elected band councillor in Fort William First ***Nation***, just across the Kaministiquia River from Thunder Bay, reconciliation is about getting out from under the Indian Act. She wants to be able to actually own the on-reserve home she paid off after 15 years.

For Roxanne Moonias, whose fly-in community of Neskantaga First ***Nation*** in Northern Ontario only recently got safe running water after 25 years on a boil-water advisory, reconciliation is about equitable and accessible health care. Every few months, she flies to Thunder Bay and then to Toronto with her four-year-old son Brydon, who needs continuing treatment for a congenital heart condition.

For national Inuit leader Natan Obed, reconciliation is about respecting rights and working together to improve conditions for Indigenous peoples.

And for Fort William elder John Charlie, reconciliation is something totally different. It is meaningless and impossible. "I don't know who came up with the word 'reconciliation,' but we sure as hell didn't," said Mr. Charlie, who works at one of the reserve's gas bars. "The damage that was done to our people is unforgivable, forever."

Just recently, a white customer called his niece a "dirty fuckin' Indian." "Those are the things we have to deal with," he said. "And then you want to talk about reconciliation?" Mr. Charlie is among those who told The Globe that they will not vote, either because they do not consider themselves Canadian citizens or because they are disenchanted with, or disinterested in, mainstream politics.

Many others, however, said they will show up at the polls to have their voices heard and to make their power known. "We flipped 21 ridings in the last election," Perry Bellegarde, the National Chief of the Assembly of First ***Nations***, said in a recent interview. Mr. Bellegarde, whose advocacy organization represents 900,000 people and 634 communities, said he hopes First ***Nations***, Métis and Inuit will "rock the vote" again this year.

Still, he understands the tensions at play. "As Indigenous people, we're part of the land and water - we have cycles," said Mr. Bellegarde, a member of Saskatchewan's Little Black Bear First ***Nation***. "It's the fall hunt, for geese, for moose. And then all of a sudden there's this election, and these two worlds colliding.

But we find balance ... We walk in both worlds."

'IS THERE ANYTHING TO BE PROUD OF?' As rain fell over Thunder Bay, a sacred fire burned inside a tepee on the field outside Pope John Paul II Senior Elementary School, which sits on the land of the former St. Joseph's Indian Residential School. It was Orange Shirt Day, an annual event held across the country to acknowledge residential-school survivors and their families.

Dozens of Grade 7 and 8 students emerged from their classes to listen to the speakers and say the Lord's Prayer, which was led by a Catholic priest who had been invited to recite words of healing and comfort. One of the students, 12-year-old Sienna Bouchard, whose grandmother attended residential school, said it is important for people to understand what happened in the past. "It's not fair for different races to be treated differently," the Gull Bay First ***Nation*** girl told The Globe.

Sienna is too young to vote in this federal election, or even the next. But her life is affected by the decisions of Canadian governments past and present, and will be in the future. Her sentiments - of understanding and equity - were echoed by adults, albeit in more complicated terms.

After the event, some of the Orange Shirt Day marchers sought reprieve from the weather at the Columbus Centre, where a community lunch of tuna sandwiches, salad and carrot cake was served. Mr. Achneepineskum and members of his family sat around a table, discussing the notion of reconciliation. One of his siblings - Anna Betty Achneepineskum - is running for the NDP in the Thunder Bay-Superior North riding.

"[Politicians] talk a lot about reconciliation, but I don't think they know what that is," said Mr. Achneepineskum, whose family is from Marten Falls First ***Nation***.

"The most important thing is to reconcile within yourself everything that happened, and to live the life that you were supposed to live."

His sister, Ida Kubitz, who also attended residential school, said she was "anti-white" for decades.

With time and therapy, she worked through her anger and ended up marrying a white man.

To her, reconciliation is not about making amends; no one can right the wrong of a lost childhood.

"For me, reconciliation is about not being angry any more," she said. As a matter of policy or politics, the word "has no real meaning to the people who survived."

Restoring ***the nation***-to-***nation*** relationship is not only about confronting the dark chapter of Canada's residential schools.

There was also the so-called Sixties Scoop, when child-welfare workers across the country removed thousands of Indigenous children from their homes and placed them with non-Indigenous families. There is the vastly disproportionate violence against Indigenous women and girls; earlier this year, the national inquiry tasked with uncovering the systemic reasons for the murders and disappearances concluded that a genocide is taking place in Canada. There is the Indian Act, first enacted in 1876, which stipulates who is "entitled" to be deemed "Indian" and controls many aspects of First ***Nations*** people's lives and the reserve system as a whole. The Liberals had planned to move forward with a new Indigenous rights framework that would say the rights of First ***Nations***, Métis and Inuit do not have to be negotiated because they are simply understood to exist. But their plan was not well-received; First ***Nations*** leaders attending an AFN policy forum in September, 2018, said the government was moving too fast.

There is the continuing matter of on-reserve child-welfare funding. In 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that Ottawa discriminated against tens of thousands of vulnerable First ***Nations*** children by providing less money for child-welfare services on reserves than is available elsewhere in Canada. Since then, the Trudeau government has been hit with several non-compliance orders. Earlier this month, it launched a challenge to the tribunal's recent decision on compensation, which would see thousands of children, parents and grandparents receive up to $40,000 each, for an estimated total of around $2-billion.

Ms. Blackstock, the executive director of the First ***Nations*** Child and Family Caring Society, which launched the tribunal case with the AFN in 2007, said she was hopeful that when the Liberals took power in 2015, the government might stop fighting the case.

She has been disappointed.

"The tribunal found that Canada's conduct is resulting in the deaths of children in some cases, and in the separation of families in many cases," she said. "We have to ask: Is there anything to be proud of when you've been found to be wilfully and recklessly discriminating against little kids? I don't think so."

Mr. Bellegarde, who voted in a federal election for the first time in 2015, called the Liberals' decision to challenge the tribunal's compensation ruling "beyond unacceptable." But while he would not say how he will cast his ballot on Oct. 21, he said the Liberal government has done more for First ***Nations*** people than any that came before it. He pointed to the decline in boil-water advisories, to funding and legislation in support of revitalizing Indigenous languages, and to child-welfare legislation that recognizes Indigenous peoples' inherent right to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services.

All the while, though, there is the gap.

Mr. Bellegarde said Canada as a whole ranks toward the top of the UN Human Development Index, but said First ***Nations*** people would place as low as 78th (currently occupied by Venezuela) if the same indicators were applied.

Reconciliation, he said, will only be achieved when the gap is closed - when Indigenous people are no longer "second-class citizens living in third-world conditions."

KNOCKING ON THE DOOR In all her years growing up in Marten Falls, Ms. Achneepineskum never saw federal officials campaign in her community.

And in all the years she has lived in Thunder Bay, she said, the only federal candidate to canvas her home was Patty Hajdu, the Liberal MP elected in 2015. It is no wonder that Ms. Achneepineskum did not participate in provincial or federal elections until about 20 years ago, when she was in her 30s; the mainstream electoral system felt foreign, she said.

Today, she is not only casting a ballot in that system, she is running for a seat in it. Ms. Achneepineskum, who said she has always voted NDP, is looking to oust Ms. Hajdu, who won the riding with 45 per cent of the vote in the previous election. Thunder Bay-Superior North, which includes the Red Rock Indian Band, is 15 per cent Indigenous, according to calculations recently published by Policy Options.

"At one point in my life, I used to say, 'What's the point in voting?' " Ms. Achneepineskum said in an interview at her campaign headquarters. "I felt invisible. No one came to knock on my door to talk to me. But later on, I realized that I can go and pound on that table. I can go and knock on the door. I don't have to wait for someone to come to me."

Other Indigenous people, it seems, came to a similar realization in 2015, when the gap between on-reserve turnout and off-reserve turnout was the lowest ever recorded by Elections Canada. Compared with the 2011 election, turnout on reserves rose by 14 per cent, reaching an unprecedented 61.5 per cent.

"If you're a political party in this country, you can't afford to overlook Indigenous voters any more," said Max FineDay, a member of Saskatchewan's Sweetgrass First ***Nation*** and the executive director of Canadian Roots Exchange, a national non-profit that works with youth to advance reconciliation. "We're a quickly growing community that doesn't have a traditional allegiance to one particular party."

Ms. Achneepineskum, the former deputy grand chief of the Nishnawbe Aski ***Nation***, said she is running to be an MP because she wants to continue fighting systemic racism. And while Mr. Trudeau "sounded good" and "fancy words were thrown around," she believes the Liberals have left much to the imagination when it comes to reconciliation. "Whatever their definition of the process is, I don't see it," she said.

Her definition hinges on more than ensuring that federal laws are in line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or that First ***Nations*** people receive equitable health care, or that the Indian Act is dismantled. "If every community had safe drinking water ... If our corrections systems weren't full of Indigenous people. If we didn't have such high rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women. If they weren't trying to put a pipeline through our traditional territories," she said.

Last year, the Liberal government purchased the Trans Mountain pipeline for $4.5-billion in order to ensure an expansion project would proceed. But the fate of the controversial project, which would triple the volume of crude oil moving from Alberta to B.C., will still be undecided by Election Day. The expansion is yet again facing legal challenges over whether the government adequately consulted with Indigenous groups.

The Liberals' platform says the federal corporate income tax revenue from the Trans Mountain expansion could generate upward of $500-million a year. That money, plus any profit from a future sale of the pipeline, "will be invested in natural climate solutions and clean energy projects that will power our homes, businesses and communities for generations to come," the platform says.

Red Rock Indian Band member Tom Borg has seen the effects of climate change on and around Lake Helen reserve, where the band is located. He used to be able to fish for lake trout right off the shoreline, but the fish have been forced to forage in deeper, colder waters. He blames climate change for the wind storms that cause trees to fall and block his trap line. He blames climate change for the emergence of new species that he said are disrupting the ecosystem.

Earlier this month, Mr. Borg laid out traps for beavers, martens and other animals on a table inside the band's Chalet Lodge.

As a member of the Red Rock trapping committee, Mr. Borg was setting up a display to help youth deepen their understanding of, and connection to, their culture and the land.

On the matter of reconciliation, Mr. Borg said Canada has a long way to go. He is among those who are disenchanted with mainstream politics; his life feels mostly the same whether the Liberals or Conservatives form government. "I just don't believe them any more," he said. "They tell you one thing, and then when they're in power, it never happens."

This past weekend, Mr. Borg's table of traps gave way to a community meal. The Chalet Lodge was the scene of a harvest feast - piping hot moose stew and potluck dishes - and a ceremony to swear in the chief and council who were elected last month.

Shannon Michelle-Ruth, a firsttime councillor, was among those who swore an oath promising not to discriminate against any community member, especially based on their last name or family heritage. As the clouds gathered outside and a storm threatened, an elder laid out four pouches in the four directions and smudged the 50 or so people in the room with smouldering sage.

In an interview in the days leading up to the ceremony, Ms.Michelle-Ruth said she was skeptical that politicians in Ottawa understand the notion of reconciliation. "Us, as native people, we're looking at the government saying, 'What are you reconciling?' Because you're not reconciling the truths we have presented to you," Ms. Michelle-Ruth said.

"All you have to do is look around and see the effects that residential schools have had on us, our parents and our grandparents. It has trickled down to our kids. We feel it here."

Ms. Michelle-Ruth said she has voted in provincial and federal elections ever since she turned 18, and always for the NDP. This year will be no different. Ms. Achneepineskum will get her vote.

Bailey Thompson, 18, has the chance to do the same - to start voting in mainstream politics now that he is of age. But the potential first-time voter has no intention of becoming a first-time voter. He has his moose and his government, he explained. "The only thing I'll vote for," he said, "is chief and council."

With a report from David Jackson, on Lake Helen reserve

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