



Two Years of Liberal Government

**A Voices-Voix
Report Card**

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In 2017, what with Trump-and-May fueled disasters in the US and the UK, not to mention *Rolling Stone* covers, political complacency tempts Canadians (and sometimes prompts international [hyperbole](#)). Decent poll numbers for Trudeau and the Liberals understandably reflect relief they get things occasionally right and equal relief that we aren't Yanks or Brits. The anniversary of their October 2015 election nevertheless reminds us to consider their, at best, mixed record.

Signs of Progress:

- Perhaps most notably the Liberals have improved the tone of politics. As was rarely the case with the previous administration, respectful debate is now sometimes possible. Citizen critics no longer constantly fear relentless vindictiveness. Canadians can also welcome the repeal of reactionary legislation that targeted unions (Bills [C-377](#) and C-525) and the ratification of the ILO's Convention 98, which offers some protection to unionists. A gender-equal cabinet, the appointment of an Indigenous Minister of Justice, a ministerial portfolio for persons with disabilities, some promising non-partisan Senate appointments, the return of the [Court Challenges Program](#), and increased consultations with civil society groups similarly signal an overdue measure of respect for all Canadians. Some willingness to address tax loopholes for the richest of Canadians (although it is too early to say whether the Finance Minister will hold the line on reducing tax benefits for business) also built on Liberal election commitments to address the growing gulf between rich and poor.
- Other human rights advances include unprecedented legislation permitting medically-assisted dying (albeit with significant restrictions), changes to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act allowing more safe injection sites for addicts, a financial payment to [Omar Khadr](#) for the violation of his constitutionally protected rights as well as the settlement of a lawsuit by Sudanese Canadian [Abousfian Abdelrazik](#) over CSIS documents leaked to *La Presse* in 2011, that attempted to link him to terrorism. Prompt attention to the Syrian refugee crisis was in much the same spirit of fostering a generous democracy.
- The government also moved on key election promises with the appointment of a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, contributions to the long over-due all-weather road to Manitoba's Shoal Lake First Nation, additional funding for Indigenous education, and reparations for survivors of Indian Residential Schools and of the Sixties Scoop (although we note that non-status and Metis survivors have not been adequately taken into account in the settlements). On the environmental front, the Liberals publicly championed the Paris Agreement on climate change and cancelled the Enbridge



Northern Gateway pipeline. The government has introduced changes to international and security policies featuring a Feminist International Assistance Policy, which highlights family planning and anti-violence programs and promises to constitute some 95% of all Canadian official development investment by 2020-2021. Commitments to negotiate new NAFTA chapters on gender equality, Indigenous peoples and the environment are also consistent with campaign pledges.

- Liberal election promises included reforms of C-51, the Harper Government's (Anti)-Terror Act, which the Liberals had supported. To date they have introduced limited parliamentary oversight and modest revisions to Canada's security and intelligence system. A new Intelligence Commissioner oversees CSE activities with cyber-attacks now falling within its mandate; no-fly lists are more restricted; and CSIS's terrorism speech mandate has been reduced. An all-agency review body for security agencies promises improved oversight and brings the Canadian Border Services Agency under long overdue review.

Yet, the Liberals' historic proclivity to campaign on the left and rule on the right undermines this record:

- Notably, in August 2017 the UN judged Canada still not fully compliant with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: it has [failed to repeal the Safe Third Country Agreement](#) with the US in respect to its refugee policy and to sign UN conventions providing more protection for migrant and domestic workers. [Desertion](#) of promised [electoral reform](#), waffling yet again on a [national childcare strategy](#), and [retreat on environmental protection](#) of lakes and rivers similarly betray voters.
- Disturbing evidence also suggests that the government is once more ignoring expert advice. The respected community-based structure of the original [Court Challenges Program](#) has not been affirmed and the recommendations of the government-commissioned [Canada's Fundamental Science Review, which reported in April 2017, seem in limbo](#). Opposition Liberals [promised extensive reform to the Access to Information Act](#), but largely ignored former Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault's comprehensive 2015 report *Striking the Right Balance* on proposed amendments to [Bill C-58](#). Statistics Canada remains in trouble. The integration of its IT work into Shared Services Canada has reduced data quality and delivery speed, and sacrificed independent reporting. The Chief Statistician has resigned. Up-to-date research is similarly been disregarded by Liberal support for the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline, the lack of a plan to meet 2030 carbon emissions targets, and continued reliance on selling fossil fuels. The Liberals have even ignored the recommendations of their own



committee to move towards a form of electoral proportional representation, and engaged in a series of obfuscating maneuvers that will maintain the current plurality electoral system, which historically favours the Liberals.

- Other signs of trouble besiege the security and international fronts. CSIS's role in 'threat reduction,' which constitutes one of the most repugnant elements of C-51, remains of questionable legality and will be certainly subject to future charter challenges. Significant questions regarding CSIS data collection and storage, and the [Security of Canada Information Sharing Act remain](#). Changes to the no-fly lists likewise fall well short of best practice. The government's [Bill C-23 extended the power of US pre-clearance officers on Canadian soil](#), even as the Trump regime endorsed unilateralism and xenophobia. An independent foreign policy is similarly compromised by the international aid budget's drop to 0.26% of GNI, in stark contrast to the 70% increase in the defense budget. And then there are those [combat vehicle sales to Saudi Arabia despite its atrocious human rights record](#).
- Failures of obligations to Indigenous people particularly darken the last two years. Only an unwillingness to tackle systemic oppression explains limited progress in implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the near-death of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls as well as persistent gender discrimination in the just-revised Indian Act and [ongoing criminalization of Indigenous protest](#). Is our government afraid of the UNDRIP requirement to obtain "free, prior and informed consent" of Indigenous people before messing with their territories? Despite the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, over-incarceration, [child welfare failures](#), and infrastructure deficiencies show little break with the Conservative past, which was also [criticized by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#) in its periodic report from August 2017. Despite recent efforts by the current government, the Committee was deeply concerned by the ongoing racial discrimination and land rights violations that Indigenous Peoples in Canada still have to face. Trudeau has appointed the official who was Deputy Minister in the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development under Harper to the PMO, which itself raises doubts about the depth of Liberals' commitment to a new approach to Indigenous relations.

On balance, what does the Trudeau record signal for the health of Canadian democracy, the main focus of *Voices/Voix*? A major concern is damage to citizens' faith in elected politicians delivering what they promise. Two years after the 2015 election, the federal government still doesn't reflect the diversity of Canadians nor guarantee the protections of our constitution for all. In sum, for all Trudeau's capacity to channel Wilfrid Laurier's 'sunny ways', the Liberals have fallen well short, both of a fair economic deal and of good public policy for a sustainable future. Disappointment and support for Indigenous



peoples led many Canadians to refuse the Liberal invitation to party for Canada's 150(+)th birthday.

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