

Voice and State Capacity

The Rise of Indigenous Lobbying in Ottawa



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for Policy and Management

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This brief was written by Christian Dippel, Associate Professor of Business, Economics, and Public Policy at Ivey Business School. We thank Suzanne Trottier, President at the First Nations Bank of Canada Trust, and Member of the Lake Manitoba First Nation, and Jeffrey Warnock, Assistant Professor of Law at Western University, for their valuable feedback. We also acknowledge Zsofia Agoston Villalba, Policy and Communications Specialist at the Lawrence National Centre, for editorial and copy-editing support.

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Abstract

In October 2015, Justin Trudeau was elected Prime Minister of Canada on a platform that placed reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples at its center.¹ This report documents that, in the ten years since that election, Indigenous lobbying in Canada's federal registry increased by over 2,000 percent, while all other lobbying grew by roughly 300 percent. In the same period, the number of unique Indigenous organizations registered to lobby federally nearly quintupled. The substantive focus of Indigenous lobbying also shifted: the generic tag Aboriginal Affairs fell from 41 percent to 27 percent of lobbying tags, while Economic Development rose from 18 percent to 29 percent. These patterns reflect a substantial expansion in Indigenous federal political engagement; whether that expansion has translated into corresponding policy outcomes — and whether capacity to engage federally is evenly distributed across communities — are separate questions that this report flags but does not resolve.

¹ Throughout this report, the term "Indigenous" is used as an umbrella term referring collectively to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Where greater specificity is important — particularly in relation to governance structures, institutional representation, and interpretation of the findings — the report uses more precise distinctions where possible. The lobbying registry data analyzed in this study include First Nations governments and tribal councils, Métis governments and settlements, Inuit governments and regional organizations, Indigenous economic development corporations, and Indigenous advocacy organizations.



Introduction

In October 2015, Justin Trudeau was elected Prime Minister of Canada on a platform that placed reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples at its center. Within his first year, Trudeau declared a “new relationship” with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and communities, committed to implementing all 94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, launched the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and pledged increased federal spending on Indigenous programs. By 2017, the government had dissolved the former Department of Indian Affairs and replaced it with two new departments — Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) and Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) — explicitly designed to facilitate a government-to-government relationship with Indigenous nations. In 2021, the federal adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) via Bill C-15 further extended the federal policy architecture associated with reconciliation.

This report documents a feature of this period that has received relatively little scholarly attention: the substantial expansion of Indigenous lobbying in Ottawa. Using data from Canada’s federal lobbying registry, I show that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and Indigenous organizations have, since 2015, registered more lobbyists, secured more meetings with officials, and engaged on a widening range of policy issues. This expansion can be understood as a build-out of Indigenous state capacity at the federal level: the organizational, institutional, and political infrastructure required to participate in the formal institutions of government. I use that framing as a description of infrastructure, not as a claim about effectiveness; whether more activity has translated into more influence is a separate question.

The findings presented here reflect registered federal lobbying activity and therefore capture one, but a key, formal channel of engagement within a broader landscape of Crown–Indigenous relations, negotiations, and governance. While the report documents significant changes in the scale and composition of federal lobbying activity, questions of policy influence, uneven community capacity, and long-term outcomes extend beyond the scope of the registry data alone.

The scale of this lobbying expansion, however, is striking. Between 2014 and 2025, Indigenous lobbying filings increased by over 2,000 percent, while all other lobbying in Canada grew by roughly 300 percent. The number of unique Indigenous organizations actively registered to lobby the federal government nearly quintupled, from 24 in mid-2014 to 114 by late 2025. This is not simply a story of more filings from the same organizations; it reflects a broadening of the Indigenous federal lobbying landscape, with First Nations governments, tribal councils, Métis and Inuit governments, and Indigenous economic development corporations registering to lobby for the first time.

The timing of this expansion is telling. Indigenous lobbying was flat throughout the Harper years (2006–2015), including after Harper’s 2011 majority victory. The takeoff begins only in 2016–2017, following Trudeau’s election and the implementation of his reconciliation agenda. This pattern is consistent with a political environment created by a government explicitly committed to reconciliation lowered the cost and raised the expected return of formal federal engagement.

Beyond the volume of lobbying activity, the analysis examines the content of Indigenous lobbying — what these organizations are lobbying about. It shows a federal Indigenous political presence that is increasingly oriented toward economic development, infrastructure, and environmental governance, alongside ongoing engagement on Aboriginal Affairs.

This lobbying expansion is part of a broader transformation in Indigenous economic engagement that has attracted growing media attention. Indigenous equity ownership in major infrastructure has surged: 28 percent of all Indigenous equity investments in Canadian energy over the preceding fifteen years occurred in just the last two alone. The federal government launched a \$5-billion Indigenous Loan Guarantee Program in February 2025, doubled to \$10 billion within weeks, issuing its first \$400-million guarantee to 36 British Columbia First Nations for a stake in Enbridge’s Westcoast pipeline. An RBC report estimates that 73 percent of the 504 major resource projects planned or underway in Canada lie within 20 kilometres of Indigenous territories, representing a \$98-billion equity opportunity. The lobbying data documented in this report capture the political dimension of this broader shift.

The findings align with the broader literature on reconciliation and economic development in Canada. The shift toward economic lobbying is consistent with the “economic reconciliation” framework that emphasizes Indigenous participation in resource development as a pathway to self-determination, and with the “nation-building” model of Cornell and Kalt, which holds that Indigenous nations that exercise sovereignty and make strategic economic decisions outperform those constrained by external direction. The shift toward economic development is additive, not substitutive: Aboriginal Affairs remains a substantial share of lobbying, and the new economic engagement complements rather than displaces rights-based advocacy.



Background: The Trudeau Reconciliation Agenda

The Policy Architecture

The contrast between the Harper and Trudeau governments on Indigenous policy is sharp on the political surface, even where underlying legal continuity has been greater. The Harper government (2006–2015) was broadly characterized by a posture of restraint and resistance on Indigenous files: Canada was one of only four countries to vote against UNDRIP at the United Nations in 2007, Harper publicly stated that Canada had “no history of colonialism,” and his government was repeatedly found in non-compliance with Canadian Human Rights Tribunal orders on First Nations child welfare. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and organizations certainly lobbied during the Harper years, but the political opportunity structure was constrained: the doors of government were, by many accounts, largely closed to formal federal engagement on Indigenous priorities.

The Trudeau government assembled an extensive Indigenous policy agenda. Several elements are particularly relevant to understanding the expansion of Indigenous lobbying.

The TRC Calls to Action. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report in June 2015, documenting the history and legacy of the residential school system and issuing 94 Calls to Action directed at all levels of government, religious institutions, and civil society. The Trudeau government committed to implementing all 94 Calls — a commitment that, while unevenly fulfilled, signaled that Indigenous policy concerns would receive sustained federal attention. This created a political opening: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit organizations that had previously operated at the margins of Ottawa now had a more receptive audience in government.

Institutional restructuring. The 2017 dissolution of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and its replacement with CIRNAC and ISC was more than organizational reshuffling. It created two new institutional venues for Indigenous engagement — one focused on the Crown-to-Crown relationship (treaties, self-governance, land claims) and one on service delivery (health, education, infrastructure). Each new department required building relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit counterparts, generating new demand for the kind of structured engagement that lobbying represents.

UNDRIP adoption. The federal endorsement of UNDRIP in 2016 (without qualification, reversing the Harper government's position) and its legislative implementation through Bill C-15 in 2021 established a federal commitment to bring Canadian law into

alignment with the Declaration over time, and to develop an action plan in consultation with Indigenous Peoples. UNDRIP is best understood as an aspirational and guiding framework for Crown-Indigenous relations rather than as a settled legal requirement: the legal status of free, prior, and informed consent in Canadian law remains contested, and the federal government has at times stated that UNDRIP does not, on its own, alter the underlying legal architecture of section 35 jurisprudence. What UNDRIP does provide — and what is relevant for the lobbying patterns documented here — is a sustained federal posture that signals openness to substantive Indigenous engagement on legislation, policy, and major projects.

Federal transfer payments. The Trudeau government substantially increased federal transfer payments and program spending directed to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and to Indigenous services: \$8.4 billion in the 2016 budget, over \$18 billion in 2021, with further investments in housing, water infrastructure, child welfare, and health. These flows are best read as intergovernmental fiscal transfers, comparable in form (if not in legal foundation) to the federal-provincial transfers that determine the resources available to provincial governments for service delivery. They created both new opportunities and new reasons for Indigenous governments and organizations to engage with Ottawa: to negotiate transfer-payment levels, to influence how new programs were designed, and to advocate for community-specific priorities.

A Theory of Political Opportunity

Why would a change in government matter so much for lobbying activity? The political-science literature on interest-group mobilization provides a framework. Pross (1992) argues that effective federal policy influence in Canada requires sustained organizational presence in Ottawa — registered lobbyists, government-relations capacity, knowledge of institutional processes, and durable relationships with officials — and that such investments are rational only when the political environment is receptive. Williams (1998) and Young (2000) develop the related claim that marginalized groups require not just formal rights but genuine openness from institutional gatekeepers to achieve meaningful political voice; Lightfoot (2016) applies a closely related framework to Indigenous political participation in the Canadian context. The Trudeau government's reconciliation agenda provided this kind of political opening: a signal that Indigenous concerns would be heard, that institutional channels were open, and that engagement would potentially be rewarded with access.

The Harper years, by contrast, represented a political environment in which the expected returns to formal federal lobbying investment were comparatively low for Indigenous priorities. The government's posture on Indigenous policy was defensive, the institutional architecture (a single, underfunded Department of Indian Affairs) offered limited points of entry, and federal transfer-payment levels were such that lobbying activity was concentrated on basic-service funding rather than on the broader policy agenda that opened up after 2015. Under these conditions, it was rational for many Indigenous organizations to invest scarce resources outside the federal lobbying channel — in direct negotiation with industry, in legal strategies and the courts, in bilateral Crown-Indigenous processes, or in protest and direct action.





Data and Methods

What Federal Lobbying Is, and What It Is Not

Federal lobbying, as captured in Canada's Lobbying Registry, is a specific institutional form of advocacy: communication with Designated Public Office Holders by registered lobbyists for the purpose of influencing legislation, regulation, policy, or public funding decisions. It is not the same as section 35 consultation, bilateral Crown-Indigenous negotiation, treaty implementation processes, dialogue and relationship-building with departments, or engagement at the provincial or territorial level. The registry captures one institutional channel of engagement — a visible and increasingly important one — but only one. The findings here should be read with that scope in mind.

Two further scope notes follow from this. First, many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and organizations employ in-house negotiators or government-relations staff who, as government employees, are typically not required to register as lobbyists under federal rules. The lobbying registered in the federal database therefore captures the visible portion of a larger picture, weighted toward organizations that retain external consultants or that maintain dedicated registered government-relations staff. Second, the registry records lobbying by national and pan-Indigenous advocacy organizations alongside lobbying by individual First Nations, Métis settlements, and Inuit organizations; the priorities of national bodies do not always map cleanly onto community-level priorities, and the aggregate data here cannot adjudicate which voices are being amplified at the federal level.

Data Sources

My primary data source is Canada's federal lobbying registry, which records all formal lobbying communications between registered lobbyists and Designated Public Office Holders (DPOHs). I use four linked datasets:

- Lobbying communications: 351,878 recorded lobbying communications (2008–2025), each associated with a registration, client organization, and date.
- Registration records: registration-level data identifying client organizations, effective dates, and end dates, allowing tracking of unique lobby-active organizations over time.
- Subject matter tags: 858,079 subject matter tags drawn from 54 standardized categories, with each communication receiving one or more tags.
- Registration subject matter descriptions: free-text descriptions attached to each lobby registration, providing a detailed narrative of the issues, projects, and objectives motivating the lobbying activity. These descriptions are linked to communications through the registration identifier, enabling qualitative analysis of what Indigenous organizations are actually lobbying about in their own words.

I consider Indigenous organizations to include First Nations governments and tribal councils, Métis governments and settlements, Inuit governments and regional organizations, Indigenous economic development corporations, Indigenous advocacy organizations, and related bodies. The dataset is consistent with the umbrella definition of “Indigenous” used throughout this report — First Nations, Métis, and Inuit — although I note that a fully consistent breakdown into the three sub-groups is not always possible from the registry classifications alone, and would warrant a dedicated treatment.

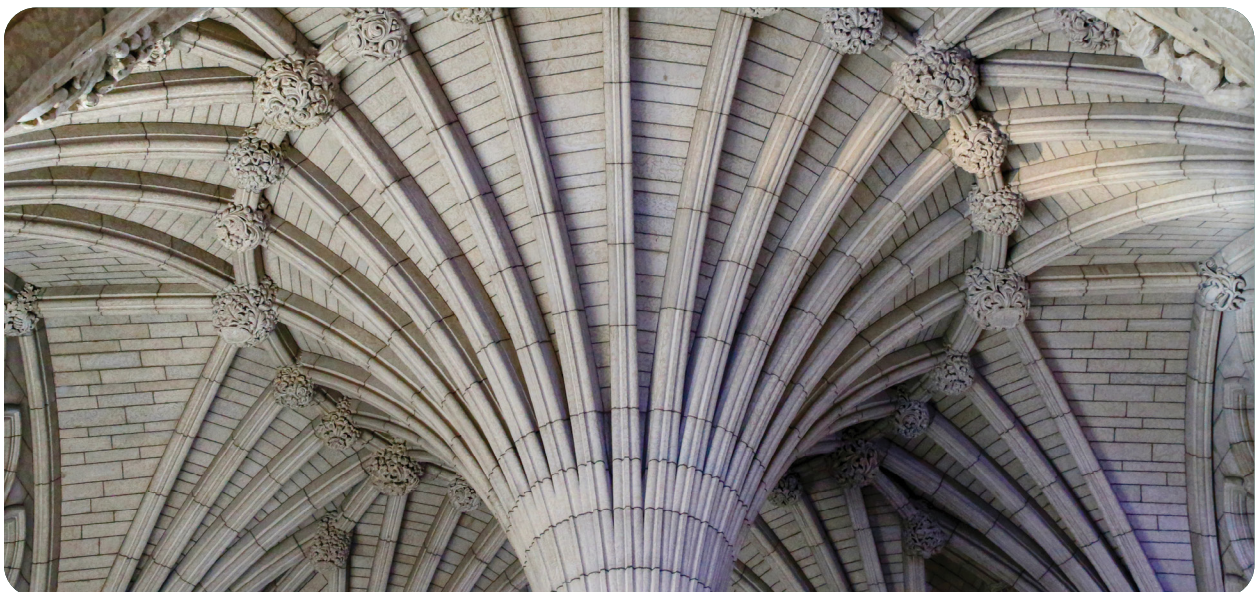


Analytical Approach

I construct four sets of analyses:

1. Normalized time series of lobbying filings (a 12-month moving average, indexed to 100 at mid-2014), comparing Indigenous and all other lobbying.
2. Unique lobby-active clients over time, normalized to the mid-2014 baseline, measuring the extensive margin of Indigenous federal political participation.
3. Subject matter evolution tracking the distribution of lobbying topics over time, categorized into Aboriginal Affairs, Economic Development, Social/Community, Environment/Climate, Fiscal, and Other.
4. Qualitative content analysis of registration subject-matter descriptions. For each year from 2010 to 2025, I link all Indigenous lobbying communications to their underlying registration descriptions, weighting each registration by the number of communications it generated in that year. The resulting text corpus is then summarized using a large language model (Claude, Anthropic) to identify the dominant themes, organizations, and issues. This AI-assisted approach enables systematic qualitative analysis of a corpus that would be prohibitively large for manual review, while the communication-weighted aggregation ensures that the summaries reflect the actual intensity of lobbying activity rather than treating all registrations equally.

All figures include vertical reference lines marking the Harper majority (May 2011) and the Trudeau election (November 2015) to facilitate visual comparison across political regimes.





Findings

The Expansion in Indigenous Lobbying Activity

Figure 1 presents the normalized time series of lobbying filings. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous lobbying are indexed to 100 at mid-2014 and smoothed using a 12-month centered moving average. The contrast is striking: while all other lobbying grew approximately threefold over the period, Indigenous lobbying grew by a factor of roughly 20.

Federal Lobbying Filings: Indigenous vs All Other (Normalized, 12-mo MA)

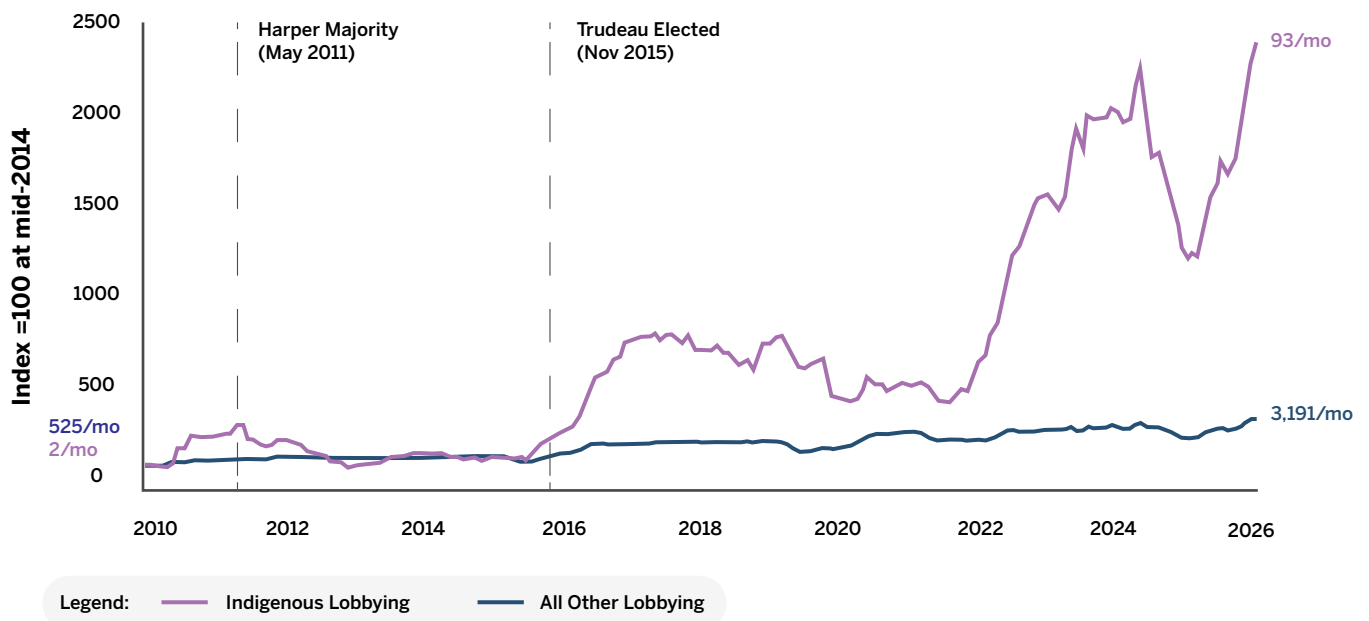


Figure 1: Federal Lobbying Filings by Indigenous vs All Other Organizations (normalized to 100 at mid-2014, 12-month moving average).

Note: The dashed dark line marks the Harper majority (May 2011); the dashed blue line marks Trudeau's election (November 2015). Indigenous lobbying was flat throughout the Harper years and increased substantially after Trudeau took office.

Several features of the time series are notable. First, Indigenous lobbying was essentially flat from 2009 through mid-2015, the entirety of the Harper era. The Harper majority of May 2011, which consolidated Conservative control of Parliament, produced no visible change in Indigenous lobbying activity. Second, the increase begins in 2016, coinciding with the first months of the Trudeau government. Third, growth has been sustained, with further increases from 2022 onward. Fourth, while all lobbying in Canada has grown over this period — likely reflecting the general expansion of federal government activity — the Indigenous-specific growth rate substantially exceeds the general trend, which is consistent with a cause specific to Indigenous federal political engagement rather than a general expansion of federal lobbying.

The Extensive Margin: New Organizations Entering the Arena

Figure 1 could, in principle, reflect a small number of already-active Indigenous organizations simply filing more communications. Figure 2 addresses this by tracking the number of unique organizations with active lobby registrations each month, normalized to mid-2014.

Unique Lobby-Active Clients: Indigenous vs All Other (normalized)

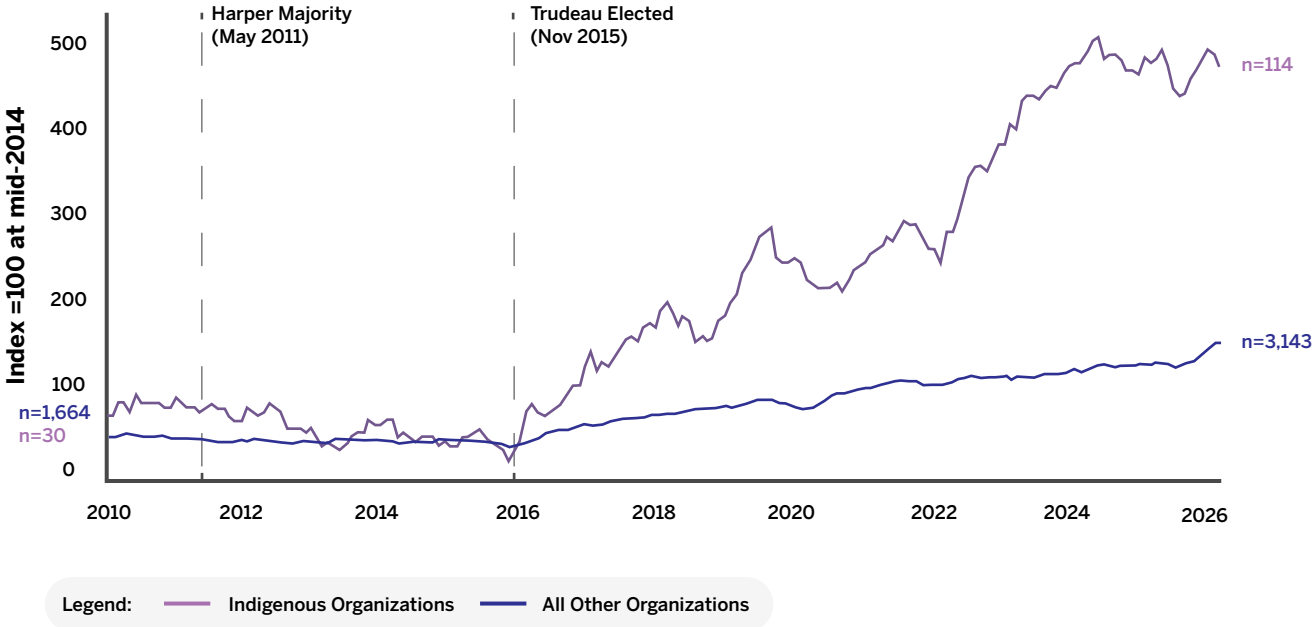


Figure 2: Unique Lobby-Active Indigenous vs All Other Organizations (normalized to 100 at mid-2014).

Note: In mid-2014, 24 Indigenous organizations had active registrations; by late 2025, this had grown to 114, a nearly fivefold increase. The increase is concentrated in the post-2015 period.

In mid-2014, 24 Indigenous organizations had active federal lobby registrations. By late 2025, this had grown to 114 — a nearly fivefold increase (index value of 475). For comparison, non-Indigenous organizations roughly doubled over the same period (index value of 199). The expansion in Indigenous lobbying thus reflects a broadening of who is registered to lobby federally, not merely intensification by existing registrants. New First Nations governments, tribal councils, Métis governments and settlements, Inuit organizations, land-claims bodies, and Indigenous economic-development corporations have registered to lobby the federal government for the first time over this period.

The timing aligns with the Trudeau era. The unique-clients series is flat through mid-2015 and begins rising in 2016, with further growth from 2017 onward as the reconciliation policy architecture (CIRNAC, ISC, the federal endorsement of UNDRIP, and increased program spending) took shape. No comparable increase occurred during the Harper years.

The Content of Lobbying: From Aboriginal Affairs to Economic Development

A second important finding concerns what Indigenous organizations are lobbying about. Each lobbying communication is tagged with one or more of 54 standardized subject matter codes. I group these into six broad categories: Aboriginal Affairs (including Federal-Provincial Relations and Constitutional Issues), Economic Development (including Industry, Mining, Energy, Natural Resources, Infrastructure, Small Business, Regional Development), Social/Community (Health, Housing, Education, Child Services, Employment and Training), Environment/Climate (Environment, Climate, Fisheries, Forestry), Fiscal (Budget, Taxation and Finance, Government Procurement, Financial Institutions), and Other.

Evolution of Indigenous Lobbying Focus Areas Over Time

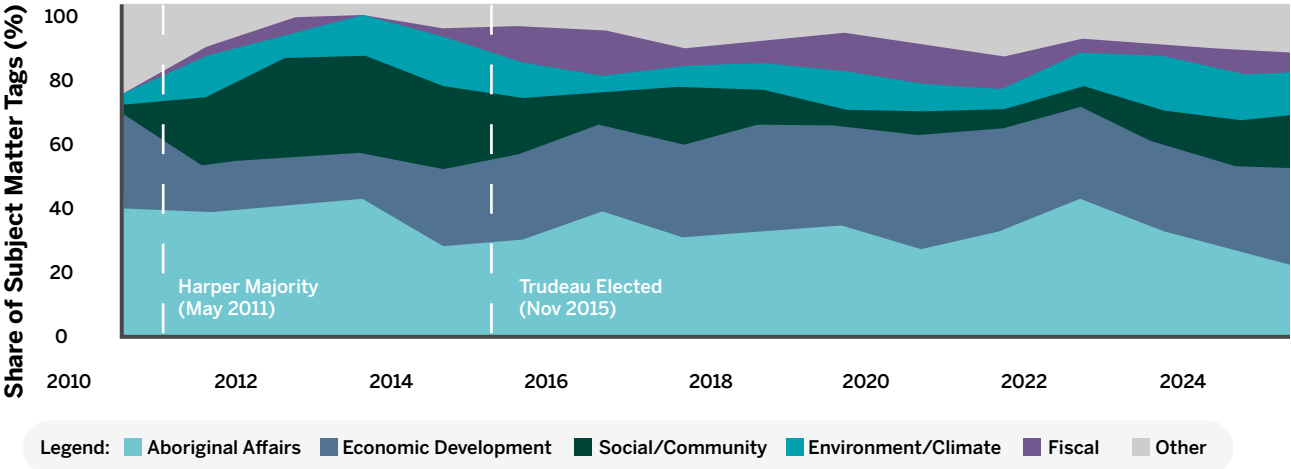


Figure 3: Evolution of Indigenous Lobbying Focus Areas Over Time.

Note: The stacked area chart shows the share of subject-matter tags by category for Indigenous lobbying communications. The Aboriginal Affairs share has declined from over 50 percent to roughly 20 percent (in absolute terms it has grown alongside the overall expansion); Economic Development and Environment/Climate have grown substantially.

Category	Harper era (2009–2015)	Early Trudeau (2016–2019)	Late Trudeau (2020–2025)
Aboriginal Affairs	40.8%	33.1%	26.5%
Economic Development	18.4%	28.8%	28.5%
Social/Community	16.5%	11.8%	13.4%
Environment/Climate	8.4%	7.1%	12.4%
Fiscal	3.1%	9.3%	6.2%
Other	12.8%	9.9%	12.9%

Table 1: Subject Matter Distribution by Period (Indigenous lobbying only).

During the Harper era, over 40 percent of Indigenous lobbying subject-matter tags fell under “Aboriginal Affairs,” the catch-all category for issues specific to the Crown-Indigenous relationship. The dominant subjects in that period were treaty rights and treaty implementation, land-claim implementation, and intergovernmental fiscal negotiations — First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments negotiating with Ottawa over transfer-payment levels and program design for service delivery to their citizens, in much the way provincial governments routinely negotiate with the federal government over health and social transfer arrangements. Economic Development accounted for roughly 18 percent.

Under Trudeau, this balance has shifted. Aboriginal Affairs has fallen to 27 percent of tags, while Economic Development has risen to nearly 29 percent, now the single largest category of Indigenous lobbying. (In absolute terms, Aboriginal Affairs lobbying has grown alongside the overall expansion in Indigenous lobbying; what has fallen is its share of the total.) Environment/Climate has also grown, from 8 percent to 12 percent, reflecting Indigenous engagement on pipeline reviews, climate policy, and natural-resource co-management.

At the individual subject-matter level, the shift is more granular. During the Harper era, the top subjects after Aboriginal Affairs were Education (9 percent), Regional Development (8 percent), and Justice (7 percent). Under Trudeau, they are Economic Development (9 percent), Infrastructure (7 percent), Environment (5 percent), and Regional Development (4 percent).

This reflects a shift from lobbying focused on intergovernmental fiscal relationships — negotiating transfer payments to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments’ service delivery to their citizens —

toward lobbying focused on Indigenous participation in the broader Canadian economy. The earlier files were not requests that Ottawa “manage” reserves; they were intergovernmental negotiations between sovereign Indigenous governments and the federal Crown over the fiscal terms on which Indigenous governments could administer their own service delivery.

This compositional shift is meaningful. It suggests that the Trudeau-era political environment did not simply produce more lobbying on the same set of issues. Rather, it appears to have opened space for a broader Indigenous political agenda — one in which First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and organizations engage federal counterparts on economic development, environmental governance, and self-determination alongside the long-running work of intergovernmental fiscal relationships. I note an important interpretive caveat here: a shift in the composition of Indigenous lobbying may reflect either a shift in community priorities, a shift in which doors are open in Ottawa, or both. The data document where lobbying activity is concentrated; they do not, on their own, distinguish a supply-side change in Indigenous priorities from a demand-side change in federal receptivity.



What Are They Lobbying About? A Year-by-Year Qualitative Summary

The standardized subject-matter codes analyzed above provide a useful high-level picture, but they inevitably compress the richness of Indigenous lobbying into broad categories. To complement this analysis, I draw on the free-text registration descriptions that accompany each lobby registration: detailed narratives, written by the registrants themselves, describing the specific issues, projects, and objectives motivating their lobbying activity.

For each year from 2010 to 2025, I linked all Indigenous lobbying communications to their underlying registration descriptions, weighting each registration by the number of communications it generated. The resulting text corpus for each year was then summarized using a large language model (Claude, Anthropic). The summaries below present, in factual terms, who lobbied, how much, and on what subjects in each year. Communication counts and active registrations are reported alongside each year for benchmarking; “most active” or “largest file” descriptors refer to communication counts within that year.

2010

(67 communications, 22 registrations)

Manitoba Cree Nations (Chemawawin, Misipawistik, Opaskwayak) accounted for roughly half of all communications, lobbying on specific land-claim settlements. Secondary subjects included opposition to Bill S-11 (the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act), Atlantic fisheries rights, and education and cultural infrastructure transfer payments.

2012

(55 communications, 16 registrations)

Bill S-11 remained the largest file by communication count. Registrants new to the file included Indspire (Indigenous education scholarships) and the Haisla First Nation, which lobbied on pipeline review processes and marine emergency response related to oil and gas development in Douglas Channel.

2014

(47 communications, 19 registrations)

The largest file by communication count was Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation's campaign for the Thaidene Nene National Park Reserve. Indspire continued lobbying on education transfer payments. Tsawwassen First Nation registered communications on infrastructure transfer payments for a commercial and industrial park; Delaware Nation lobbied on roads, fibre optics, and business development.

2011

(93 communications, registrations)

Activity was concentrated among nine registrants. The Assembly of Treaty Chiefs (Alberta) opposing Bill S-11 accounted for roughly half of the communications. Remaining activity included housing transfer payments (Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak), northern transportation infrastructure (MacKenzie Aboriginal Corporation's proposed all-weather road to Tuktoyaktuk), and land-claim implementation.

2013

(41 communications, 19 registrations)

The lowest-volume year in the series. The proposed First Nations Education Act was the largest new file. Atlantic fisheries management continued (snow crab quotas, AICFI renewal). Kashechewan First Nation registered communications related to capacity-building transfer payments and diamond-mine opportunities.

2015

(39 communications, 17 registrations)

The lowest-volume year of the Harper era. Makivik Corporation's social housing backlog in Nunavik was the largest file by communication count. Other files included transfer-payment negotiations for self-governing nations (Carcross/Tagish) and an Aboriginal title claim (Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement).

2016

(252 communications, 68 registrations)

Communication counts increased roughly sixfold relative to 2015. Des Nedhe Development LP, a Saskatchewan Indigenous business venture, was the largest registrant by communication count, lobbying on Indigenous business cooperation with government.

Clean drinking water entered the file as a recurring subject (Keewatinook Okimakanak, Mississaugas of Scugog Island). HUU-ay-aht First Nation registered communications on LNG development, economic diversification, and social infrastructure. The TRC appeared in registrations directly, with residential school survivors lobbying on reconciliation in sport policy. A substantial number of organizations registered for the first time in 2016.

2018

(299 communications, 82 registrations)

The Kivalliq Inuit Association registered substantial communication volumes on clean energy and fibre optics in the Arctic. The Native Women's Association of Canada lobbied on MMIWG, gender-based violence, food security, and corrections reform.

Clean energy projects (biomass, wind, solar) appeared across multiple registrations. The Nisga'a Nation registered communications against the oil tanker moratorium (Bill C-48).

2020

(236 communications, 65 registrations)

COVID-19 appeared in multiple registrations. Communication volumes dipped relative to 2019.

Continuing files included Kivalliq clean energy, Kluane First Nation (school construction and self-governance), and the Inuit Development Corporation Association (procurement policy reform and Arctic business development). Pauktuutit Inuit Women lobbied for \$20 million in transfer payments for emergency shelters. The Assembly of First Nations lobbied on the conversion of 100 Wellington Street into an Indigenous space.

2017

(361 communications, 77 registrations)

The Nisga'a Nation was the largest registrant by communication count, lobbying on treaty rights and economic development. Des Nedhe Development LP also continued at high communication volumes. New files included Mikisew Cree on bond-market financing for First Nations projects, Fisher River Cree Nation on solar energy and school construction, and Opaskwayak Cree Nation on the purchase of a rail line and mining development. Cannabis legalization (Bill C-45) appeared in the registrations for the first time.

2019

(276 communications, 79 registrations)

Des Nedhe Development LP and its consortium (Ni'Akinde) accounted for the largest communication volumes among registrants, lobbying on Indigenous business ventures. Reconciliation Inc. registered for the first time, on the Project Reconciliation pipeline-equity initiative. Fox Lake Cree Nation lobbied on the Impact Assessment Act (Bill C-69). The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs registered communications on the purchase of the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation. The Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation registered communications on Trans Mountain pipeline ownership.

2021

(193 communications, 81 registrations)

The number of unique active registrants reached a new high in this period, even as communication volume was lower than 2019. The Canadian Council for Indigenous Business registered substantial communication volumes, lobbying on an Indigenous entrepreneurship strategy and federal procurement. Métis Nation of BC registered substantial volumes on the Daniels v. Canada decision and self-governance. Yellowknives Dene registered communications on Giant Mine remediation procurement. Child welfare jurisdiction under Bill C-92 appeared in Cowessess First Nation's registrations. Residential schools and unmarked graves entered the file.

2022

(566 communications, 168 registrations)

Communication volumes increased roughly threefold relative to 2021. The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation registered the largest communication volumes among registrants, lobbying on residential school records preservation. Huu-ay-aht First Nation registered communications on a corporate acquisition.

Salmon farming appeared as a multi-registrant subject (Tlowitsis, Ehattesaht), framed in registrations as economic reconciliation. Bill C-18 (Online News Act) appeared in registrations related to Indigenous media. Land-claim settlements appeared across several registrations (Northlands Denesuline, Sayisi Dene, Athabasca Denesuline). The Haudenosaunee Confederacy registered communications on the High Frequency Rail project and UNDRIP obligations. Indigenous policing legislation appeared in the registrations for the first time.

2023

(788 communications, 229 registrations)

The Indigenous Leadership Initiative registered the largest communication volumes, lobbying on conservation guardians and Indigenous-led stewardship. The Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (CANDO) registered higher volumes than in prior years on procurement. Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation registered on deep geological repository hosting, data centres, modular housing, and water treatment. Northwest Territories communities registered on wildfire recovery, defence infrastructure, and NATO-linked community investment. Indigenous loan guarantees for resource investment appeared as a new policy instrument in the registrations.

2024

(811 communications, 205 registrations)

Huu-ay-aht's corporate acquisition file accounted for the largest single share of communications. Métis Nation of BC registered substantial volumes on housing and self-governance negotiations. Bill C-53 (Métis self-governance) appeared in multiple registrations. First Nations policing as an essential service appeared in Tsuu T'ina registrations. The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation registered on child welfare, housing, Arctic oil and gas, and devolution. Housing, economic development, and self-governance were the three subject clusters with the highest aggregate communication counts.

2025

(811 communications, 230 registrations)

The largest number of unique active registrants in the series. Métis Nation of BC registered on housing, self-governance, digital governance, and Indigenous justice. The Lands Advisory Board registered on a First Nations land registry. Nishnawbe Aski Nation registered on a multi-subject agenda. Nunavut Tunngavik registered on Arctic sovereignty and security. The Confederacy of Treaty Six registered on military procurement at CFB Cold Lake, carbon capture (Pathways Alliance), and policing. The First Nations With Schools Collective registered on self-determined education jurisdiction. Northern defence spending, nuclear waste governance, major-project procurement, and free trade legislation (Bill C-5) all appeared in the registrations — a substantively broader agenda than was visible a decade earlier.



Photo: Interior of 100 Wellington St, Ottawa. Source: Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC), Government of Canada. Reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada and that the reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.

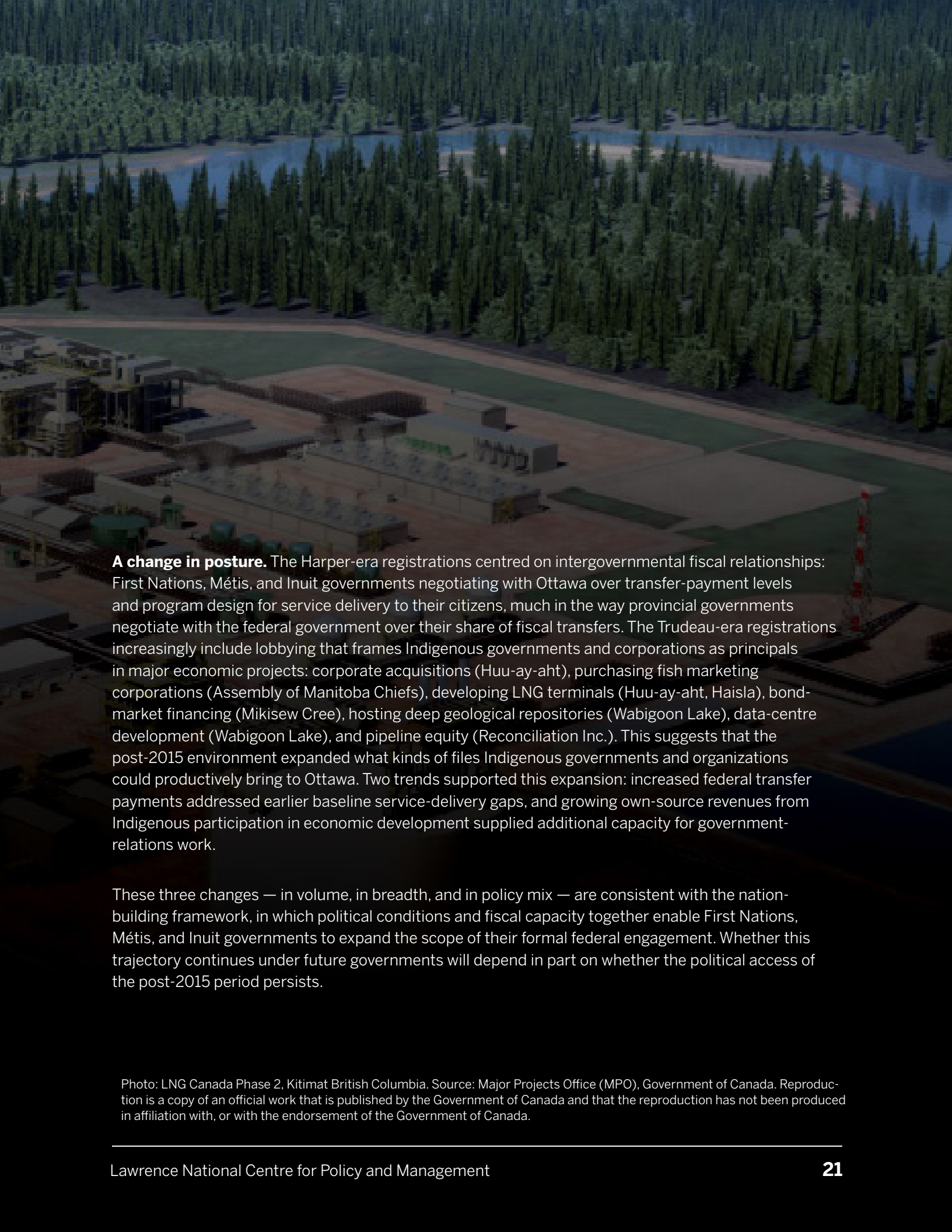
An aerial photograph of an industrial facility, possibly a refinery or chemical plant, with several large storage tanks and processing units. In the background, a river flows through a dense forest of evergreen trees. The scene is captured from a high angle, showing the layout of the industrial site and its proximity to the natural environment.

The Arc: Volume, Breadth, and Posture

The year-by-year record reveals three observable changes in Indigenous federal lobbying. Note, however, the data document the changes themselves more clearly than their underlying causes.

In the Harper years, the registrations concentrate on opposition to specific legislation (Bill S-11), land-claim settlement and implementation, and intergovernmental fiscal negotiations over transfer-payment levels. By the Trudeau era, the registrations span a broader policy mix that includes proposed economic-development projects, investment partnerships, and proposals for institutional reform (a First Nations land registry, a commissioner for modern treaty implementation, essential-services policing legislation). I want to be careful, however, about reading this change as a transition from “grievance” to “governance,” or from “reactive” to “proactive.” Many of the pre-2015 files — land-claim implementation, treaty negotiation, child-welfare litigation — were themselves rights-based governance work; what has changed is more accurately described as the breadth of policy domains in which First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and organizations now appear in the registry, and the share of files that relate to economic development.

An expansion in breadth. In 2010, Indigenous lobbying was concentrated among a handful of First Nations pursuing specific land claims. By 2025, the registrants include First Nations governments, tribal councils, Métis governments and settlements, Inuit governments and regional organizations, Indigenous business corporations, cultural organizations, women’s advocacy bodies, education collectives, and health organizations. The thematic range has also broadened: where the Harper-era agenda concentrated on Aboriginal Affairs and intergovernmental fiscal relationships, the 2025 agenda includes nuclear-waste governance, Arctic defence infrastructure, salmon aquaculture, digital governance, carbon capture, data-centre development, and international trade policy. Taken together, the data document a more pluralistic federal Indigenous political presence — one that engages across the policy landscape rather than being confined to a single “Indigenous issues” silo.



A change in posture. The Harper-era registrations centred on intergovernmental fiscal relationships: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments negotiating with Ottawa over transfer-payment levels and program design for service delivery to their citizens, much in the way provincial governments negotiate with the federal government over their share of fiscal transfers. The Trudeau-era registrations increasingly include lobbying that frames Indigenous governments and corporations as principals in major economic projects: corporate acquisitions (Huu-ay-aht), purchasing fish marketing corporations (Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs), developing LNG terminals (Huu-ay-aht, Haisla), bond-market financing (Mikisew Cree), hosting deep geological repositories (Wabigoon Lake), data-centre development (Wabigoon Lake), and pipeline equity (Reconciliation Inc.). This suggests that the post-2015 environment expanded what kinds of files Indigenous governments and organizations could productively bring to Ottawa. Two trends supported this expansion: increased federal transfer payments addressed earlier baseline service-delivery gaps, and growing own-source revenues from Indigenous participation in economic development supplied additional capacity for government-relations work.

These three changes — in volume, in breadth, and in policy mix — are consistent with the nation-building framework, in which political conditions and fiscal capacity together enable First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments to expand the scope of their formal federal engagement. Whether this trajectory continues under future governments will depend in part on whether the political access of the post-2015 period persists.

Photo: LNG Canada Phase 2, Kitimat British Columbia. Source: Major Projects Office (MPO), Government of Canada. Reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada and that the reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.



Interpretation: Lobbying as State Capacity

The expansion documented above represents more than a quantitative increase in lobbying activity. It is also an expansion in Indigenous state capacity at the federal level — the organizational and institutional infrastructure required to participate in formal federal governance processes. I use that framing as a description of infrastructure, not as a claim that more activity has automatically produced more influence; the section that follows develops the distinction.

Photo: Interior of 100 Wellington St, Ottawa. Source: Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC), Government of Canada. Reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada and that the reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.

Research on political representation (Williams 1998; Young 2000) has argued that standard models of liberal representation fail marginalized groups, who require alternative mechanisms to achieve meaningful political voice. Studies of Canadian federal politics (Pross 1992) have shown that effective policy influence requires sustained organizational presence in Ottawa: registered lobbyists, government-relations capacity, knowledge of institutional processes, and durable relationships with officials. Lightfoot (2016) develops the parallel argument for Indigenous political participation in the Canadian context. By these measures, Indigenous governments and organizations have, over the past decade, built infrastructure that political theorists argue is necessary for meaningful federal-level participation.

This framing connects to the broader literature on state capacity (Skocpol 1985; Evans 1995) and on Indigenous nation-building (Cornell and Kalt 1998, 2007; Papillon 2012). The expansion of Indigenous lobbying reflects investments in governance infrastructure — hiring government-relations staff, establishing Ottawa offices, developing policy expertise, and building relationships across the federal bureaucracy and Parliament. These are durable investments in political capacity that extend beyond any single policy issue, and they would not have been made without a political environment that made such investments worthwhile.

The comparison with the Harper years is instructive. During 2009–2015, Indigenous federal lobbying was stagnant for two complementary reasons. First, the political opportunity structure was constrained, and the expected returns to formal federal lobbying investment were comparatively low for Indigenous priorities. Second, transfer-payment levels were such that lobbying capacity was concentrated on basic-service files; there was less room for the broader policy agenda that opened up after 2015. The Trudeau government

changed both pieces of the calculus: by signaling that Indigenous policy concerns were a federal priority, by creating new institutional venues for engagement, and by increasing federal transfer payments, it made investment in formal federal lobbying capacity more worthwhile and freed organizational capacity to engage on a broader agenda.

Limitations and Nuances

I want to set out, in one place, what these data can and cannot show. The empirical contribution is to document the scale, breadth, and changing composition of registered Indigenous federal lobbying since 2009. The sections that follow outline several important limitations and interpretive cautions.

Activity is not the same as influence. Several of the policy areas with the most sustained Indigenous advocacy in this period — long-term drinking water advisories, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and the resolution of major resource-development disputes — are also areas where outcomes have been uneven or contested. The growth of formal lobbying activity documented here is best read as evidence that Indigenous organizations are increasingly equipped to engage in federal politics on their own terms; whether and where that engagement is translating into policy change is a separate empirical question that will require additional outcome-side data to address.

Capacity to engage federally is unevenly distributed. Sustained activity in Ottawa requires dedicated personnel, institutional infrastructure, and — in practice — proximity to or routine travel to the federal capital, all of which depend on financial resources and administrative capacity that are not evenly distributed across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit

governments and organizations. The aggregate growth documented here is real, but the doors of government have always been there. They are now more open than they were before 2015, but getting through them remains harder for some communities than for others, and that unevenness is itself an important part of the picture.

The registry captures one institutional channel among many. As emphasized in the Data and Methods section, federal registered lobbying is not the same as section 35 consultation, bilateral Crown-Indigenous negotiation, treaty implementation processes, dialogue and relationship-building with departments, or engagement at the provincial or territorial level. Many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and organizations rely on in-house negotiators and government-relations staff who do not typically register, so the trends here document the visible portion of a larger picture.

Not all “Indigenous lobbying” represents the same kind of voice. The registry includes both lobbying by individual First Nations, Métis settlements, and Inuit governments on their own behalf, and lobbying by national or pan-Indigenous advocacy bodies. The priorities of national bodies do not always map cleanly onto community-level priorities, and the aggregate data here cannot adjudicate which voices are being amplified at the federal level.

Political access has shifted faster than legal posture. It is important to distinguish two things that have moved at different speeds. The political posture of the federal executive toward Indigenous engagement — in tone, in policy attention, in the willingness to take meetings and respond to requests — shifted markedly after 2015. The underlying legal posture of the Crown, particularly as advanced by the Attorney General in civil litigation on the duty to consult and the limits of Crown obligations, has had

considerably more continuity. The lobbying patterns documented here reflect the first kind of shift more directly than the second; a change in political access and tone is consistent with much of what we observe, but should not be taken as evidence of a corresponding settled change in the legal architecture of Crown-Indigenous relations.

A note on causation. I describe the post-2015 increase as consistent with a Trudeau-era political opening, but the data do not allow me to isolate that channel from a number of complementary channels: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action and their public salience; increased federal transfer payments addressing baseline service-delivery gaps and freeing capacity for a broader policy agenda; growing own-source revenues from Indigenous participation in resource development; and the broader institutional changes (CIRNAC, ISC, the federal endorsement of UNDRIP) that opened new venues for engagement. These are not competing explanations so much as complementary parts of the same shift, and the empirical task of disentangling them is left to future work.



Conclusion

The evidence presented in this report documents a substantial expansion in Indigenous federal political engagement in Canada. Over the past decade, and specifically since the election of the Trudeau government in 2015, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments and organizations have built a significant and growing presence in federal lobbying. This expansion is visible across multiple dimensions: the volume of lobbying communications (up over 2,000 percent), the number of organizations actively lobbying (up nearly 500 percent), and the breadth of policy issues on which Indigenous registrants now appear.

This expansion appears to reflect the political opening of the Trudeau period, working alongside increased federal transfer payments and growing Indigenous own-source revenues. Indigenous lobbying was stagnant throughout the Harper years not because Indigenous governments and organizations lacked priorities, but because the expected returns to formal federal lobbying investment were low and because lobbying capacity was concentrated on basic-service files. The Trudeau government's reconciliation agenda — the TRC response, institutional restructuring, the federal endorsement of UNDRIP, and increased federal spending — created political opportunities for expanded Indigenous engagement; rising fiscal capacity from both transfers and economic development made organizational investment in government-relations capacity feasible. When the doors of government opened more widely, more Indigenous governments and organizations invested in the capacity to walk through them — though, as the new Limitations section emphasizes, that capacity remains unevenly distributed across communities.

For policy, the data document that government openness to Indigenous engagement, combined with adequate transfer-payment levels, is associated with substantial increases in the volume, breadth, and policy range of formal Indigenous federal engagement. The shift in lobbying content — from Aboriginal Affairs toward economic development, environment, and self-determination — is consistent with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governments increasingly engaging Ottawa on a broader policy agenda alongside the long-running work of intergovernmental fiscal relationships. This change should not be read as evidence of policy effectiveness on its own. Several of the policy domains where Indigenous lobbying activity has been most sustained — long-term drinking water advisories, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, the resolution of major resource-development disputes — are also areas where federal outcomes have remained contested or unresolved, and the data here cannot adjudicate the influence question on its own.

Whether this expansion of Indigenous federal political voice will survive a change in government, and whether the organizational investments of the past decade represent durable political capacity or a political-cycle artifact, are questions that future research will need to address. So too is the question of whether the underlying legal architecture of Crown-Indigenous relations is changing in step with the political access documented here, or whether, as some observers have suggested, the shift in political tone has substantially outpaced the shift in legal posture.



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Lawrence National Centre
for Policy and Management

Lawrence National Centre for Policy and Management
1255 Western Road
London, Ontario N6G 0N1

Telephone: 519-661-2111 ext. 88487
Email: LNC@ivey.ca
www.ivey.uwo.ca/lawrencecentre