



Indigenous Governance in Canada

Indigenous Peoples in Canada are not one single group. There are **many different nations**, each with **unique traditions, values, beliefs, and systems of governance**. Some have lived on their traditional lands for thousands of years and continue to make decisions based on their traditional laws and teachings. Others have signed treaties with the Canadian government that recognize their right to self-govern.

While each Indigenous nation is distinct, many share a common goal: to protect their people, culture, land, and right to make decisions about their own communities. This article explores four different examples of Indigenous governance in Canada.

Haudenosaunee Confederacy

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy, is one of the world's oldest living democracies. It includes six nations: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora. These nations joined together under the Great Law of Peace, a traditional constitution that guides their government.

In the Haudenosaunee system, Clan Mothers play an important role. They are responsible for choosing leaders called Hoyaneh (chiefs), who speak for their clans at council meetings. Decisions are made by consensus, which means that everyone must agree before action is taken. This ensures that all voices are heard, not just the majority. If a chief does not act in the best interest of the people, the Clan Mother can remove him from the role. This is different from the Canadian government, where leaders are elected through voting and can only be removed in an election. The Haudenosaunee value peace, unity, respect, and shared responsibility.

Nisga'a Nation

The Nisga'a Nation, located in northwest British Columbia, has a modern treaty with the Canadian and BC governments. In 2000, the Nisga'a Final Agreement became the first treaty in BC to give an Indigenous nation the right to self-govern over its own land and people.

The Nisga'a have their own government, called the Nisga'a Lisims Government. Citizens elect representatives to make decisions about education, health, land, and culture. The Nisga'a also follow a constitution and have their own set of laws that reflect Nisga'a values, traditions, and language. Elders are respected advisors, and their knowledge is used to help guide decisions.

Like the Canadian government, the Nisga'a use elections and written laws. However, the big difference is that Nisga'a governance is focused on preserving culture, maintaining strong ties to the land, and promoting self-determination, the right to decide their own future.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) is a national organization that represents Inuit across four regions of Canada: Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (Labrador). While ITK does not make laws like a government, it plays a powerful role in speaking on behalf of Inuit people and ensuring their voices are heard at the national level.

The ITK's president is elected by leaders from each region. This organization works on important issues such as education, health, language preservation, and housing. Decisions are made through collaboration with regional Inuit organizations and communities.

The ITK is different from the Canadian government because it does not pass laws, but it influences how policies are made. It shows a different form of leadership, one that focuses on advocacy, unity, and protecting the rights and cultures of Inuit people.

Coast Salish Governance

The Coast Salish peoples live along the west coast of British Columbia. Their traditional governance systems are based on family ties, oral traditions, and community respect. Leadership is often passed down through families in the form of Hereditary Chiefs, chosen for their wisdom, generosity, and leadership abilities.

In the past, major decisions were made through family and community meetings, where everyone had a voice. Leaders were expected to listen carefully and make fair decisions for the well-being of all. Today, some Coast Salish communities also use elected leadership systems that work alongside traditional forms.

Unlike Canada's government, which uses formal voting and laws, Coast Salish systems emphasize relationships, land stewardship, and balance. The values of respect for nature, cooperation, and oral history remain strong in their governance traditions.



Indigenous governance in Canada is rich and diverse. Whether through ancient confederacies like the Haudenosaunee, modern treaty governments like the Nisga'a, advocacy organizations like the ITK, or traditional hereditary systems like those of the Coast Salish, Indigenous peoples continue to lead their communities with strength and resilience. Understanding these systems helps us see that there is more than one way to lead, and that **respect, relationships, and responsibility** are key values in many Indigenous forms of governance.

Name: _____

Date: _____

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Governance System	Who are the Leaders?	How are Decisions Made?	Similarities to Canadian Government	Differences from Canadian Government
Haudenosaunee Confederacy				
Nisga'a Nation				
Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami				
Coast Salish Governance				