

ENERGY TRANSITION AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RECONCILIATION?

Carelle Mang-Benza, Jamie Baxter, Romaine Smith Fullerton examined energy issues by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers inspired by the hope that “the prospects of mutual benefits could turn the energy transition into an opportunity to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada.”¹ They start by referencing launching, in 2017, of the federal government’s “country-wide public consultation on the future of the energy sector that involved interactions with over 380,000 Canadians,” a project named “Generation Energy.”² Among the conclusions Natural Resources Canada reached was that the “energy transition is an opportunity for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.”³ Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton see “this splicing of energy transition and reconciliation” as an opportunity to explore how a potential new discourse [is] developing along these two national imperatives,” the first being “reconciliation,” the second “the transition to less carbon-intensive economic activities.”⁴

While “energy transition” requires shifts in technology and economics, it also portends wider shifts in culture, including patterns of consumption.⁵ More specifically, “Canada’s energy transition” requires the “production, distribution, and consumption of energy clean and efficient” as well as the reduction of carbon consumption, specifically in the oil and gas sector.⁶ Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton focus on the former, “looking at renewable energy production in the current transition and how it connects to reconciliation.”⁷ They do so by reviewing “public policy documents and select news media” during the period of 2007-2018, “prob[ing] whether and to what extent there is a melding of discourses of energy transition and reconciliation.”⁸ They ask two questions: (1) “In what ways do Indigenous and non-Indigenous public sources communicate about the energy transition and reconciliation?” and (2) “How have their communications evolved over time, especially in relation to two landmark moments of 2015: the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC]?”⁹

Before answering their questions, they review definitions of key concepts, reminding readers that “colonization” denotes an imperial power’s movement into already occupied space, establishing “domination” and thereby “supplant[ing] the traditional order.”¹⁰ One form of “colonization” is “settler colonization,” meaning the conversion of a “foreign site into a new home” by “constraining, erasing, and extinguishing the original inhabitants,” process disguising its aggression and genocide by “engineering structures of dispossession, which in Canada ranged from legislation—for example, the 1857 Gradual Civilization Act and the consolidated 1876 Indian Act—to assimilation projects such as residential schools.”¹¹ The “early settlers,” Mang-Benza,

Baxter, and Smith Fullerton note, “routinely used racial semantics that condoned the exclusion of Indigenous voices from public life.”¹² Their third key concept is “resurgence,” denoting “Indigenous people’s efforts to assert their identities and reclaim their territories,” and the fourth is “reconciliation,” itself “a settler initiative” prompted by “pressure” on the “colonial establishment to publicly consider the root causes of the broken relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada,” culminating in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) which issued “a recommendation to address one of the most damaging colonial institutions, the residential school system.”¹³ During the RCAP public hearings, “residential school survivors launched class action lawsuits supported by the newly elected National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Phil Fontaine,” leading to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which set aside funding for the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.¹⁴

“Many aspects of the settler-led reconciliation project,” Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton report, “are contested: from the concept as a legitimate means to address colonial legacies to the process and outcome,” as any “settler-led” reconciliation risks reinscribing elements of the colonial relationship, a “relationship that cannot be fundamentally reconciled until treaties are honoured.”¹⁵ Despite these critiques and obstacles, the authors suggest that “reconciliation ... seems to be taking hold in public narratives,” including “in the energy sector—site of recurrent conflicts between Indigenous communities and mainstream energy stakeholders over costs and benefits of extraction activities.”¹⁶ The authors cite the 2017 Generation Energy report’s claim that “the country wants to ensure that Indigenous communities benefit more directly from energy development” and that “this transition is an opportunity for Indigenous Peoples and communities to take their place at the table.”¹⁷ In contrast to the “fossil fuel industry” – which “has been challenged in Canada through court cases when energy initiatives have threatened Indigenous Rights to Traditional Territories” – the “renewable energy sector is increasingly appealing to Indigenous communities [and] it is to this category of energy projects that we turn next.”¹⁸

Why would the renewable energy sector be appealing to Indigenous communities? Some have pointed to “aspirations to sovereignty, self-determination, and financial autonomy,” while others note that “renewable energy projects often align with Indigenous values and ways of living on the land but are also opportunities to generate revenues.”¹⁹ Still, there are Indigenous communities who engaged in renewable energy who have experienced “tension between sustainable land stewardship and economic development,” as “with perpetual patterns of colonial domination, Indigenous communities must overcome rigid bureaucracy, financial limitations, and even the legacy of mistrust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders.”²⁰ Moreover, there have been Indigenous leaders who initiated renewable energy projects facing “internal resistance when their community opposes the idea of participating in the Western economy.”²¹ Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton admit that “there

are only a handful of authors to date who have explicitly connected renewable energy and reconciliation,”²² citing former “Band Chief Judith Sayers of the Hupačasath First Nation” who (quoting) “described sustainable energy development as a game changer for First nations.”²³ One study suggested that “the low-carbon transition provides a dual opportunity for Canada to decarbonize and for Indigenous communities to promote economic development, but stressed the risk of perpetuating colonial injustices.”²⁴ For those for whom any participation in the “Western” economy is anti-Indigenous, the two are intrinsically reciprocally related.

Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton note that “the energy transition literature has not yet integrated the dimensions of colonization in studies of energy systems,” an “emerging body of literature [that] examines structural changes in energy systems over time,” literature “organized around three main schools of thought: the technico-economic school stemming from economics and engineering, the socio-technico approach that considers energy as a social phenomenon, and the socio-political school that draws on political ecology and political science.”²⁵ “To our knowledge,” Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton continue, “none of these approaches pay explicit attention to Indigenous worldviews.”²⁶ And so they “examined Indigenous and non-Indigenous media and policy communication about renewable energy and reconciliation to understand the evenness (or not) of the uptake of reconciliation discourses” in the province of Ontario, the “leader in the energy sector.”²⁷

Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton used “content and discourse analysis to explore publicly available statements from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources about renewable energy and reconciliation in a selection of media, policy documents, and press releases,” focusing more on the “origin of the sources” more than on the “author’s identity, recognizing that readership is largely source dependent,” true possibly, but odd in that they also note that “Indigenous and non-Indigenous people may debate using shared vocabulary, mutual understanding is not guaranteed,”²⁸ in which case authors’ identities would seem rather relevant. Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton examine materials – see overview below - during “January 1, 2007, and June 30, 2018, a period that starts two years before the Ontario Green Energy and Green Economy Act (2009) [now repealed], [and] includes the TRC’s (2015) final report and Paris Agreement on climate change, and ends two years after the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change issued by the Government of Canada in 2016.”²⁹

Table 1. Overview of Documents Included in the Data Set

Category	Indigenous sources		Non-Indigenous sources			
	Corporate news releases	Newspaper articles	Country-wide			Ontario
			Federal and provincial governments	Submissions to Generation Energy	Newspaper articles	Bills
Examples	Assembly of First Nations. (2017, November 6). <i>Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde says First Nations must be fully involved in the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment</i> [Press release].	Ball, D. (2014, January 1). Harper's B.C. energy envoy urges more Aboriginal consultation. <i>Windspeaker</i> .	Government of Canada. (2017). <i>Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change, first annual synthesis report on the status of implementation</i> . Government of Ontario. (2013). <i>Achieving balance—Ontario's long-term energy plan</i> .	Clean Energy Canada. (2016). <i>A Canadian opportunity: Tackling climate change by switching to clean power</i> .	Barretto, J. (2018, January 1). How Alberta achieved Canada's lowest renewable-electricity prices. <i>The Globe and Mail</i> .	Climate Change Mitigation and Low-carbon Economy Act, 2016, S.O. 2016, c. 7.
<i>n</i>	123	38	8	18	22	3

Note. *N* = 212

Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton list “six main themes, 21 sub-themes, and 1,501 sections of text (hereafter referred to as statements) coded under the various themes, the number of occurrences of each theme displayed below (Table 2).” The main themes include (1) “inclusion ... bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, including through energy development, climate change, economic development, land access, and cultural exchange”; (2) “dependency ... Indigenous people as needing support, as vulnerable people, and even as liabilities for Canada in energy development”; (3) “representations of Indigenous assets,” among them Indigenous peoples “political voices,” as “business partners, holders of valuable knowledge, stewards of the land, workforce, and political stooges,” that last phrase, the authors unnecessarily note, conveying “negative connotations related to political gaming”; (4) “exclusion,” referring “either to language of opposition that positions Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people as antagonists, or to language of negation that disregards any difference between the two”; (5) “autonomy,” referencing “Indigenous control over land and economic development”; (6) “Indigenous people as after-thought – statements based on either the position of a mention to Indigenous people (e.g., at the end of a paragraph) or the apparent importance of a particular mention.”³⁰ In Table 2, the “post- or pre-TRC ratio is an indicator of the frequency of those themes before and from 2015.”³¹

Table 2. Distribution of Themes Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Sources Before and After the TRC Report

Themes	Pre-TRC (2009-2014)		Post-TRC (2015-2018)		Ratios		
	Number of statements per theme	Indigenous sources (%) ^a	Non-Indigenous sources (%) ^a	Indigenous sources (%) ^a	Non-Indigenous sources (%) ^a	Post/pre TRC	Total non-Indigenous statements/ total Indigenous statements
Inclusion	484	8%	9%	29%	54%	4.8	1.7
Dependency	291	9%	15%	20%	56%	3.2	2.4
Representations of Indigenous assets	265	13%	12%	26%	49%	3.0	1.6
Exclusion	258	16%	23%	31%	30%	1.6	1.2
Autonomy	161	11%	19%	32%	39%	2.4	1.3
Indigenous Peoples as after-thought	42	0%	33%	5%	62%	2.0	20.0
Total number of coded statements	1,501	159	224	401	717	2.9	1.7

Note. ^a Percentages pertain to the themes in each row.

In Table 3,” Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton explain, “are registered the “21 sub-themes composing the six main themes.”³²

Table 3. Distribution of Sub-Themes Under Each Theme Over the Study Period 2007-2018

Main themes	Inclusion	Dependency	Representations of Indigenous people	Exclusion	Autonomy
Sub-themes	Inclusion through energy (48%)	Indigenous Peoples need support (53%) <i>risk deficit thinking</i>	Indigenous Peoples as political voice (34%)	Discourse of opposition and separation (41%)	Autonomy through land (44%)
	Together against climate change (18%)	Indigenous Peoples are vulnerable (43%) <i>risk paternalistic view</i>	Indigenous Peoples as business partners (28%)	Opposition related to energy issues (37%)	Autonomy through economic development (40%)
	Meaning of reconciliation (18%)	Indigenous Peoples as liabilities (4%)	Indigenous Knowledge as valuable for Canada (16%)	Discourse of negation (22%)	Autonomy through equity (16%)
	Inclusion through economic development (11%)		Indigenous Peoples as stewards of the land (15%)		
	Inclusion through land use (4%)		Indigenous Peoples as workforce (5%)		
	Inclusion through cultural exchange (1%)		Indigenous Peoples as political stooges (2%)		

Note. The theme *Indigenous Peoples as after-thought* has no sub-theme.

“Figure 1,” Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton continue, “compares the occurrence of the six themes in Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources while Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of those themes before and after 2015,” the two showing “that all themes have become more prevalent post-TRC, while at the extremes, the theme of inclusion has increased the most (4.8 times).”³³

Figure 1. Comparison of Themes in Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Sources

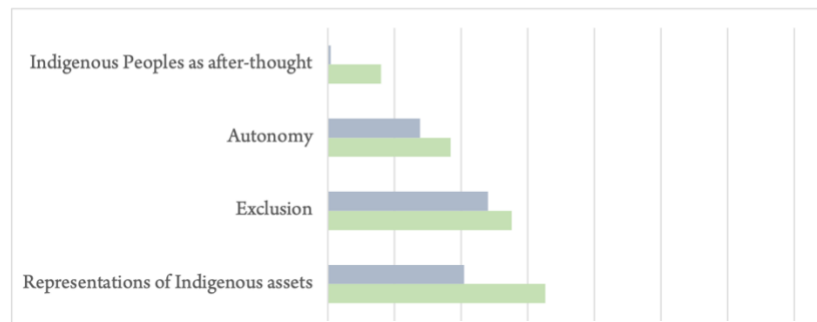
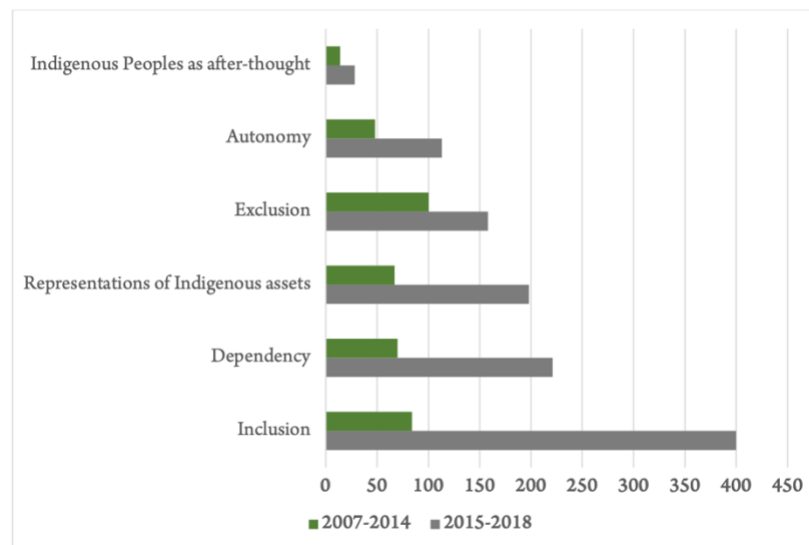


Figure 2. Occurrence of Themes Before and After 2015



“Inclusion,” Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton report, was “by far the most prominent theme, with 484 supporting statements, originating mainly from non-Indigenous sources,” the theme increasing “almost 4-fold after the TRC, which suggests that the settler sources are increasingly diffusing messages about energy development in Indigenous communities.”³⁴ They note that “Table 3 shows that, out of the six sub-themes pertaining to inclusion, the three most common are inclusion through energy, meanings of reconciliation, and together against climate change.”³⁵ “Non-Indigenous communication about inclusion through energy sounds less adamant,” they continue, reflective of “Western imaginaries of a pluralist society awarding equal opportunities to all oblivious to the fact that many Indigenous communities struggle with technical capacities to develop projects and are still constrained by Indian Act provisions regarding on-reserve investments.”³⁶ “One of the common themes” – from non-Indigenous sources – “relates to living conditions among Indigenous people and their perceived vulnerability to climate change,” a theme that shows up among “Indigenous leaders, like National Chief of the AFN Perry Bellegarde also use the language of dependency, but from a different standpoint,” emphasizing instead the federal government’s “historic role in institutionalizing

Indigenous poverty and dependency,” as well as its “chronic, conscious underfunding regardless of need or equity,” treating “Nations governments ... like NGOs rather than governments that are part of the constitutional fabric of this country.”³⁷ This contrast in characterization - Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton list this item “under the theme of dependency” – was also evident in 2013 newspaper article from Quebec’s newspaper *La Presse*, reporting “mixed reactions among energy stakeholders in the province following the release of market allocations to wind energy producers, including Indigenous producers.”³⁸ Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton tell us that “the news article subtly weaves together public discontent over rising electricity costs and a complaint that an over accommodating process allocated generous energy production contracts (150 of the total 800 MW production capacity) to Mi’gmaq communities.”³⁹

“Indigenous representation,” Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton report, “tripled after the TRC.”⁴⁰ Before the TRC they “found an almost equal number of Indigenous representations in Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources (see Table 2),” but “from 2015 onward, non-Indigenous voices dominate this category, which could point to the TRC’s impact on a nation suddenly more aware of patterns that historically besmirched Indigenous people.”⁴¹ Whereas before Indigenous peoples were represented as “business partners”⁴² – the authors quote from the 2013 Long-Term Energy Plan of Ontario - afterward “reconciliation” enters the conversation, requiring representation to acknowledge the “challenges” and “likelihood of controversial outcomes.”⁴³ “Decarbonisation and reconciliation with Canada’s Indigenous peoples” are now linked, and the two objectives necessitating the making of “decisions” that will leave “winners and losers.”⁴⁴ When surveyed, respondents prioritized “national interest” over “the rights of Indigenous people, Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton observing that “the very formulation of the survey question could put respondents in a mindset of dichotomous choice between energy and reconciliation,” adding: “This survey construction is revealing as it suggests the dilemmas that Canadians face at the crossroads of energy transition and reconciliation.”⁴⁵ And when “these two demographics talk about autonomy, they do not mean the same thing,” illustrating this assertion by citing the Government of Ontario’s 2017 Long Term Energy Plan, wherein one finds “examples of what it calls Indigenous leadership in the energy sector,” focusing primarily on the energy cost “savings” that the Wikwemikong First Nation’s Ignite Energy and Infrastructure Project will bring to the “community,” a project “financed with a contribution of \$127,900 from the IESO’s Save on Energy Program and private debt financing.”⁴⁶ Also illustrative of “autonomy” the authors note that “Dokis First Nation membership voted to opt out of the sections of the Indian Act dealing with land issues and ratified their own land code in 2013,” a “bold step to manage their own lands, resources and environment as enabled through the First Nations Land Management Act,” granting “them a seat at the decision-making table in a new government-to-government relationship,” what National Chief Perry

Bellegarde termed “shared sovereignty,” not exactly autonomy I’d say but apparently interpreted that way by Chief Bellegarde: “we will no longer tolerate being treated as ‘claimants’ in our own lands,” adding “What we hold is what the Creator gave us. We do not hold ‘grievances,’ we hold this land . . . We are resuming control. We are re-asserting jurisdiction over our lands and resources.”⁴⁷

Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton acknowledge this jurisdictional split on energy issues among federal, provincial, and territorial governments, a constitutional challenge that is compounded when discussions extend to Indigenous governments,” a split that “lists the provincial and territorial governments as entities too important to be overlooked, while Indigenous governments are listed at the end,” a sequencing they interpret as “illustrat[ing] the ingrained patterns of thinking in settler society and policy circles.”⁴⁸ This simultaneous “inclusion and exclusion, . . . autonomy and dependency,” the authors found “interlaced in public communications” overall. ⁴⁹ Still, “non-Indigenous voices dominate those communications where empowering representations of Indigenous people coexist alongside prejudiced ones.”⁵⁰ They note that these “texts examined rarely reflect the differences in Indigenous and Western imaginaries about development and well-being, which is symptomatic.”⁵¹ Perhaps “both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians similarly aspire to see higher levels of Indigenous autonomy, even though autonomy may take on different meanings for each group,” as “settlers are willing only to accommodate Indigenous claims that do not threaten colonial privileges.”⁵²

Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton conclude that there was a “significant expansion of the theme inclusion that brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada and the marginal expansion of the theme [of] exclusion that juxtaposes the two groups as antagonists.”⁵³ From this “finding” they conclude that “Indigenous and non-Indigenous people increasingly discuss the convergence of reconciliation and decarbonisation imperatives as they both share significant interest in the development of energy resources,” but – they add unnecessarily - “the shared interest in the energy sector may not be sufficient to topple the colonial edifice.”⁵⁴ Even national consensus on climate change may hide divergent views on the format and outcome of [ecological] reconciliation,” divergent views on “water, wind, sun, rocks, and land,” positioning Indigenous peoples as “land stewards.”⁵⁵ Despite the facts, Mang-Benza, Baxter, and Smith Fullerton share Senator Murray Sinclair’s optimism “that Canada might be ‘on the cusp of something special’ as it gradually shakes its colonial ‘cloak of pain and shame’ . . . while dealing with its fossil fuel addiction.”⁵⁶ Renegotiating the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada means “engaging in an energy transition that does not name winners and losers along racial lines.” Such “reconciliation” recalls “the vision of the Two Row Wampum.”⁵⁷

REFERENCE

- Mang-Benza, Carelle, Baxter, Jamie, and Smith Fullerton, Romaine. 2021. New Discourses on Energy Transition as an Opportunity for Reconciliation? Analyzing Indigenous and Non-indigenous Communications in Media and Policy Documents. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 12 (2), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2021.12.2.8641>

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ 2021, 1.
² Ibid.
³ Quoted in 2021, 1.
⁴ 2021, 1.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ 2021, 2.
¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ 2021, 3.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ 2021, 3-4.
¹⁶ 2021, 5.
¹⁷ Quoted in 2021, 5.
¹⁸ 2021, 5.
¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid.
²² Ibid.
²³ Quoted in 2021, 5.
²⁴ 2021, 5.
²⁵ 2021, 6.
²⁶ Ibid.
²⁷ Ibid.
²⁸ 2021, 6-7.
²⁹ 2021, 7.
³⁰ 2021, 8.
³¹ Ibid.
³² Ibid.
³³ 2021, 8-13.

³⁴ 2021, 14.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ 2021, 15.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. “Besmirched” seems an odd word choice, understating what befell Indigenous peoples after non-Indigenous peoples arrived.

⁴² 2021, 16.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ 2021, 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ 2021, 17-18.

⁴⁸ 2021, 18.

⁴⁹ 2021, 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Isn’t the “energy sector” part of the “colonial edifice”?

⁵⁵ 2021, 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ 2021, 21; <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/>