



Mohawks of Tyendinaga stand by railway tracks during an action near Belleville, Ontario, Canada, on Thursday, Feb. 13, 2020. Photographer: Brett Gundlock/Bloomberg

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On February 7, militarized RCMP arrested and removed Wet’suwet’en land defenders from their unceded territories, triggering demonstrations and blockades across the country. With large parts of the country’s rail traffic at a standstill, and shipping vessels unable to move goods, people are seeing that peaceful civil disobedience can #ShutDownCanada.

As solidarity actions spread, Canadian politicians of all stripes struggled to respond. On February 14, Conservative opposition leader Andrew Scheer called the rail blockades and political disruptions “illegal” and said Indigenous land defenders and their supporters should “check their privilege.” Scheer’s statement was ill-informed and arrogant, but it was also predictable. These kinds of statements are standard fare in settler colonial societies like Canada, and they are part of a pattern of behaviour consistent with what Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice has described as “Settlers With Opinions.”

When movements like Idle No More or #ShutDownCanada emerge, when non-Indigenous Canadians are inconvenienced by Indigenous assertions of nationhood and sovereignty, settlers often respond with what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call “moves to innocence.” Tuck and Yang define settler moves to innocence as “strategies to

remove involvement in and culpability for systems of domination.” These “moves” or “plays” form a key part of the settler playbook: the common tactics and strategies used by settlers to defend the colonial status quo. Violence and coercion are a key part of the playbook; however, settlers also use a number of discursive manoeuvres to maintain the material conditions of colonialism. Exposing the settler playbook can help counter these strategies and advance decolonization. As activists and settler scholars, we offer this short primer to the settler playbook.

Play 1: Distorting or Dismissing the Past

One of the most common strategies in the settler playbook is warping the writing of history to protect and privilege the colonial perspective. In the *Wretched of the Earth*, anti-colonial writer Frantz Fanon notes that the “colonist makes history and he knows it.” Similarly, Indigenous scholars like Sto:lo writer Lee Maracle consistently point out that Canadians often use a distorted account of the past to justify colonialism as commonsensical. Sometimes the past is crafted into righteous mythology (e.g. the history of the RCMP), while at other times the past is ignored all together (e.g. government starvation policies) or dismissed as too complicated to understand (e.g. treaties and nation-to-nation agreements).

British Columbia premier John Horgan employed this tactic last week when he stated that #ShutDownCanada activists engaged in rail blockades in Ontario “haven’t got a clue, quite frankly, of how complex these issues are.” The most significant action in Ontario is a CN rail blockade being undertaken by the Mohawks of Tyendinaga. The Mohawks’ long history of engaging in blockades and solidarity actions demonstrate that Horgan’s comments were flat out wrong. Meanwhile, recognizing that many settlers “haven’t got a clue” about the history of Indigenous-settler relations, the Mohawks have been using the blockade to educate those willing to listen and learn about the nation-to-nation agreements that govern these lands. On day six of the blockade, they brought out the two-row wampum belts to clarify and affirm the relationship coming out of the 1764 Treaty of Niagara. Contrary to Horgan’s comments, Indigenous peoples such as the Wet’suwet’en and Mohawks have a clear and precise understanding of history and are using it to hold settlers to the founding agreements of these lands that provide frameworks for peaceful coexistence.

Play 2: Doublespeak and Deceit

Another tactic in the settler playbook is doublespeak and deceit. Canadian government relations with Indigenous peoples have historically been defined by lies and broken promises. For example, in its numbered treaties Canada promised Indigenous people on the Prairies farming tools and seeds at a time when bison herds were nearly gone and people were starving. Historian Sarah Carter has shown the many ways in which Canada broke those promises by providing shoddy implements, delivering seeds far too late, and making it impossible for Indigenous farmers to sell their produce. As well, Canada and Britain often negotiated treaties in bad faith, including sending treaty negotiators with the treaty text already printed.

On 11 February, Horgan stated, “We are also engaged in ongoing reconciliation discussions, which are focused on rights, title, self-government and self-determination. Those channels of communication remain open.” He went on to say that the BC government has made a commitment to reconciliation in good faith and intends to see it through; “it is a shared journey.” Horgan’s pleasant words confirm that reconciliation has become primarily a metaphor. The reality of the events unfolding in Wet’suwet’en territory stand in stark contrast to settler appeals to dialogue, consultation, sharing, and mutual respect. The day after Horgan made these comments, and two months after the BC government signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into law, at least fifty heavily armed RCMP officers invaded Wet’suwet’en territory. They threatened the lives of unarmed Indigenous people with high-powered weapons and removed them from their lands. This is an example of doublespeak: using language to obscure or hide an often disrespectful or violent reality. Doublespeak has been a foundational tool for colonial decision-makers, and Indigenous peoples have a lot of experience recognizing and navigating it. It is deceitful and disingenuous when Canadian leaders, at all levels, speak of reconciliation and sharing while ignoring Indigenous legal orders and making choices that dispossess and harm Indigenous peoples.



BC Premier John Horgan. September 6, 2017. Source: BC Gov News.

Play 3: Divide and Conquer

Colonial powers also employ strategies of “divide-and-conquer” to rule over colonized peoples. In the case of the Mohawk nation, the Department of Indian Affairs coerced the community of Kahnawake into accepting the elected band council system in the 1880s by promising Mohawks they could return to their traditional government system if they did not like it. When a majority of Kahnawake Mohawks were dissatisfied and asked to return to their own system, the Department said it would require 100% consensus in the community, an outrageous and impossible hurdle.

A similar “divide-and-conquer” strategy is playing out right now in Wet’suwet’en lands. Many politicians and settler Canadians are pointing to the fact that although the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs oppose the proposed route, twenty band councils have signed benefits agreements with Coastal GasLink. As Horgan stated, “I think it’s disingenuous to suggest that a handful of people can stop progress and success for people who have been waiting for a break like this for many, many years.” Here Horgan attempts to exploit internal differences within the Wet’suwet’en nation to justify his government’s already-existing support of the project. It is convenient for him and others to ignore how the long history of settler colonialism has shaped and fomented such divisions. Since its founding (and before), Canada has been dividing large Indigenous nations into small bands under the Indian Act, scattering Métis land holdings through the scrip system and undermining existing Indigenous governments and legal orders. These efforts to divide and conquer are well documented by historians and intimately understood by Indigenous peoples. Successive Canadian governments have cultivated and used these divisions to undermine Indigenous rights and appropriate lands, and it continues to this day.

Play 4: Paternalism

Another common strategy in the settler playbook is paternalism: the assumption that Indigenous legal orders don’t exist or aren’t worth considering, that Indigenous people are uncivilized, and that assimilation will be beneficial. Every aspect of the history of Indigenous-settler relations is marked by paternalism. You don’t have to look far for condescending, paternalistic statements from settlers in moments like these. See, for example, historian Ken Coates’ recent editorial where he explains to Indigenous people that #ShutDownCanada is against their own interests. Coates imposes his own moral assumptions and biases by defining Idle No More as ‘peaceful’, ‘legal’, and thus acceptable in contrast to the current disruptions which are, to Coates, being co-opted by anti-pipeline activists – suggesting that Indigenous anger is misdirected. In moments of open conflict, like right now, many settler leaders and spokespeople deploy an arrogant “I know better” attitude. In reality, settlers have been wrong about what is good for Indigenous peoples over and over again: dispossession, residential schools, resource extraction, the Sixties Scoop, the Indian Act, etc. – all of these things have been imposed on Indigenous peoples “for their own good” and have caused (and are still causing) immense harm.

Play 5 : Invoking the “Rule of Law”

Settlers often refer to the “rule of law” as if Canadian law is a self-evident, singular reality. In fact, Canada is marked by legal pluralism: common law, civil law, and Indigenous law co-exist and interact in a complicated legal environment. As Kate Gunn and Bruce McIvor argue in their recent [article](#), Indigenous law and title does not depend on recognition by Canadian law. Nevertheless, settlers often invoke the “rule of law” to justify their control of Indigenous lands and legitimize resource accumulation by continued dispossession. On January 13, Horgan declared, “this project is proceeding and the rule of law needs to prevail in BC.” In a recent press conference, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau similarly stated that Canada is “a country of the rule of law and we need to make sure those laws are respected.”

By referring to *the* rule of law, settlers naturalize and universalize their own idea of what law is and should be and ignore Indigenous legal orders. For settlers, *our* law becomes *the* law. Following this logic, settlers frame Indigenous peoples as devoid of law – as lawless. Stephen LeDrew made this argument in his recent [editorial](#), “Canada should enforce the law with Wet’suwet’en anti-pipeline protests.” Such ignorance of Indigenous law is central to maintaining colonial control because it allows settlers to frame Indigenous peoples as trespassers and law-breakers and to deny their own participation and culpability in continued violence against Indigenous peoples. In a context where Indigenous legal orders are ignored and erased, reconciliation means integration and inclusion of Indigenous nations rather than acknowledging their legal sovereignty. #ShutDownCanada is partly a response to this denial.

Conclusion

Settlers use a number of strategies to maintain the colonial status quo, including distorting or dismissing the past, doublespeak and deceit, divide-and-conquer politics, paternalism, invoking a singular “rule of law,” and, of course, violence and coercion. Our hope is that by exposing some of the discursive tactics in the settler playbook – and putting them in historical context – we can help settlers to see these “moves to innocence” for what they are. As well, we want to show that settlers can choose how to respond in these moments. Instead of treading the familiar paths of colonial hubris that have led to so much pain and damage, we invite settlers to recognize the limits of our knowledge and experience and to listen to Indigenous elders, youth, scholars, and knowledge keepers. In the case of the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs, their calls are clear: the RCMP must leave their territory and the Coastal GasLink project must pause for nation-to-nation negotiations.

We have heard from the brave people putting their bodies on the line at numerous blockades that they are not there for themselves but for future generations. As Dr. Karla Tait, director of programming for the Unist’ot’en Healing Centre, [states](#), Wet’suwet’en women are taking a stand “to protect the lands for all the future generations that depend on it.” Land defenders are acting out of love and are taking risks to protect land and life for us all. Instead of deploying the same old tactics and strategies to talk down to Indigenous people and to justify violence against them, we want to find generative and

life-affirming ways to respond that might help shape a new playbook based on respect, good relations, and reciprocity.

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