“Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience,” the late Palestinian scholar Edward Said wrote in 2001. “It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and their native place, between the self and its true home: the essential sadness of exile can never be surmounted.”

The Dalai Lama’s global perspective on exile was reflected in a special edition of Toronto’s Sunday Star in October 2010 that focused on the more than 43 million forcibly displaced people in the world at that time. “Myself, I am one of them,” he said, referring to his escape from Chinese-controlled Tibet in 1959.

Today, 10 years after the Star’s editorial, the number of homeless people or exiles has nearly doubled. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports on its website that 70.8 million people are currently on the move, having been forced from their homelands. And more than half of these are children under the age of 18.

Meanwhile, the Canadian government wants the world to know how great Canada is and is even currently seeking a seat on the United Nations Security Council. Fantastic. I like Canada too. I guess. But I brought up the Dali Lama and Edward Said and the word exile earlier because it seems the underlying issue these days is about land, and the human right of all people including our people to a homeland.

Yes, Canada is great. But how much greater a country this would be if every citizen understood and accepted the relationship between Canada’s past and its present.

At the G20 Summit in September 2010, then prime minister Stephen Harper boasted that Canada “has no history of colonialism.” That a leader of our country could stand in front of dignitaries from around the world and speak these words is a testament to just how far some of us are from understanding the history of this land.

Of course, Canada is a colonial state. Take a walk through Ontario’s legislature at Queens Park someday and look at the symbols of the British aristocracy and the war implements of centuries of British military rule that hang in the corridors there. Listen to our current governors on Parliament Hill in Ottawa as they legislate policies that ignore Indigenous sovereignty and make our homelands uninhabitable, regulations that make the lands we still live on death lands.

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1 Said, Edward W., Reflections on Exile and Other Essays, Harvard University Press, 2001
2 Toronto Star, Looking for a Place Called Home, Saturday, October 23, 2010
3 unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance
Here’s a definition that most Canadians do not like to hear:

**Settler colonialism** seeks to replace the original population of a colonized territory with a new society of settlers. As with all forms of colonialism, it is initially based on external domination, typically organized or supported by an imperial authority that intends to economically exploit the occupied land.

Canada’s history fits squarely into this definition.

Canada was created through a process of acquiring control over lands occupied by other nations - us.

In 1878, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald instituted a National Policy to establish what he called ‘greater national cohesion’. In fact, it was a policy designed to cement Canada’s dominion over the land. The policy included a commitment to the construction of a transcontinental railway, a protective tariff on imports, and an organized approach to the settlement of the West. To implement his policy Macdonald required land: land for the railway, land for the settlers, and land over which Canada could exercise the political control necessary to exploit the land’s natural wealth. To get the land, Canada undertook a project of Western treaty-making that was designed to remove Indigenous people from their homelands. Canada implemented a reserve system that was administered under the Indian Act, which had been created two years earlier in 1876 and was designed to remove Indigenous people from their homelands. And Canada introduced a program of Métis land scrip in exchange for Métis land rights that was designed to remove Indigenous people from their homelands.

Long before Macdonald, the first permanent settlements in what would become Canada were established in the name of France and England in the 1600’s. By the middle of the 1600s enough European settlers had arrived in New France that Jean Talon was able to conduct North America’s first census between 1665 and 1666. Talon’s census listed 3,215 inhabitants of European descent, including 3 schoolmasters, 5 bakers, 9 millers, and 36 carpenters. These were among Canada’s first European settlers. Their descendants and the settler societies they constructed eventually extended from coast to coast.

The descendants of these and later settlers now form and control the Canadian government. Until 1960, a Status Indian could not vote in a federal election unless he or she first renounced their Indigenous identity by giving up their right to be registered under the Indian Act, thus losing their treaty rights, and suffering what Edward Said called “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and their native place, between the self and its true home”. That is, until they agreed to integrate with settler society.
And what has enfranchisement won us? Since Confederation in 1867, 153 years ago, only 39 Indigenous persons have served as Members of Parliament. In the last election in 2019, a total of ten Indigenous candidates were elected to the House of Commons: four First Nations, four Métis, and two Inuit. That’s less than .03 percent of parliament, even though Indigenous people constitute 4.9 percent of the population of Canada. Canada’s government was, and continues to be, a Parliament for the settler majority.

Canada’s economy was built and depends on the exploitation of Canada’s land and resources for the benefit of its settlers. Canada’s reliance on natural resources has been an integral part of its economic strategy since before Confederation. From the early sixteenth century, when European fishermen took cod from the Grand Banks off Newfoundland and in the Gulf of St Lawrence, to the completion of the transcontinental railway in 1885, to the proposed Trans Mountain Pipeline System and the Coastal GasLink Project that are causing so much controversy today.

Other primary industries, including agriculture, forestry, and mining are now major contributors to Canada’s total economy, which makes the question of who owns, controls, and benefits from the resources extracted from Indigenous land as pressing today as it was when John A. Macdonald instituted his National Policy in 1878.

Moreover, recent and ongoing disputes over who controls the land from which these resources are extracted or over which they are transported have brought a critical issue to national attention. Suddenly we are in the news. Not because our ongoing economic disadvantage in this country is finally about to be addressed, not because the government has taken action to act on its pledge to implement the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and not because Canada’s lawmakers are finally willing to take action to remedy the urgent situation facing Indigenous women and girls. No, Indigenous people are in the news because some of our communities are rising up to protest and confront governments and industries engaged in mineral exploration and resource transportation activities that we argue infringe on our autonomy over lands left to us during the treaty-making process. Activities that fail to benefit and in fact harm our communities.

If settler Canadians will look at the country’s past with clear eyes, they will recall that the Royal Proclamation of 1763 acknowledged Indigenous peoples as independent nations. Just as we recall that as independent nations, we have every right to reclaim our culture and assert our authority on our traditional lands, which according to Canada’s own laws are our sovereign homes and remain under our care.

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I am an artist. I am not a lawyer, politician, or historian. My work strives to celebrate and honour the artistic and intellectual traditions of the Anishinaabe nation of which I am a member. In my 25-year career I have tried not to focus only on the troubles facing us but also on our way forward toward justice and sovereignty over our affairs. I made the work on display on the tables over there two years ago to comment on the difference in perspective and attitude between Indigenous people and settlers. The exhibition was called “Circles and Lines: Michii Saagiig”. At that time the pictures and maps were intended to illustrate a theoretical position. But the conditions we are facing today have materially magnified the problem I was addressing artistically in 2018 and nowadays Land, and rights and title to Land have moved to the centre of my work.

Slide show...