

Indian In The Cabinet: Speaking Truth to Power. By Jody Wilson-Raybould. Toronto, ON: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2021. 352pp. ISBN 9781443465396

Lindsay Knight

Volume 8, Number 2, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094537ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v8i2.70808>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Saskatchewan

ISSN

2369-1190 (print)

2368-416X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Knight, L. (2022). Review of [Indian In The Cabinet: Speaking Truth to Power. By Jody Wilson-Raybould. Toronto, ON: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2021. 352pp. ISBN 9781443465396]. *Engaged Scholar Journal*, 8(2), 191–193. <https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v8i2.70808>

© Lindsay Knight, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Indian In The Cabinet: Speaking Truth to Power. By Jody Wilson-Raybould. Toronto, ON: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2021. 352pp. ISBN 9781443465396

Indian in the Cabinet is a groundbreaking memoir that reflects Jody Wilson-Raybould's experiences and perspective as the first Indigenous woman in the simultaneous roles of Canada's Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Within this context, she describes how, within the Canadian political system, power and truth are disassociated from one another. In order for real change to occur, fraudulent power must be dismantled and replaced with truth as a primary commitment in the democratic system of the Canadian government.

As an Indigenous woman who is an academic, I was intrigued by this book for various reasons. Indigenous people have such a limited presence within institutions of power. We find ways to navigate these systems, despite multiple challenges. Although it is mostly a political memoir, the book speaks volumes about the intersections of gender and race from an Indigenous woman's perspective. Like many Indigenous people working in colonial spaces, Jody Wilson-Raybould gathers strength from the cultural teachings of her own nation. In particular, she reflect on her grandmother's lessons and life experiences in order to explain the desire to embark on a career in Indigenous and Canadian political systems. She frames these teachings as focused on both her Indigeneity and Canadian identities, and while her stories are intriguing, she struggles to validate her decision to try to change the colonial system from within. In this review, I discuss Jody Wilson-Raybould's descriptions of power dynamics and truth telling by relating her explanations of governance within Indigenous communities and at the intersections of gender within both Indigenous and western politics.

I read this book with the preliminary awareness of Wilson-Raybould's main audience—the Canadian public, by many of whom she is considered a hero for standing firm on the recent SNC-Lavalin Affair.¹ I am not versed in Canadian political history and language, yet I am keenly interested in the dynamics of Indigenous people working within Canadian politics. Wilson-Raybould's tone, language, and storylines are framed in a way that is careful and calculated—as a politician who is adept in maintaining the favour of the public. As an Indigenous person, her decision to engage with Canadian politics is described, but is not entirely convincing. She mentions her optimism about democracy multiple times in the book, despite the disheartening experiences she has endured within the same system; at the same time she describes the Indian Act, which is problematic colonialist piece of federal legislation that actively defines and controls Indigenous people in Canada. Convincing the reader of the desire to work within a system that has been fundamentally designed to eradicate Indigenous people since contact

1 The SNC-Lavalin scandal resulted from attempted political interference with the justice system by Canada's Prime Minister's Office. An ethical review concluded that Justin Trudeau and others had improperly sought to influence Jody Wilson-Raybould to intervene in an ongoing criminal case against Quebec-based construction company SNC-Lavalin, by offering a deferred prosecution for \$48 million Canadian dollars (CD) to Libya, between 2001 and 2011. The company ultimately admitted to offering \$127 million CD in bribes funneled to Libyan officials to secure contracts. In protest to these pressures, Wilson-Raybould and Jane Philpot resigned from the Trudeau cabinet.

is difficult. With such a wide audience, this book was an opportunity to suggest pragmatic solutions to the long-standing, complicated relationship between Indigenous nations and the Canadian government, yet it does not.

The author draws comparisons between the practices and traditions of Indigenous and colonial governance systems and asks, “What does a politics of inclusion that recognizes difference look like in practice?” (261). Wilson-Raybould is committed to Indigenous people, people of color, and women achieving substantive equity, beyond task forces, policy reports, and commissions. She points out,

My experience was so out of the norm for Ottawa that it needed to be exiled, pushed back to the margins – to which Indigenous people, people of color, and women have long been relegated in this country. (261)

It seems that this is where Wilson-Raybould is divided. She refers to the ways in which Indigenous governance systems do not foster division, because a healthy community is the focal point of good governance. The stark contrast between those systems and her Ottawa experience conflicts with her stance, as she does not want to side completely with Indigenous governance, yet the most problematic aspect of her story is the fact that despite the obvious colonial and genocidal policy that the Canadian government upholds, Wilson-Raybould is still adamant to focus on inclusion and maintaining a role within that system, even as an independent.

Wilson-Raybould recognizes that there are multiple Indigenous nations within Canada with different histories, and they have endured different levels of colonial influence. Because of this, gender is a conflictual area in governance. For example, the east coast began its colonial relationship much earlier than the west coast, so the history of diverse Indigenous communities is different in each territory. Gender binaries within Indigenous communities are a result of patriarchal colonial influences. Wilson-Raybould describes numerous examples of misogyny and racism experienced within her roles, and she retaliated by emphasizing “strength,” “persistence,” and “resilience” as ways of moving through the structural discrimination that is foundational to Canada (135, 204). These are words which Indigenous people—particularly women—are accustomed to embodying in Canada’s colonialist context.

One example that I could not forget was a campaign speech where she was speaking to thousands of people and had a miscarriage while at the podium. She completed her speech while it was happening (68). Wilson-Raybould displays her ability to navigate the space of power and maintain truth, despite the very real and continuous patriarchal onslaught. The way that she carried herself throughout her time in Ottawa was a display of the generational strength of Indigenous women, despite colonial histories.

The Indian in the Cabinet contains constant references to Wilson-Raybould’s grandmother, Pugladee, who is the highest ranking person in her clan. How Wilson-Raybould was taught embodies a traditional Indigenous governance system of knowledge. She describes how Indigenous worldviews on governance are foundationally different from Canada’s political systems. Examples include practices such as putting community first, versus the Canadian

political culture's focus on competition and winning. She also discusses leaders as chosen, rather than voted into power in her nations, where hereditary chiefs pass on their traditions to the next generations. The concepts of power, control, and wealth are often furthest from the minds of traditional Indigenous leaders who were expected to give everything away in Potlatch ceremonies. Wilson-Raybould's grandmother confirmed that these worldviews contrast Canadian practices of governance in ways that cannot be reconciled, so Indigenous communities must find ways to embody good governance and non-gendered practices of leadership, without colonial interference.

Contemporary Indigeneity is complex, and not all Indigenous peoples, nations and communities are the same in their motivations. That being said, there are some similarities in traditional governance systems among Indigenous nations. An example is how Wilson-Raybould explains Indigenous governance leadership roles, which are based on a model of power that is aligned with truth and grounded in the ability to uplift the community so that everyone is thriving. The question is, then: is there also power in admitting the truths of the internal conflicts that arise from enjoying the power and money that comes with being in a high position or positions in the Canadian government? Wilson-Raybould's grandmother reflects on "the contemporary reality of Indigenous people, upon whom outside forces have had huge impacts. She asks whether we, as a people, "still really know who we are" (297). Hopefully, Jody Wilson-Raybould will continue to embrace her grandmother's teachings about Indigenous concepts of governance and leadership. *Indian in the Cabinet* provides readers with a chance to understand more deeply how an alignment with truthfulness might revise the terms of Canadian governance.

Lindsay Knight
Ph.D. Candidate
University of Saskatchewan
Email: ljkl16@mail.usask.ca