

The Governing Systems Pillar: First Nations Elders teach how to “train” to self-govern

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Elders from Lílwat gathered to teach First Nations youth both inside and outside their territory as the featured guests of the second 2022 Inherent Rights Youth Initiative (IRYI) storytelling session.

Each online session brings together First Nations Elders, youth, and friends from across Turtle Island to discuss one of the [Five Pillars of Effective Governance](#) developed by The Centre For First Nations Governance (CFNG). Every gathering, Elders help guide young First Nations people on their journey to becoming the inherent rights leaders of the future.

In this session, Elders shared their wisdom and stories relating to The Governing Systems Pillar.

“The way we've structured the sessions is around the Five Pillars of our inherent right to self-government that comes from our great leaders of the past, right across this great land of ours,” said Satsan (Herb George), CFNG’s co-founder.

He and his team at the national non-profit coordinate each IRYI session with support from [The Rebuilding First Nations Governance Project](#), [Laidlaw Foundation](#), and [The Institute of Public Administration of Canada \(IPAC\)](#).

This gathering was the second of six events in the series. Youth and Elders can still sign up for the remaining gatherings through [IRYI's signup form](#).

Learning from the community

The group of Lílwat Elders assembled at a table in a room filled with books and learning materials at Xetólacw Community School. Sitting in the middle of the group, brothers Elder Hálaw7 (Lloyd Williams) and Elder Ha7ya (Burt Williams) drew out memories of the everyday lessons on governing systems they learned from decades of life at Lílwat.

Elder Hálaw7 recalled he and Elder Ha7ya’s several-times great grandfather was responsible for assembling the different Lílwat Clans once or twice a year. These gatherings were just one aspect of Lílwat’s past governing systems.

“His only job on the whole nation was to get the people together and feed everybody,” Elder Hálaw7 said.

“All the different Clans would come, and they (would) feast and eat,” he added. “They talked about the rules and laws of the whole nation.”

Governing systems have always reached both far and wide into Lílwat life. As Elder Ha7ya recounted, he and Elder Hálaw7's education in Lílwat governance wasn't on pause when nation-wide meetings weren't being held.

When their cousin Roger and his friends were caught stealing strawberries, Elder Ha7ya explained, the brothers learned another lesson on Lílwat's governing systems.

"They had to go to cítíqam' (Lílwat traditional court)," he said. "The way they conducted the meeting tells us kind of how they governed."

"A group of well, I guess you could call them family heads or counselors, were sitting up on the stage," he explained. "Roger was saying that they really debated back and forth forever."

After a group consensus, Elder Ha7ya said, the Chief made no announcements of a punishment, but Roger would soon find out a means of reprimanding him and his trouble-making friends had still been conferred.

"What boys used to do, like young boys, is they (would) go to an Elder's place, and they would chop wood, help out, feed the animals or do different kinds of chores," said Elder Ha7ya. "When they went to help, (the Elders) would always welcome them and give them snacks and stuff like that. When Roger went to help out, they didn't. They wouldn't even acknowledge him."

Learning from the land

According to Elder Sawt (Martina Pierre), being allowed back into the community after being shunned would have required one thing—training.

"What did he do when he got abandoned? He had to go and find the truth on the land and train," she said.

Going out on the land is necessary for First Nations' reconnection with their traditional governing systems, explained Elder Sawt. This act of personal training allows individuals to learn who they are as a being and as a leader.

"Understand and walk the land. Train. Be humble. Learn all the different principles of life—the purpose of why we are here on this land," she said.

Elder Sawt, looking down at her notes from her spot at the table, explained understanding land, culture, and practices helps individuals in a community come together and unite in purpose. Communities need a clear vision to fulfill their sacred responsibilities.

"We're not placed on this earth to be selfish. We're here to protect the gifts of the land for the next generations. That is what we need to pass on," she said.

Passing knowledge across generations

After the Elders' teachings, attendees took to discussing and reflecting on self-governments in their own communities and the future of First Nations' governing systems.

Darian Agecutay, representing Cowessess First Nation, was one youth to point out the variety of governing systems in First Nations on across Turtle Island.

"It seems like everywhere except for on the plains, (First Nations) had clans. In our culture, we didn't have Clans. We lost our Clan system," he said. "We had our House system, where depending on different parts of where you lived in the territory, you were like sectioned off into a different House."

"So that's what I thought was interesting."

Others, such Emhàlqwem (Rosa Andrew), discussed the laws and practices making up their present-day governing systems, including those for protecting animals and nature.

"We live right in front of our river that goes by our house. I looked out the window, and there was this man in hip waders walking in the river and fly fishing," she said. "So I went down there. I said, 'Come here, come on! Get out of the water.'"

"I had to explain it to him that we don't allow anybody in the river right now, because we need to respect that the salmon are spawning. I really liked that idea."

The future of self-government

Preserving and building upon the rules, customs, and practices that make up First Nations governing systems will take will demand youth take the reigns of leadership from older generations.

As the gathering reached its end, Satsan reminded the youth of their important position as the inherent rights leaders of tomorrow.

"I mean, the Elders have said it—how important you are to our future and how much we need your leadership in this inherent rights way, not in the Indian colonial system that's been imposed on us," he said.

The decades-long activist and inherent rights advocate didn't let the youth in attendance leave without thanks for their commitment throughout the event.

"It really lifted up my spirits and my heart. I want to thank you all for that," said Satsan.

For information on how to join future IRYI storytelling sessions and other gatherings, please visit our [events webpage](#).

