TREATY RELATIONS
COMMISSION OF MANITOBA

LET'S EXPLORE

TREATY TURNING POINTS

WHAT ABOUT ..?

BILL C-31

BILL C-31



Mary Two-Axe Earley advocated for her rights until Bill C-31 was passed in 1985. She because one of the first women to regain her Indian Status.

ROLE OF FIRST NATIONS WOMEN

Indigenous women are the backbones of their cultures and communities. As life-givers and caregivers, they were honoured and respected in traditional societies. Women played important roles as knowledge keepers and pipe bearers, Elders and ceremony leaders. They brokered trading alliances and guided relationships between European newcomers and their people. Many Indigenous nations were matrilineal societies, meaning the men would stay with the woman's family upon marriage and children would be known by their mother's clan and lineage.

THE INDIAN ACT: 1876 - 1951

Numbered Treaties were made between First Nations the Crown between 1871 and 1921. These were bilateral, negotiated agreements between sovereign nations. From First Nations' perspectives, Treaties were agreements to share land with newcomers and safeguard First Nation cultures, economies, and ways of life.

In 1876 the Canadian government passed the Indian Act. The Indian Act gave the government complete control over the lives of First Nations. The Act's two main objectives were to (1) control First Nations and their lands and (2) assimilate First Nations into non-Indigenous society.

As a result of the Indian Act, First Nations were forbidden from expressing their identities through governance and culture. Tradtional governance - which included hereditary chiefs, representing different houses or clans - was replaced with band council elections. First Nations were banned from practicing traditional rites and ceremonies. Children were required to attend residential schools.

The Indian Act set rules that dictated who was Indian (status) and who was not (non-status). Gender discrimination in the Act further disadvantaged First Nations women.

BILL C-31



Jeannette Corbiere Lavell was appointed to the Order of Canada in 2017.

THE INDIAN ACT AND FIRST NATIONS WOMEN

In 1876, the Indian Act defined an Indian as, "any male person of Indian blood." Indian status was passed through the male bloodline, meaning that the children of Status Indian men also had status rights under the Act.

The Indian Act disadvantaged women and female lines of descent. Status Indian women lost their status rights if they married a man who did not have status, as would their children. However, a Status Indian man could marry a non-status woman and retain his status. In fact, the woman in that relationship would gain status rights, as would their children.

Source: Canadian Encyclopedia

BILL C-31

Outraged by the gender discrimination in the Indian Act, many Indigenous women fought to regain their status rights. They mobilized speaking campaigns, lobbied governments, and created public awareness. Mary Two-Axe Earley was one of the earliest activists. Yvonne Bédard and Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, both of whom lost their status because of a marriage, brought cases to court against the Canadian government. In 1973, their cases merged at the Supreme Court of Canada.

In 1985, Bill C-31 amended the Indian Act and removed gender discrimination. The amendment allows women who married out to apply for the restoration of their status and rights, and also allows their children to apply for registration as Status Indians.

SHARE YOUR UNDERSTANDINGS

- What was/is the role of women in traditional First Nation societies?
- In what ways did Mary Two-Axe Early, Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, and other First Nations women bring gender discrimination issues in the Indian Act to the public?
- How did Bill-C31 rectify these these issues? What issues still exist?