

When I first heard the term “land back,” only a few weeks ago, my reaction was a common one “What?? My ancestors came to what is now Canada almost 200 years ago. My four grandparents were born on the prairies. I have cousins still on century farms. We’re supposed to give all that back? How would that work?”

The term “land back” was coined in 2018 when a young Canadian Blackfoot, Arnell Tailfeathers, used it in a post on Instagram. The term quickly became a rallying call for action on restoring Indigenous people’s ancestral rights to their land.

Gareth and Cori have explained some of the history.

In the beginning, there was the “Doctrine of Discovery,” a papal bull in the 1450s sanctioning Christian explorers to lay claim to the lands of peoples who were not Christian.

We know what happened next.

In Canada, at first, Indigenous peoples were seen as useful, particularly by fur traders, who needed the help of Indigenous peoples to trap furs and travel through the country. The partnership lasted about 200 years.

The [Royal Proclamation of 1763](#) guaranteed certain [rights](#) and protections for First Nations peoples, and established the process by which the government could acquire their lands. This proclamation was affirmed in 1973 by the Supreme Court of Canada in what became known as the Calder Decision.

The 1800s brought treaties. However, a considerable amount of territory remained unceded. Indigenous groups assumed their ancestral rights to the unceded land. But the government slipped a small section into the British North America Act in 1870 and claimed control over Indians and lands reserved for the Indians.

When BC joined Confederation in 1871, there were no treaties because they thought they had the “Indian problem” solved.

Again, we know what happened in the years that followed. Indigenous peoples were gradually and systematically disempowered.

The Land Back movement is part of their re-empowerment, their quest for recognition of their sovereignty.

There are many opinions among Indigenous groups, but I think Arthur Manuel said it best, in his book *The Reconciliation Manifesto*.

“Canada needs to fully recognize our Aboriginal and treaty rights and our absolute right to self-determination. At the same time, we will recognize the fundamental human rights of Canadians, after hundreds of years of settlement, to live here. Then we can sit down and negotiate a way that Canadians can live on this vast shared land in a way that allows for prosperity for both societies and protects our environment for all of the generations to come.”

In an interview for a series of CBC podcasts on Land Back, Marc Miller, Minister of Crown-Indigenous relations, says there is a need for difficult conversations and assures the interviewers that the government is starting these conversations. Indigenous groups believe the recognition of sovereignty comes first, then the conversations. There’s been enough talk.

Perhaps there is hope. In Winnipeg, we have the new urban reserve, Naawi-Oodena (naa way oh day nah). Tom Brodbeck in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 21, 2022, says “This is what reconciliation looks like. It is about reconciling the past and finding solutions to improve the future by acknowledging that treaties were signed, that they are binding and constitutionally protected.”

And the last word goes to Naomi Klein, who says Arthur Manuel “taught me that . . . what is good for indigenous people, what will ultimately fight poverty and heal trauma, is the return of the land.”

And that is what Land Back is all about.

And my cousins are safe on their Treaty One land.

### **Some useful resources**

A series of CBC podcasts on Land Back <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/1341-landback>

A course, Indigenous Canada, offered by the University of Alberta, online, free.  
<https://www.coursera.org/learn/indigenous-canada#syllabus>

Arthur Manuel and Grand Chief Ronald Derrickson. *The reconciliation manifesto: Recovering the land, rebuilding the economy*. 2017. James Lorimer and Co. Ltd.  
(Available from the Winnipeg Public Library)