

Billboards and Racial Tension: The 2019 Election

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As many have noted both within this text and in the media, the 2019 Manitoba election was a campaign devoid of substance. Outside of the debates, there was little attention paid to major issues. Therefore, it is not surprising that issues of importance for Indigenous peoples were all but missing from the campaign trail. For instance, while candidates raised the issues of hospitals and emergency rooms, their interventions were largely focused on urban issues and not issues of accessibility outside of city limits and in remote communities. This is particularly significant given that recent changes to the air ambulance and other health care services have negatively affected the supposed universality of health care for rural and northern communities. These changes were never a substantive part of any 2019 election platforms.

The election proceeded without meaningfully addressing issues of significance for Indigenous peoples. These include matters of health care, affordable housing, clean water, education, poverty, child care, children in care, and reconciliation.

Instead of focusing on substantive issues, the election campaign was dominated by attack ads directed at party leadership. While electoral politics often struggle to move beyond negative messaging, and healthy criticism of leadership is the norm, there was something different about

this campaign. That difference was the presence of an Indigenous leader in a mainstream political party.

Wab Kinew's face was more present in this campaign than any other candidate. This was because he featured prominently in Liberal and Conservative campaign materials. Conservative billboards scrutinized Kinew's viability as a political leader and arguably (re)presented a culture of distrust towards Indigenous peoples. By our observation, appearing mainly in predominantly white communities within Manitoba, these billboards spoke to existing racial tension within what *Maclean's* has called "the most racist city in Canada."¹ While Conservative pundits explain these billboards as a critique of previous NDP governments—given that Kinew was neither a part of these governments nor in a leadership position—such attribution makes one uncomfortable. Rather than attacking previous policies, the campaign focused on associating poor decisions, criminality, and distrust with the face of Wab Kinew. This may seem like politics-as-usual, but when read against the recent billboards of Winnipeg artist KC Adams,² it is hard to ignore the centrality of racist stereotypes in the conservative campaign.

The evoking of racist stereotypes was not limited to billboards and TV ads. Public statements and comments to donors behind closed doors

Understanding the Manitoba Election 2019

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sustained these stereotypes by insisting that Kinew had been “handed” benefits and “privilege.”³ While the racial tensions were strongest between the Conservatives and New Democrats, the Liberal Party failed to change the conversation or challenge the race-baiting banter. In so doing, the Liberal campaign normalized the racializing nature of the election. Not all parties chose to engage in the same nature of commentary, however, as the Green Party and its leader James Beddome refused to campaign on racial tensions.

While we find that the campaign evoked anti-Indigenous sentiments, we choose to end this chapter on a more positive note. We choose to celebrate the fact that Manitoba has elected the most racially diverse legislative assembly that it has ever seen: an Indigenous man was elected as the leader of the opposition; seven Indigenous candidates were elected (although this is down one from the last election); and three black MLAs were elected, including the first openly queer MLA.

- 1 Nancy Macdonald, “Welcome to Winnipeg: Where Canada’s Racism Problem Is at Its Worst,” *Maclean’s*, 22 January 2015, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/welcome-to-winnipeg-where-canadas-racism-problem-is-at-its-worst/>.
- 2 Nancy Macdonald, “Winnipeg’s New Art Project Stares Down Racism in the Face” *Maclean’s*, 8 March 2015, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/winnipegs-new-art-project-stares-down-racism-in-the-face/>.
- 3 Austin Grabish, “‘Offensive’: Brian Pallister Under Fire For Saying Wab Kinew Was ‘Handed More Benefits Than Any Premier,’” CBC Manitoba, 23 August 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/pallister-kinew-benefits-comment-1.5258179>.