



JAMES  
GLADSTONE  
AKAY-NA-MUKA



# FRONTIER CENTRE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Profile Series

*Profile of:*

## JAMES GLADSTONE

**"Gentle Persuader "**



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No.30 / Feb 2021

In this age of Indigenous reconciliation, it is important to remember the Indigenous movers and shakers who have gone before and cleared the path for others. James Gladstone (1887-1971) was such an Indigenous person. In the Blackfoot language, he was known as Akay-na-muka, meaning "Many Guns." He was born in Mountain Hill, Northwest Territories. This community was near the Kainai reserve, as at the time the Northwest Territories included the territory of Alberta.

Many Canadians might not know that in 2017, Gladstone was one of four famous Canadians—including prime ministers and the first female MP—featured on a special issue of the \$10 Canadian banknote. Recognized as the first Canadian senator of Indigenous ancestry, Gladstone himself was of mixed ancestry, being partly Scottish-Canadian through his maternal grandfather. As a senator from Alberta, he represented the city of Lethbridge.



Gladstone was a member of the Blood Tribe (Kainai First Nation) in southern Alberta but was not born with Indian status. He only obtained status at age 33. He spent his entire childhood on the Blood reserve and attended the Anglican Mission School until 1903. For a time, he left the reserve and became an apprentice printer at the Indian Industrial School in Calgary. In 1905, he would return to Kainai reserve to work as an interpreter. Around the same time, he also found work as a cattle wrangler in and around Fort MacLeod. He

would also work as a scout and interpreter for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and as a mail carrier. In 1911, he would marry the daughter of one of the most respected members of the tribe and they would have six children.

Later in life, he became deeply involved in the political life of the Kainai reserve, which would lead to greater involvement in Indigenous causes.

Known as a passionate and involved activist for Indigenous rights and recognition, in 1949 Gladstone was elected president of the Indian Association of Alberta. He would also serve on federally appointed committees to review the Indian Act, which would eventually lead to him earning the attention of then-prime minister John Diefenbaker.

Appointed to the Senate by Diefenbaker in 1958, Gladstone was an advocate for increased Indigenous integration into mainstream society. At the time of his appointment, Indigenous Canadians could not vote in federal elections and few treaty Indians owned land. Given his advocacy for increased integration, one wonders how Gladstone would view modern Canadian society with its emphasis on identity politics and focus on separating Indigenous peoples from the mainstream.

At the time he entered the Senate, the lawful possession of reserve land by status Indians could be approved only by the minister of Indian Affairs through a certificate of possession. In fact, a journalist for an Indigenous newspaper in Alberta wrote that this land ownership restriction presented a problem for Gladstone's Senate appointment. Parliament's rules stated that a senator upon appointment must own real property valued at least \$4,000. Gladstone sold off some of his cattle (he was a skilled rancher) to purchase some off-reserve land in Cardston, Alberta valued at \$6,700.

Prior to his Senate work, Gladstone was known for his innovative and entrepre-

neurial initiatives in agriculture. He and his sons established a successful farm and ranch with cattle numbering 200 head on 720 acres of land.

Due to the problems of status Indians voting, Gladstone sat as an “Independent Conservative” until he retired from the Upper House in March 1971.

He also defied tradition by addressing the audience during his inaugural speech in his native Blackfoot. At the time, English and French were Parliament’s only recognized languages. It is important to note that this was an issue in Parliament up until recently. One Indigenous MP from Manitoba delivered an address in 2019 in the Cree language and no simultaneous translation was offered.



After his distinguished career, Gladstone retired from the Senate on March 3, 1971. He died later that year in Fernie, British Columbia.

Gladstone’s life and legacy stand as a testimony to the great impact Indigenous peoples can have working within the system for constructive change. Gladstone sought to bring Indigenous communities closer to the Canadian mainstream, not remove them from it. His focus on engagement and integration while protecting one’s Indigenous identity stands as a model for today’s Indigenous communities. In this period of divisive policies, one hopes that these communities will take another look at his life and legacy.

One historian mentioned that Gladstone was known as the “Gentle Persuader” for his role in bringing Parliament’s attention to the needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples. He served in the Senate for 13 years and helped shepherd through many contentious revisions to the reviled Indian Act. He saw one of his greatest achievements as helping move along the bill that allowed status Indians to vote in federal elections. Some official sources note that he played a prominent part in the fight for better education for Indigenous peoples, greater respect for treaty rights, and participation of Indigenous peoples in their own administration.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Joseph Quesnel is a research fellow for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy who mainly focuses on Aboriginal matters and property rights. Presently based in eastern Nova Scotia, he is from northeastern Ontario and has Métis ancestry from Quebec.

He graduated from McGill University in 2001, where he majored in political science and history. He specialized in Canadian and U.S. politics, with an emphasis on constitutional law. He also has a Master of Journalism degree from Carleton University, where he specialized in political reporting. His master's research project focused on reformist Indigenous thinkers in Canada.

He is currently studying theology at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax.

In the past while as a policy analyst, he was the lead researcher on the Frontier Centre's flagship Aboriginal Governance Index, which is measured perceptions of quality of governance and services on Prairie First Nations. For over two years, he covered House standing committees as well as Senate committees. Quesnel's career in journalism includes several stints at community newspapers in Northern Ontario, including in Sudbury and Espanola. He also completed a radio broadcasting internship at CFRA 580 AM, a talk radio station in Ottawa, and the well-known Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC).

He is a past editor of C2C Journal, an online Canadian publication devoted to political commentary. He wrote a weekly column for the Winnipeg Sun and contributes to The Taxpayer, the flagship publication of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Quesnel's policy commentaries have appeared all over Canada, including the Globe and Mail, the National Post, the Financial Post, the Vancouver Sun, the Ottawa Citizen, the Montreal Gazette, the Calgary Herald, Winnipeg Free Press, among many other major papers. Over the years, he has been featured as a guest commentator on many radio and television news programs.



203-2727 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada R3J 0R2

Tel: 204-957-1567

Email: manitoba@fcpp.org

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Profile Series No.29 • Date of First Issue: March 2018.

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ISSN 1491-78

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