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(Ab)Originalism and Canada’s Constitution

John Borrows

I. INTRODUCTION

Constitutions help people make judgments about how they should live together within a shared territory. They create expectations about how decisions should be made and carried into effect. They also help people address their disagreements. Constitutions identify, generate and organize relationships in ways which enhance or suppress activities of communities and individuals. They do so through an appeal to law, and they are often considered a country’s highest form of law. They authoritatively denote who or what someone or something is or does, within a governing framework. If actions are inconsistent with such law they are, not surprisingly, regarded as being unconstitutional, making contrary actions invalid, inapplicable or inoperable. Practitioners of constitutional law should note how their work can sustain, negate, inflect, modify or transform relationships and states of being. Like verbs, constitutions position us in time; they have a past, present and future tense. They explain what brought us together, and what should happen now and later on to sustain our togetherness and measured separateness. Thus, like verbs, constitutions regulate relationships through time; they link objects (persons, places and things) to a reciprocal series of obligations in the real world.

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Constitutional law is best explained as a verb. The word “constitution” comes from the Latin verb *constituere*, and is made up of two roots: *con*, which means “together”, and *statuere*, which means “to establish”. Thus, a constitution can be regarded as an activity of establishing something together. In this light a constitution acts on a person, place or thing, just like a verb. The Anishinaabe people of the Great Lakes attach a similar meaning to this activity, and also characterize constitutional law as a verb. The Anishinaabe use the word *chi-inakonige* to describe constitutional law. *Chi* means great or large and *inakonige* means to act on an object through making a judgment, deciding things a certain way, or agreeing on something. Thus, constitutional law is the great way of acting through judgment, guided decision-making and agreement. The Supreme Court of Canada also characterizes Canada’s Constitution as a verb — as an action and a shifting state of being. A prime activity associated with the country’s Constitution is that it “embraces the entire global system of rules and principles which govern the exercise of constitutional authority”.

Embracing, governing and exercising authority are necessary constitutional actions. Understanding the Constitution’s fluid state of being is also necessary in regulating governmental practices. In pursuing these activities the Court has said the Constitution is organic and animate; in fact, the Supreme Court has repeatedly written that Canada’s Constitution is a living tree.

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2 The Ojibwe Peoples Dictionary, online: University of Minnesota <http://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/inakonige-vai>.


Understanding constitutional law as an ongoing activity, which nourishes a living entity, improves our judgments relating to its genesis, preservation and growth. Recognizing that a constitution has a temporal existence helps us balance the past, present and future when regulating our relationships. This article contends that constitutions are weakened if too much emphasis is placed on either their origins, or our current obsessions, or our future predictions regarding what they require. It is unhealthy to place too much stress on any one part of the roots, trunk or branches of any living tree. Each part needs to bear the weight of growth to be strong and durable. Likewise, Canada’s Constitution is at its strongest when interpretation is equally attentive to all forms of authority, including arguments that appeal to its history, text and structure. These modes of argument must be similarly combined with doctrinal authority from previously decided cases, prudential arguments about the costs and benefits of a course of action, and ethical ideas which appeal to the ways Canadians think about their social commitments.  

A balanced approach to constitutionalism, which draws on the metaphor of a living tree, can help keep Canada’s Constitution dynamic and strong. The “living tree” approach to constitutional interpretation was adopted by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in the so-called Persons Case. The question in the Persons Case was whether a woman could be appointed to the Senate under section 24 of the British North America Act, 1867, which states that “the Governor General shall from time to time ... summon qualified Persons to the Senate”. Since women could not hold political office when this section was enacted, it was argued that this section’s meaning could not be changed to accommodate shifting conceptions of a woman’s role in political life. The Supreme Court of Canada accepted this argument and decided that the framers’ understanding of the Constitution’s words could not change with the times. It therefore held that women could not be “qualified persons”

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7 For further discussions of these six modes of constitutional interpretation, see Robin Elliot, “References, Structural Argumentation and the Organizing Principles of Canada’s Constitution” (2001), 80 Can. Bar Rev. 67, at 72-74; and Philip Bobbit, Constitutional Fate: Theory of the Constitution (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

8 Supra, note 6, at 136. For a comparative analysis of this metaphor in other constitutional contexts, see Vicki Jackson, “Constitutions as ‘Living Trees’? Comparative Constitutional Law and Interpretive Metaphors” (2006) 75 Fordham L.R. 921.

9 (U.K.), 30 & 31 Vict., c. 3 [hereinafter “BNA Act”].


Passed in the year 1867, the various provisions of the B.N.A. Act ... bear to-day the same construction which the courts would, if then required to pass upon them, have given to
because they were excluded from political office at the time the Constitution was enacted.

On appeal, the Privy Council disagreed with the Supreme Court’s conclusion and overturned its decision. It held that women were persons who could be qualified to be summoned to the Senate. The Court arrived at this conclusion by adopting a living tree interpretative approach. Justice Sankey, writing on behalf of the Privy Council, declared:

The British North America Act planted in Canada a living tree capable of growth and expansion within its natural limits. The object of the Act was to grant a constitution to Canada. “Like all written constitutions it has been subject to development through usage and convention” ... .

Their Lordships do not conceive it to be the duty of this Board — it is certainly not their desire — to cut down the provisions of the Act by a narrow and technical construction, but rather to give it a large and liberal interpretation so that the Dominion to a great extent, but within certain fixed limits, may be mistress in her own house, as the Provinces to a great extent, but within certain fixed limits, are mistresses in theirs. 11

In the result, women were held to be persons who could be summoned to the Senate because the Privy Council held that the Supreme Court’s reliance on the public meaning of “person” in 1867 was too narrow and technical a construction. A large and liberal interpretation required that any ambiguity about the meaning of the word “person” should be resolved by including women. 12

In the intervening years, the Supreme Court further developed the Privy Council’s living tree metaphor and designated it as the preferred approach to constitutional interpretation. 13 As such, it has become the

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11 Supra, note 6, at 136 A.C.
12 The Privy Council gave the government the burden of proving that the word "person" did not include women: “The word ‘person’ ... may include members of both sexes, and to those who ask why the word [person] should include females the obvious answer is why should it not? In these circumstances the burden is upon those who deny that the word includes women to make out their case”: Persons Case, supra, note 6, at 138 A.C.
dominant form of analysis in determining the Constitution’s meaning. As now articulated, this approach allows the Court to look beyond historical understandings of a provision and give it meaning in the light of contemporary circumstances. The Supreme Court has acknowledged this fact in many cases. For example, in the Securities Reference, the Court wrote: “This metaphor has endured as the preferred approach in constitutional interpretation, ensuring ‘that Confederation can be adapted to new social realities’.” In the Same-Sex Marriage Reference, the Supreme Court wrote that “‘frozen concepts’ reasoning runs contrary to one of the most fundamental principles of Canadian constitutional interpretation: that our Constitution is a living tree which, by way of progressive interpretation, accommodates and addresses the realities of modern life.” This led the Court to conclude that same-sex marriage was not prohibited by the Constitution even though “[s]everal centuries ago it would have been understood that marriage should be available only to opposite-sex couples.” In British Columbia (Attorney General) v. Canada Trust Co., the Court reaffirmed the living nature of Canada’s Constitution, declaring that “[t]here is nothing static or frozen, narrow or technical, about the Constitution of Canada.” This led the Court to deny the idea that the Constitution created historically fixed categories. It wrote: “If the Canadian Constitution is to be regarded as a ‘living tree’ and legislative competence as ‘essentially dynamic’ ... then the determination of categories existing in 1867 becomes of little, other than historic, concern.” The Supreme Court reiterated this theme in Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.), when it wrote: “The doctrine of the constitution as a living tree mandates that narrow techni-
cal approaches are to be eschewed,’” which means that “the past plays a
critical but non-exclusive role in determining the content of the rights
and freedoms granted by the Charter.”24 As such, the Court wrote: “The
tree is rooted in past and present institutions, but must be capable of
growth to meet the future.”25 These observations led the Provincial
Electoral Boundaries26 Court to conclude that the right to vote could not
be “viewed as frozen by particular historical anomalies”. It said: “What
must be sought is the broader philosophy underlying the historical
development of the right to vote — a philosophy which is capable of
explaining the past and animating the future.”27 The Supreme Court
made a similar point in Canada (Combines Investigation Act Director of
Investigation and Research) v. Southam Inc.,28 in relation to Canadian
Charter of Rights and Freedoms29 interpretation, when it wrote, a
“constitution ... is drafted with an eye to the future” and therefore we
must not “read the provisions of the Constitution like a last will and
testament lest it become one”.30 These and numerous other decisions
plainly demonstrate that a future-oriented living tree approach to constitu-
tional interpretation is dominant in Canada.

There are good reasons for the dominance of the living tree approach
in Canadian law. It invites democratic participation since it reminds us
that constitutional law should be an ongoing activity.31 Its growth is
cultivated on the historical, social, political, cultural, legal and economic
grounds in which the constitution-as-practice is situated.32 People will be
more inclined to get involved in the Constitution’s development if they
realize that it responds to assorted demands on various terrains.33 A living
constitution allows people with different interests to prune and graft it in
accordance with its broader context. The Constitution is not just a dead
piece of historical writing; it “facilitates — indeed, makes possible — a

24 Id., at 180.
25 Id.
26 Id.
27 Id.
29 Part I of the Constitution Act, 1982, being Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982 (U.K.),
1982, c. 11 [hereinafter “Charter”].
31 For an excellent discussion of this point as it relates to the balance of power between the
Prime Minister and Parliament, see Peter Aucoin, Mark D. Jarvis & Lori Turnbull, Democratizing
ch. 13.
33 Robert C. Post & Reva B. Siegel, “Democratic Constitutionalism” in Jack M. Balkin &
democratic political system by creating an orderly framework within which people may make political decisions," as the Supreme Court wrote in the *Quebec Secession Reference*.

Living tree analysis is also consistent with Canada’s broader constitutional tradition because the country does not have a singular founding moment. Canada’s Constitution gradually evolved; it adapted to reflect changing social and political values throughout its history. While the passage of the BNA Act in 1867 marked an important stage in this evolution, section 52(2) of the *Constitution Act, 1982* makes it clear that Canada’s Constitution includes many other laws. Furthermore, the *Constitution Act, 1867* (as the BNA Act is now called) also mandates a Dominion with a “Constitution similar in principle to that of the United Kingdom.” This means Canada’s Constitution draws on centuries of accreted experience with no one occasion dominating as a founding moment. Even in relation to particularly significant moments the organic nature of our tradition makes it appropriate to change the Constitution’s meaning over time. Indeed, Canada stands in contrast to the experience of the United States, which ratified a singular constitutional text at a particular historic period. Viewing the Constitution as a

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34 Supra, note 3, at para. 78.
36 *Quebec Secession Reference*, supra, note 3, at paras. 33, 46.
37 Supra, note 9.
38 Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (U.K.), 1982, c. 11.
39 See the Schedule to this Act, which non-exhaustively references 30 such constitutional Acts.
40 Supra, note 9.
41 In the *Quebec Secession Reference*, supra, note 3, at para. 150, the Supreme Court observed:

> The Constitution is not a straitjacket. Even a brief review of our constitutional history demonstrates periods of momentous and dramatic change. Our democratic institutions necessarily accommodate a continuous process of discussion and evolution. ...

living tree makes more sense in a country like Canada, which has always been engaged in an “ongoing process of constitutional development”.  

II. ABNORMAL ORIGINALISM

Despite the dominance of the living tree approach to Canadian constitutional interpretation, unfortunately, there is one set of relationships to which this balanced approach does not apply — that involving Aboriginal peoples. The living tree does not operate when considering Aboriginal and treaty rights because history is said to be determinative in this field. The Supreme Court has concluded that Aboriginal and treaty rights are limited by the parties’ historic intentions and the public meaning attaching to original actions. While non-discriminatory understandings of history must guide constitutional interpretation, the Court’s current approach to Aboriginal rights overemphasizes the past by restricting the Constitution’s meaning to certain foundational moments. This method, which goes by the name originalism, is alive and well in the field of Aboriginal rights.

The justifications for an originalist approach are varied. Nevertheless, they generally coalesce around an idea that the law has a specific historic meaning to which judges must defer. As such, originalism has been called “a paradigmatic form of legal positivism”. It gives prominence to the subjective intentions and/or so-called objective public meanings of a constitution’s drafters, ratifiers and/or receivers. Originalism is often used in an exclusivist, either/or manner, prohibiting and discour-

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44 Quebec Secession Reference, supra, note 3, at para. 52.
47 “‘Meaning’ is a capacious concept, and indeed, it has many different meanings, including semantic content, purposes, intentions, practical entailments, and cultural associations. Conceived most broadly, ‘meaning’ includes a vast array of cultural associations, traditions, conventions, and background assumptions”: Jack Balkin, “Nine Perspectives on Living Originalism” (2012) U. Ill. L.R. 815, at 828.
aging modes of constitutional interpretation based on other grounds.\(^4\)

While attempts have been made to reconcile originalism and living tree constitutionalism,\(^5\) many are skeptical about the success of these efforts.\(^6\) Originalism generally places dispositive weight on formative historical understandings and meanings, whereas living tree constitutionalism draws guidance from history but gives it lesser weight.\(^7\) Originalism is perhaps best known for its role in U.S. constitutional law, where many prominent members of the Supreme Court and legal academy strongly support this approach.\(^8\) It has also been the subject of substantial critique.\(^9\)

Originalism’s place in Canadian constitutional law is incongruous.\(^10\) The Supreme Court has explicitly distanced itself from this practice.\(^11\) In

\(^4\) Peter Hogg, *Constitutional Law of Canada* (Scarborough, ON: Thomson Carswell, 2012), at 15.9(f) and 60.1(e).


\(^7\) Reference re Motor Vehicle Act (British Columbia) S. 94(2), supra, note 13, at 507-509 (S.C.C.).


\(^11\) For commentary see Ian Binnie, “Constitutional Interpretation and Original Intent”, *id.* Furthermore, the Supreme Court of Canada did not respond positively to interpreting the Charter in light of the drafters’ intent; see Reference re Motor Vehicle Act (British Columbia) S. 94(2), supra, note 13, at 509.
the *Ontario Hydro v. Ontario (Labour Relations Board)* case, it wrote: “This Court has never adopted the practice more prevalent in the United States of basing constitutional interpretation on the original intentions of the framers of the Constitution.”\(^{57}\) Academic commentary has also maintained that “originalism has never enjoyed any significant support in Canada”\(^{58}\). Despite these observations, the Supreme Court and other constitutional participants might be surprised to discover that originalism is flourishing under our noses because the practice does not quite go by this name in Canada. In this country it goes by the name Aboriginalism.

The Supreme Court’s abnormal originalism, or (ab)originalism, measures the constitutionality of Aboriginal claims by attributing public meaning to events that are regarded as being foundational to constitutional relations between Aboriginal peoples and the Crown at some point in the past.\(^{59}\) For example, Aboriginal rights can only be claimed if they flow from Aboriginal practices that were “integral to their distinctive culture” prior to European contact.\(^{60}\) Similarly, Aboriginal title can only be recognized and affirmed if a group occupied land prior to the assertion...
Likewise, treaty rights must be proved by reference to the common intention between the parties at the time the agreement was made. In each instance, constitutional rights are contingent upon the Court creating an original public meaning for a past event, when such rights were first recognized, “crystallized”, or contemplated by the parties (in the case of treaties).

While it is perfectly appropriate to draw upon history in considering Aboriginal and treaty rights, holding that rights are solely dependent on past recognition, crystallization or contemplation is a significant break with our country’s dominant constitutional traditions. This is a problem for Canadian constitutional law more generally and for Aboriginal peoples in particular. Therefore, in order to understand and overcome Canadian originalism this paper examines its anomalous existence and identifies genuine alternatives to it. These proposals are drawn from longstanding and current constitutional practices and principles. They are aimed at strengthening and reinforcing Canada’s constitutional law by making it more internally consistent. They confirm, adjust, enlarge and transform our Constitution to bring it in line with its other constituent parts, in accordance with its highest traditions.

Originalism must be supplanted within section 35(1) because it creates a double standard within Canadian constitutional law. Its application constructs an unbalanced interpretative landscape that subjects Aboriginal and treaty rights to greater constitutional constraints than would occur under a living tree approach. Originalism, as applied to Aboriginal peoples, excludes the growth of rights not connected to founding intentions and events. (Ab)originalism considers constitutional meanings to be fixed and limited by particular historical moments. This stands in contrast with a living tree approach that is appropriately attentive to a law’s roots but is more forward-looking in its approach. Originalism and living tree constitutionalism both take meaning from the past, but originalism does not tolerate change in relation to “new social realities”

63 Van der Peet, supra, note 59, at para. 28.
65 Marshall (I), supra, note 62, at paras. 58, 60.
in the same way as a living tree approach.\textsuperscript{66} While historic legal interpretations should be regarded as helpful by way of analogy when dealing with \textit{sui generis} Aboriginal and treaty rights, they should not be used to deny rights that may spring from other sources.\textsuperscript{67} History should not exclusively determine the source and scope of Aboriginal rights.\textsuperscript{68} Unfortunately, originalism in an Aboriginal context does not sufficiently draw upon other modes of constitutional interpretation which are also attentive to the Constitution’s present and future tense.

To create greater balance within the Constitution, Aboriginal and treaty rights must be part of Canada’s living tree. This is particularly important because Indigenous societies have the deepest roots on this continent. Their prior and ongoing connection with the land is the soil from which subsequent relations grow.\textsuperscript{69} As with other constitutional provisions, Aboriginal rights should be able to continually expand and mature. Aboriginal and treaty rights should not be automatically restricted by meanings that attached to them at the time of contact, assertion of sovereignty or negotiation. Such limitations sever Aboriginal relationships from the constitution’s broader terrain and threaten the sustainability of Canada’s constitutional ecology.

Attempts have been made to justify the differential treatment of Aboriginal peoples within Canada’s constitution based on the Supreme Court’s observation that “Aboriginal rights cannot, however, be defined on the basis of the philosophical precepts of the liberal enlightenment.”\textsuperscript{70} This acknowledgment opens important space for recognizing constitutional influences arising from non-European sources.\textsuperscript{71} However, as the

\textsuperscript{66} The Supreme Court wrote that a living tree approach would allow confederation to change with new social realities in \textit{Reference re Employment Insurance Act (Can.)}, ss. 22 and 23, \textit{supra}, note 13, at para. 9, \textit{per} Deschamps J., citing \textit{Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.)}, \textit{supra}, note 13, at 180.

\textsuperscript{67} Some of these alternative sources might be Indigenous peoples’ own laws, human rights law, international Indigenous law, as well as laws based on textual, structural, doctrinal, prudential and ethical modes of constitutional interpretation, see Phillip Bobbitt, “Methods of Constitutional Argument” (1988-1989) 23 U.B.C. L. Rev. 449.


\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Van der Peet, supra}, note 59, at para. 19.

\textsuperscript{71} There are many sources of constitutional authority in Canada that are not based in European thought, such as the role the \textit{International Declaration on Human Rights} played in the drafting of the Charter: see \textit{Reference re Public Service Employee Relations Act (Alta.)}, [1987] S.C.J. No. 10, [1987] 1 S.C.R. 313, at 348-60 (S.C.C.); \textit{Suresh v. Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration)}, [2002] S.C.J. No. 3, [2002] 1 S.C.R. 3 (S.C.C.). The Supreme Court has also recognized that
Court indicates, recognition of Aboriginal difference should not sever Aboriginal rights from broader constitutional traditions that seek to limit the state’s reach. Placing limits on government action is clearly an important part of our constitutional regime. This is also the case with Aboriginal rights jurisprudence. As the Supreme Court of Canada observed in the Sparrow case, section 35(1) “gives a measure of control over government conduct and a strong check on legislative power”. Thus, Aboriginal rights should not be placed completely outside of the stream of constitutional history when it comes to considering section 35(1)’s power to constrain governments. While Aboriginal rights do not flow from the “liberal enlightenment view [that] rights are held by all people in society because each person is entitled to dignity and respect”, as with other constitutional laws they configure and constrain government action, and thus are general and universal in an important respect. In this light, in Sparrow, the Supreme Court of Canada explained the place of Aboriginal rights in Canada’s constitution as follows: “s. 35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982, represents the culmination of a long and difficult struggle in both the political forum and the courts for the constitutional recognition of aboriginal rights”. As such, the Court acknowledged that Aboriginal rights placed constraints on the Crown in


Van der Peet, supra, note 59, at para. 19: “Although equal in importance and significance to the rights enshrined in the Charter, aboriginal rights must be viewed differently from Charter rights because they are rights held only by aboriginal members of Canadian society.”


Supra, note 73.

Id., at 110.


Van der Peet, supra, note 59, at para. 18.

Sparrow, supra, note 73, at para. 53.
ways consistent with those that governments encounter in other contexts. As the Court wrote:

Section 35 calls for a just settlement for aboriginal peoples. It renounces the old rules of the game under which the Crown established courts of law and denied those courts the authority to question sovereign claims made by the Crown.\(^80\)

Thus, though they have a different source, Aboriginal rights parallel constraints on the Crown that flow from the liberal enlightenment, and thus are part of its living tree. Consider how limitations on government action in the broader context are vital to the Constitution’s development. For instance, in 1215 the issuance of the *Magna Carta* restricted Crown rights relative to certain classes of individuals (wealthy landowners), which slowly expanded through time.\(^81\) Despite its limitations,\(^82\) the *Magna Carta*'s constraint on Crown power is considered to be a pillar of democratic constitutionalism.\(^83\) Similarly, the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 circumscribed the Crown’s authority and made the monarchy subject to Parliament in many important ways.\(^84\) The English Bill of

\(^80\) *Id.*, at para. 54. At para. 55:

The approach to be taken with respect to interpreting the meaning of s. 35(1) is derived from general principles of constitutional interpretation, principles relating to aboriginal rights, and the purposes behind the constitutional provision itself. Here, we will sketch the framework for an interpretation of “recognized and affirmed” that, in our opinion, gives appropriate weight to the constitutional nature of these words.

\(^81\) *Quebec Secession Reference*, supra, note 3, at para. 63:

The evolution of our democratic tradition can be traced back to the Magna Carta (1215) and before, through the long struggle for Parliamentary supremacy which culminated in the English *Bill of Rights* of 1689, the emergence of representative political institutions in the colonial era, the development of responsible government in the 19th century, and eventually, the achievement of Confederation itself in 1867 ... “[T]he Canadian tradition” ... is “one of evolutionary democracy moving in uneven steps toward the goal of universal suffrage and more effective representation”.


\(^83\) See Kent McNeil, “Aboriginal Title as a Constitutionally Protected Aboriginal Right” in Owen Lippert, ed., *Beyond the Nass Valley: National Implications of the Supreme Court’s Delgamuukw Decision* (Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 2000):

*Magna Carta* would have been received as part of the applicable statute law in all the common law provinces. As a fundamental part of the British constitution, no doubt it applies in Quebec as well, despite the reintroduction of French civil law by the *Quebec Act*, 14 Geo. III (1774), c. 83 (U.K.). The preamble to the *Constitution Act, 1867*, supra note 64, provides that Canada shall have “a Constitution similar in Principle to that of the United Kingdom”.

Rights, which sprang from the revolution, obligated the Crown to raise and spend money with the consent of elected parliamentary officials and not of its own accord.\(^{85}\) Though these gains were somewhat ambiguous at the time,\(^{86}\) the “Glorious Revolution” has become an important constitutional source and many regard it as a cornerstone of liberty throughout the British Commonwealth.\(^{87}\) British North Americans enjoyed similar restraints on the exercise of the Crown prerogative when responsible government came to non-Aboriginal Canadians in the 1850s in the Canadian and the Maritime colonies.\(^{88}\) Furthermore, the American and French revolutions of the late 1700s, which also purported to restrain Crown sovereignty relative to individual rights, are also regarded as being an essential step in democracy’s development. Canada’s own Charter is in this tradition.\(^{89}\)

While Aboriginal and treaty rights are exercisable only by Aboriginal peoples, and thus do not flow from the liberal enlightenment in this respect, this should not cause us to overlook the truth that they likewise exist to restrain government action. They are living constitutional traditions. While Aboriginal and treaty rights flow from sources beyond the liberal enlightenment, they nevertheless are synchronous with these broader constitutional traditions: they also constrain governments. Thus, though we must take care to ensure that while we appropriately define Aboriginal rights as having different contours, we must also ensure that we do not place them entirely outside of the Constitution’s broader framework. Unfortunately, the Court’s use of originalism in defining Aboriginal rights is outside the Constitution’s wider framework.

Not only is originalism out of step with Canada’s wider constitutional traditions, it also risks perpetuating the discrimination Aboriginal peoples have encountered throughout the years.\(^{90}\) This is because

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\(^{86}\) Vallance, supra, note 84, at 164, 177.


\(^{89}\) The Charter constrains the Crown relative to individual citizens and obligates it to respect enumerated rights in the document.

\(^{90}\) For a significant period of time assimilation guided the Crown’s actions towards Aboriginal peoples, as illustrated by the following statement: “Our object is to continue until there is not a
originalism links and then limits interpretation to periods when the Constitution was formed. Since Canada’s legal history is saturated with discrimination towards Aboriginal peoples, constitutional standards should not pass along the troubling attitudes, behaviours and intentions of past generations of constitutional actors. Again, there is nothing wrong with using history as a constitutional standard if it respects the parties’ political agency, and such history is tested, contextualized and harmonized with our entire constitutional traditions. For example, treaty interpretation generally requires a greater degree of deference to history than do Aboriginal rights cases. Conversely, the weight of history should be diminished in Aboriginal rights cases. This is because Aboriginal agency is severely restricted when the Court interprets rights through the prism of unilateral Crown actions. Quite simply, under current approaches, Aboriginal rights cases do not consider the historic or contemporary perspectives of Aboriginal peoples regarding Crown unilateralism. These cases take no account of Aboriginal views on the negative impacts of perpetually limiting their rights by the moment of Crown contact and sovereign assertion. The fact that the Crown’s historic actions are grounded in discriminatory assumptions regarding Aboriginal inferiority should further diminish history’s influence. Treaty interpretation, on the other hand, generally purports to respect the parties’ agency when assigning them meaning. While treaty history can itself be problematic, due to power imbalances and differences of opinion, its interpretation at least attempts to consider Aboriginal peoples’ views at the time they were signed. History should always be calibrated to non-discriminatory standards for judgment when used as a source of constitutional authority; it should rarely be determinative. Contemporary constitutional standards should not replicate views held by past generations of Canadian leaders.

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Whatever the justification advanced in earlier days for refusing to recognize the rights and interests in land of the indigenous inhabitants of settled colonies, an unjust and discriminatory doctrine of that kind can no longer be accepted.
who regarded Aboriginal peoples as inferior and denied their governance and land rights.\(^93\) Constitutional doctrines that transmit these and other historically discriminatory beliefs should have no place in Canada’s highest law.\(^94\)

The Privy Council avoided adopting ancient discriminatory customs as constitutional standards in the *Persons* Case. It did so after considering the diminished legal and political status of women from before the time of the Roman Empire through the early 20th century. It noted that “The exclusion of women from all public offices is a relic of days more barbarous than ours.”\(^95\) It therefore rejected the law’s discriminatory history as an aid to constitutional interpretation. The Court wrote that an “appeal to Roman Law and to early English decisions is not of itself a secure foundation on which to build the interpretation of the *British North America Act* of 1867.”\(^96\) In the face of such bias the Court held that “[t]he appeal to history ... is not conclusive.”\(^97\) In so ruling, the Privy Council discarded arguments rooted in historical discrimination against women. The Supreme Court should take the same approach in relation to Indigenous peoples and similarly reject arguments rooted in historical discrimination.\(^98\) Limiting Indigenous rights to what was integral to their


94 The Supreme Court has indicated that it is inappropriate to view Aboriginal peoples as being inferior: see *Calder v. British Columbia (Attorney General)*, supra, note 59, at 346-47:

> The assessment and interpretation of the historical documents and enactments tendered in evidence must be approached in the light of present-day research and knowledge disregarding ancient concepts formulated when understanding of the customs and culture of our original people was rudimentary and incomplete and when they were thought to be wholly without cohesion, laws or cultures, in effect a subhuman species.

95 *Persons Case*, supra, note 6, at para. 9.

96 Id., at para. 39.

97 Id., at para. 37.

98 Justice Binnie, formerly of the Supreme Court of Canada, would seem to agree. In an article dismissing originalism and arguing for living tree constitutionalism in Canada, he wrote:

> Canadians will remember that until the last 50 years or so Aboriginal peoples in Canada were effectively denied almost all civil rights on the basis, and I quote a Nova Scotia judge writing in 1929, that:

> The savages’ rights of sovereignty even of ownership were never recognized ... In my judgment the Treaty of 1752 is not a treaty at all and is not to be treated as such; it is at best a mere agreement made by the Governor and council with a handful of Indians.
distinctive cultures prior to European contact or Crown sovereignty should “become a relic of days more barbarous than ours”.

Thus, even though discriminatory customs historically developed among European nations to take land and governance away from Indigenous peoples, such customs should not form part of our law today. As noted, these laws were based on assessments of Indigenous inferiority. For example, past discriminatory assessments of Indigenous peoples’ legal and political status are found in North America’s leading case on Indigenous peoples’ rights, Johnson v. McIntosh, where Chief Justice John Marshall wrote:

On the discovery of this immense continent, the great nations of Europe were eager to appropriate to themselves as much of it as they could respectively acquire. Its vast extent offered an ample field to the ambition and enterprise of all; and the character and religion of its

Eventually our Supreme Court declared this approach to be “unacceptable” and brought to bear a more contemporaneous view of aboriginal peoples and of federal responsibilities under section 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867. In 1984, I acted for the federal government in a case that decided that exercise by the Crown of its power to accept a surrender of Indian lands creates a trust enforceable in the courts, a conclusion which would have been unthinkable in 1867. However, the evolving view of the courts toward Aboriginal rights, initially signalled in Calder v. Attorney General of British Columbia, in 1973, in effect was endorsed by the political leadership when they included a recognition of existing treaty and aboriginal rights in the Constitution Act, 1982.


99 See R. v. Côté, supra, note 92, at para. 53: ... a static and retrospective interpretation of s. 35(1) cannot be reconciled with the noble and prospective purpose of the constitutional entrenchment of aboriginal and treaty rights in the Constitution Act, 1982. Indeed, the respondent’s proposed interpretation risks undermining the very purpose of s. 35(1) by perpetuating the historical injustice suffered by aboriginal peoples at the hands of colonizers who failed to respect the distinctive cultures of pre-existing aboriginal societies. To quote the words of Brennan J. in Mabo v. Queensland [No. 2] (1992), 175 C.L.R. 1 (H.C.), at p. 42:

Whatever the justification advanced in earlier days for refusing to recognize the rights and interests in land of the indigenous inhabitants of settled colonies, an unjust and discriminatory doctrine of that kind can no longer be accepted.

100 Borrows, “Sovereignty’s Alchemy”, supra, note 64, at 558-67.

inhabitants offered an apology for considering them as a people over whom the superior genius of Europe might claim an ascendancy.\footnote{Id., at 573-74.}

Unilaterally declaring that Indigenous peoples had lesser rights when constitutional principles were formed (due to alleged inferiorities in their character, religion and genius) does not bode well for originalism. At a minimum the doctrine of discovery, using the language of the \textit{Persons} Case, should be considered “a relic of days more barbarous than ours”, rather than the foundation of the law. It does not respect Aboriginal peoples’ agency. Unfortunately, this doctrine explicitly undergirds Aboriginal and treaty rights jurisprudence in Canada to the present day. In 1984 the doctrine of discovery was accepted by the Supreme Court of Canada as one of the country’s constitutional foundations. As the Court observed in \textit{Guerin v. Canada}:\footnote{[1984] S.C.J. No. 45, [1984] 2 S.C.R. 335 (S.C.C.) [hereinafter “\textit{Guerin}”].}

The principle of discovery ... gave the ultimate title in the land in a particular area to the nation which had discovered and claimed it. In that respect at least the Indians’ rights in the land were obviously diminished.\footnote{Id., at 378.}

The doctrine of discovery has been reaffirmed in subsequent cases.\footnote{Sparrow, supra, note 73, at 1103: “[T]here was from the outset never any doubt that sovereignty and legislative power, and indeed the underlying title, to such lands vested in the Crown”; \textit{Delgamuukw}, supra, note 61, at para. 145: “Crown did not gain this title until it asserted sovereignty over the land in question. Because it does not make sense to speak of a burden on the underlying title before that title existed, aboriginal title crystallized at the time sovereignty was asserted.”}

Following the example of the \textit{Persons} Case, as noted, the Supreme Court should not apply discriminatory customs of this kind in building Canada’s highest law. The appeal to history in matters where discrimination has guided past traditions should not be conclusive when deciding the foundation of our current laws.\footnote{Paraphrasing \textit{Persons} Case, supra, note 6, at 134.} The doctrine of discovery should be challenged as being contrary to Canada’s broader constitutional approaches.

For example, when the Crown arrived in North America, Indigenous peoples’ territories were not barren and deserted.\footnote{Richard Lillich et al., \textit{International Human Rights: Problems of Law, Policy and Practice}, 4th ed. (New York: Aspen, 2006), at 31-34; Paul Keal, \textit{European Conquest and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).} In fact, despite affirming discovery at most points in the jurisprudence, in at least one instance the Supreme Court of Canada has written: “At the time of the
assertion of British sovereignty, North America was not treated by the Crown as *res nullius*.” 108 Canada’s Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples also recommended the rejection of the doctrine of discovery because it is “legally, morally and factually wrong”. 109 In light of these observations, and in line with the Privy Council’s approach in the Persons Case, we would do well to apply the following caution to the doctrine of discovery: “Customs are apt to develop into traditions which are stronger than law and remain unchallenged long after the reason for them has disappeared.” 110 It is time to reject archaic and misguided customs and traditions that lie at the heart of Canadian constitutional law, particularly when they rest on Indigenous peoples’ legal inferiority. The reasons for considering Aboriginal peoples to be constitutionally inferior have been discredited and should have long since disappeared. It would be incongruous if such approaches continued under the guise of originalism.

Despite deep problems underlying Aboriginal rights jurisprudence, the Supreme Court has not employed a living tree approach when considering the rights of Aboriginal peoples. In fact, the only time the Supreme Court considered the living tree approach as applied to Aboriginal peoples it was rejected on the facts of the case. The case was *R. v. Blais*, 111 where the Court was asked to find that Métis peoples were Indians under sections of the 1930 *Natural Resources Transfer Agreement* (“NRTA”). 112 The Supreme Court rebuffed this assertion on the grounds that the language, historical context and views of the NRTA’s drafters did not support the Métis’ claim. 113 When the Court was asked to apply a living tree interpretative approach, it refused, and wrote:

> We decline the appellant’s invitation to expand the historical purpose of para. 13 on the basis of the “living tree” doctrine enunciated

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108 *R. v. Marshall; R. v. Bernard*, supra, note 71, at para. 132. Unfortunately, despite critiquing *res nullius*, the doctrine of discovery applied in this case because the Aboriginal peoples were regarded as being nomadic at the time that the Crown asserted sovereignty, such that they could not claim exclusive possession of the land they used.

109 See *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, supra, note 91, at recommendation 1.16.2, at 696:

> Federal, provincial and territorial government further the process of renewal by: (a) acknowledging that concepts such as *terra nullius* and the doctrine of discovery are factually, legally and morally wrong.

110 *Persons Case*, supra, note 6, at 134.


113 *Blais*, supra, note 111, at paras. 19-34.

This Court has consistently endorsed the living tree principle as a fundamental tenet of constitutional interpretation. Constitutional provisions are intended to provide “a continuing framework for the legitimate exercise of governmental power”: Hunter v. Southam Inc., [1984] 2 S.C.R. 145, per Dickson J. (as he then was), at p. 155. But at the same time, this Court is not free to invent new obligations foreign to the original purpose of the provision at issue. The analysis must be anchored in the historical context of the provision. ... Similarly, Binnie J. emphasized the need for attentiveness to context when he noted in R. v. Marshall, [1999] 3 S.C.R. 456, at para. 14, that “[g]enerous rules of interpretation should not be confused with a vague sense of after-the-fact largesse.” Again the statement, made with respect to the interpretation of a treaty, applies here.  

In the Blais case the Supreme Court held that the application of a living tree approach would produce a result that was inconsistent with the NRTA’s “original purpose”. An interpretative approach that conveyed “after-the-fact” generosity was thus rejected. However, “after-the-fact largesse” is precisely the kind of generosity resulting from the Persons Case, particularly as developed by the Supreme Court over the past 70 years. Women were qualified “persons” to be appointed as Senators within the Constitution despite a historic context that denied women the right to vote or claim political office.

III. ORIGINALISM AND THE CANONS OF CONSTRUCTION

In refusing to apply a living tree approach in the Blais case, it should be noted that the Court supported its opinion by applying the “generous rules of interpretation” that apparently exist to benefit Aboriginal peoples. Ironically, while expansive in one respect, these canons of construction ultimately constrain Aboriginal and treaty rights in the way they are used by the Court. This is because the Court says these “special rules” are only “dictated by the special difficulties of ascertaining what in fact was agreed to” when law was made. Notice the originalism communicated in the Court’s formulation of the canons of construction.

114 Id., at paras. 39-40.
Since the distinctive rules for interpreting Aboriginal rights only exist to help the Court weigh evidence of historic purposes, these limits pose substantial problems for Aboriginal peoples. They cannot be used to go beyond a law’s original meaning, as can occur in living tree jurisprudence. It is ironic that allegedly generous rules would have the effect of ultimately restricting interpretations of Aboriginal rights, especially when these rules appear very generous on the surface.

Generously construing intentions when Aboriginal peoples were viewed as inferior is not the same thing as unequivocally repudiating laws rooted in such discriminatory beliefs. Generosity should lead the Court to acknowledge that many of the government’s formative policies were “wrong, have caused great harm, and have no place in our country”, as the government of Canada acknowledged in its 2008 Statement of Apology to Aboriginal peoples. Regrettably, the Court has not yet taken this step in relation to the way it developed and applies its canons of construction. Thus, these special rules sustain original intentions and public meanings, though they try to put them in their best light, troubling as these experiences may be. Thus, these special rules apply despite the fact that many of the country’s formative laws and policies were designed to undermine Aboriginal peoples’ lands, governance and lifestyles. This should raise awareness that any interpretive “generosity” associated with originalism has its limits. It is a generosity that tacitly emphasizes the identification of problematic past intentions. This is opposed to the forward-looking view of living tree jurisprudence that incorporates Indigenous legal traditions, adopts a “progressive interpretation”, “accommodates and addresses the realities of modern life”

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117 Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.), supra, note 13, at 180:

The doctrine of the constitution as a living tree mandates that narrow technical approaches are to be eschewed. ... It also suggests that the past plays a critical but non-exclusive role in determining the content of the rights and freedoms granted by the Charter. The tree is rooted in past and present institutions, but must be capable of growth to meet the future.


119 See, infra, Part V of this paper, where it should become clear that the extension of a living tree approach into s. 35(1) jurisprudence and beyond would lead to a greater scrutiny of originalism’s colonial roots and enhance the role of Indigenous peoples’ own role in the constitution’s ongoing formation.

120 Canada (Attorney General) v. Hislop, supra, note 13, at para. 94.
and rejects historical discrimination.\(^{121}\) “Generous” originalism will not produce as many benefits as living tree constitutionalism because the framework in which it applies is much narrower.

1. Treaties, Originalism and the Canons of Construction

I have been arguing that distinctive canons of construction applicable to Aboriginal and treaty rights, unfortunately, do not function in a manner analogous to the living tree doctrine because they have been developed and applied within the context of originalism. This restricted view is part of a broader history in which the courts have long deployed distinctive canons of construction when considering Aboriginal issues.\(^{122}\)

To unequivocally show their originalism, these canons will now be examined in further detail by reference to case law. In the treaty realm, Chief Justice Marshall of the United States Supreme Court first articulated special interpretive principles for dealing with Indigenous peoples in the case of \textit{Worcester v. Georgia}.\(^{123}\) Justice Marshall developed this approach to better understand and give effect to the Cherokee nation’s intentions at the time their treaties were negotiated.\(^{124}\) Justice Marshall broadly construed specific provisions within these treaties to understand the Indians’ original intent in entering such agreements. These rules developed through the years and they were consolidated in \textit{Jones v. Meehan}\(^ {125}\) in 1899, and have played an important role in the United

\(^{121}\) \textit{Persons} Case, supra, note 6, at 136 A.C.


\(^{124}\) \textit{Worcester v. Georgia}, id., at 553-54 U.S.

\(^{125}\) \textit{Jones v. Meehan}, 175 U.S. 1 (1899), at 10-11:

In construing any treaty between the United States and an Indian tribe, it must always ... be borne in mind that the negotiations for the treaty are conducted, on the part of the United States, an enlightened and powerful nation, by representatives skilled in diplomacy, masters of a written language, understanding the modes and forms of creating the various technical estates known to their law, and assisted by an interpreter employed by themselves; that the treaty is drawn up by them and in their own language; that the Indians, on the other hand, are a weak and dependent people, who have no written language and are wholly unfamiliar with all the forms of legal expression, and whose only knowledge of the terms in which the treaty is framed is that imparted to them by the interpreter employed by the United States; and that the treaty must therefore be construed, not according to the technical meaning of its words to learned lawyers, but in the sense in which they would naturally be understood by the Indians.
States throughout the intervening years.\textsuperscript{126} In 1990 the Canadian Supreme Court approvingly cited these rules in the case of \textit{R. v. Sioui}.	extsuperscript{127} The \textit{Sioui} case also endorsed previous Canadian citations of these canons from the cases of \textit{R. v. White and Bob}\textsuperscript{128} and \textit{R. v. Taylor and Williams}\textsuperscript{129} and \textit{R. v. Simon}.	extsuperscript{130} The Court has continued to apply these canons to understand a treaty’s original intent in the cases of \textit{R. v. Horseman},\textsuperscript{131} \textit{R. v. Badger},\textsuperscript{132} \textit{R. v. Sundown},\textsuperscript{133} \textit{R. v. Marshall (I)},\textsuperscript{134} \textit{R. v. Marshall (II)},\textsuperscript{135} \textit{R. v. Marshall; R. v. Bernard} \textsuperscript{136} and \textit{R. v. Morris}.	extsuperscript{137} A brief review of each of these cases reveals their obvious originalism. The \textit{White and Bob} case focused on original intent to bring out “the importance of the historical context, including the interpersonal relations of those involved at the time, in trying to determine whether a document falls into the category of a treaty under s. 88 of the \textit{Indian Act}.”\textsuperscript{138} The \textit{Taylor} case canvassed original intentions because “[c]ases on Indian or aboriginal rights can never be determined in a vacuum.”\textsuperscript{139} Thus, the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[127] [1990] S.C.J. No. 48, [1990] 1 S.C.R. 1025 (S.C.C.) [hereinafter “\textit{Sioui}”]. At paras. 16, 18:

\begin{quote}
Our courts and those of our neighbours to the south have already considered what distinguishes a treaty with the Indians from other agreements affecting them. The task is not an easy one. In \textit{Simon v. The Queen}, [1985] 2 S.C.R. 387, this Court adopted the comment of Norris J.A. in \textit{R. v. White and Bob} (1964), 50 D.L.R. (2d) 613 (B.C.C.A.) (affirmed in the Supreme Court (1965), 52 D.L.R. (2d) 481), that the courts should show flexibility in determining the legal nature of a document recording a transaction with the Indians. In particular, they must take into account the historical context and perception each party might have as to the nature of the undertaking contained in the document under consideration. ... In my opinion, this liberal and generous attitude, heedful of historical fact, should also guide us in examining the preliminary question of the capacity to sign a treaty ...
\end{quote}

\item[129] [1981] O.J. No. 3135, 34 O.R. (2d) 360 (Ont. C.A.) [hereinafter “\textit{Taylor}”].
\item[134] Supra, note 62, at paras. 9-14.
\item[136] Supra, note 71, at para. 26.
\item[139] \textit{Taylor}, supra, note 129, at 367.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Court wrote: “It is of importance to consider the history and oral traditions of the tribes concerned, and the surrounding circumstances at the time of the treaty, relied on by both parties, in determining the treaty’s effect.”\textsuperscript{140} The \textit{Simon} case applied the view that “Indian treaties should be given a fair, large and liberal construction in favour of the Indians” to give effect to the “intention of creating mutually binding obligations” in a treaty between the Mi’kmaq and the Crown.\textsuperscript{141} The \textit{Horseman} case held that the Court “must be prepared to look at that historical context in order to ensure that they reach a proper understanding of the meaning that particular treaties held for their signatories at the time”.\textsuperscript{142} It also wrote, “to put it simply, Indian treaties must be given the effect the signatories obviously intended them to have at the time they were entered into even if they do not comply with to-day’s formal requirements”.\textsuperscript{143} Generous “back-word” looking rules were also used to assist with originalist interpretations in the \textit{Badger} case, which similarly sought to understand “the intention of the framers”.\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Sundown} likewise held that these rules were in place to “take into account the First Nation signatory and the circumstances that surrounded the signing of the treaty”.\textsuperscript{145} \textit{Marshall I} adopted the point of view of a 17th-century “officious bystander” to ensure that modern treaty interpretations accord with their original public meaning.\textsuperscript{146} The same \textit{Marshall} Court also used originalism to “choose from among the various possible interpretations of the common intention [at the time the treaty was made]”.\textsuperscript{147} In \textit{Marshall II} the Court reiterated that the rules of treaty interpretation were aimed at understanding what “was in the contemplation of either or both parties to the 1760 treaty”.\textsuperscript{148} The Court was also firm in indicating that treaties “cannot be wholly transformed” by engaging in an “extended interpretation” of their original meaning.\textsuperscript{149} This view was reinforced in \textit{R. v. Marshall; R. v. Bernard} when the Court observed that an Aboriginal group’s historic “activity must be essentially the same” as what was occurring in the past in order to receive recognition.\textsuperscript{150} Finally, the

\begin{thebibliography}{150}
\bibitem{140} Id., at 367.
\bibitem{141} Simon, supra, note 130, at para. 27.
\bibitem{142} Horseman, supra, note 131, at 907.
\bibitem{143} Id.
\bibitem{144} Badger, supra, note 132, at paras. 4, 41.
\bibitem{145} Sundown, supra, note 133, at para. 25.
\bibitem{146} Marshall (I), supra, note 62, at para. 43.
\bibitem{147} Id., at para. 14 (emphasis in original).
\bibitem{148} Marshall (II), supra, note 135, at para. 20.
\bibitem{149} Id., at para. 19.
\end{thebibliography}
Morris case highlighted the Court’s originalist framework that “promises in the treaty must be placed in their historical, political, and cultural contexts to clarify the common intentions of the parties and the interests they intended to reconcile at the time.”

From the foregoing review it is clear that originalism plays a significant role in the Supreme Court’s treaty jurisprudence. Generous interpretative rules are consistently referenced but they are deployed to assist the Court’s retrospective search for meaning. These rules do not take us out of the past in determining the intentions of the framers or in understanding an agreement’s public meaning. While treaty interpretation should exhibit a greater deference to history because it respects the parties’ agency when assigning them meaning, it should not be used to limit the availability of future rights not discussed during the negotiations.

Living tree jurisprudence does not operate within such limits. It permits “progressive constitutional development” which, while attentive to a law’s roots, also keeps its eye more firmly on the present and future by “structuring the exercise of power by the organs of the state in times vastly different from those in which it was crafted”.

2. Aboriginal Rights, Originalism and the Canons of Construction

Yet originalism is not only practised in section 35(1)’s treaty jurisprudence. It is also present in the Court’s treatment of Aboriginal rights and title. For example, in the Supreme Court’s first case dealing with Aboriginal rights, it wrote: “Section 35(1) must be given a generous, large and liberal interpretation and uncertainties, ambiguities or doubts should be resolved in favour of the natives.”

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152 By way of contrast, treaty jurisprudence in the United States does not regard treaties as exhaustive statements of law. Issues not discussed during treaty negotiations continue to be vested in Indigenous communities: see United States v. Winans, supra, note 126. In this case the Court held that treaties are “not a grant of rights to the Indians, but a grant of rights from them — a reservation of those not granted.” Thus, anything not discussed in a treaty is retained by the tribe. This is known as the reserved rights doctrine; the tribes retain everything within their territory unless they affirmatively give it up: Menominee Tribe v. United States, 391 U.S. 404 (1968).
155 Supra, note 59.
156 Supra, note 61.
v. Sappier; R. v. Gray\(^{157}\) and R. v. Marshall; R. v. Bernard\(^{158}\) similarly shows that the application of these canons is strongly correlated with the Court’s originalism. In fact, most section 35(1) cases do not ground their interpretation of Aboriginal rights on the contemporary relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Crown. As occurs with treaties, the Supreme Court picks an “original” moment to guide its interpretations and it repeatedly uses the canons of construction to elucidate this moment (which the Court has itself fabricated). In the Van der Peet case the defining moment for recognizing and affirming Aboriginal rights is the one immediately prior to contact with Europeans\(^{159}\) because “the rights recognized and affirmed by s. 35(1) must be temporally rooted in the historical presence — the ancestry — of aboriginal peoples in North America”\(^{160}\). Under this formulation Lamer C.J.C. tautologically concluded that Aboriginal rights possess “original” rights because Aboriginal peoples are “Aboriginal”.\(^{161}\) Thus, on this formulation Aboriginal rights can only be claimed if they are based on “practices, customs and traditions [that are rooted in the] pre-contact societies”.\(^{162}\) This test forces the parties into an originalist framework with public meaning (recognition and affirmation of Aboriginal rights) being assigned to first contact.

Likewise, in the Delgamuukw case, the Supreme Court also placed the proof of Aboriginal title in an “original” moment. However, Delgamuukw moved that moment from contact to sovereignty. In this regard the Delgamuukw court wrote that “[i]n order to establish a claim to aboriginal title, the aboriginal group asserting the claim must establish that it occupied the lands in question at the time at which the Crown asserted sovereignty over the land subject to the title.”\(^{163}\) The Court said that “sovereignty is the appropriate time period” for proving Aboriginal


\(^{158}\) Supra, note 71.

\(^{159}\) The Court held that the test for proving Aboriginal rights would be links to “an element of a practice, custom or tradition integral to the distinctive culture of the aboriginal group claiming the right”: Van der Peet, supra, note 59, at para. 46.

\(^{160}\) Id., at para. 32.

\(^{161}\) Justice Lamer distinguished Aboriginal rights from other “liberal” rights and wrote that “aboriginal rights must be viewed differently from Charter rights because they are rights held only by aboriginal members of Canadian society”. He then went on to say that Aboriginal rights “arise from the fact that aboriginal people are aboriginal; ... aboriginal rights ‘inhere in the very meaning of aboriginality’”: id., at para. 19.


\(^{163}\) Delgamuukw, supra, note 61, at para. 144 (emphasis in original).
title because “aboriginal title crystallized at the time sovereignty was asserted”. 164 Thus, as with Aboriginal rights, the proof of Aboriginal title depends on the Court assigning public meaning to a past event; in this case the original public meaning is said to be the recognition of underlying Aboriginal title when the Crown asserted sovereignty over Aboriginal groups. This demonstrates how the doctrine of discovery lies at the heart of the Court’s originalism. Pinning constitutional meaning to the moment that Aboriginal rights were diminished 165 actually makes the Crown the main recipient of the Court’s generous interpretive stance. Crown sovereignty and the “magic moment of European contact” as McLachlin J. once critically described it, become the default position for defining the meaning and limits of future Aboriginal rights within an originalist framework. 166

The Supreme Court reinforced this framework in the cases of Sappier 167 and R. v. Marshall; R. v. Bernard. 168 The Sappier case held that reference to pre-contact practice is necessary to prove Aboriginal rights in order “to determine how the claimed right relates to the pre-contact culture or way of life of an aboriginal society”. 169 In fact, the Court stated that the absence of such originalist evidence makes it next to impossible to claim rights under section 35(1). While the Court was careful to declare that “aboriginal rights are not frozen in their pre-contact form”, 170 any reasonable analysis of the Court’s originalism cannot evade the fact that contemporary Aboriginal practices are frozen out of constitutional inclusion if they do not have pre-contact correlations. They become frozen rights despite the Court’s reasons to the contrary. 171

164 Id., at para. 145. For a critique of crystallization of title more broadly, see John Borrows, Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), at 93-94 [hereinafter “Borrows, Recovering Canada”].

165 The Supreme Court noted that Aboriginal rights were diminished at contact in Guerin v. Canada, supra, note 103, at 377-78: “... the rights of Indians in the lands they traditionally occupied prior to European colonization both predated and survived the claims to sovereignty made by various European nations in the territories of the North American continent. The principle of discovery which justified these claims gave the ultimate title in the land in a particular area to the nation which had discovered and claimed it. In that respect at least the Indians’ rights in the land were obviously diminished; but their rights of occupancy and possession remained unaffected ...” (my emphasis)

166 Justice McLachlin used this language in dissent in Van der Peet, supra, note 59, at para. 247.

167 Supra, note 157.

168 Supra, note 71.

169 Sappier, supra, note 157, at para. 22.

170 Id., at para. 23.

The *R. v. Marshall; R. v. Bernard* case reaffirmed these principles and observed that the proof of Aboriginal and treaty rights both rested on (ab)originalist premises. Thus, the Court wrote: “The question is whether the aboriginal practice at the time of assertion of European sovereignty (not, unlike treaties, when a document was signed) translates into a modern legal right.”\(^{172}\) This sentence reveals the Court’s interpretive fusion of Aboriginal and treaty rights within an originalist framework. The application of this test led the Court to conclude that Mik’maq people could not claim Aboriginal title because their historic land use did not correspond to common law conceptions of physical occupation when the Crown asserted sovereignty.\(^{173}\)

### IV. Three Alternatives to (Ab)originalism

The Court does not have to adopt an originalist approach when interpreting Aboriginal and treaty rights. Section 35(1)’s jurisprudence could be brought within the constitutional mainstream by highlighting the contemporary nature of Aboriginal and treaty rights. Lines of authority more consistent with a living tree approach could be emphasized. This would help to ensure that the “past plays a critical but non-exclusive role in determining the content of [Aboriginal] rights and freedoms”.\(^{174}\) In taking this path the Supreme Court could highlight one of three prominent alternatives to originalism within section 35(1). These three alternatives are arguments relating to (1) the restraint of government authority; (2) the continuity of Aboriginal rights; and (3) the ongoing obligation of the Crown to act honourably in all its dealings with Aboriginal peoples. While history is relevant in each of these approaches, the Court more appropriately focuses on the contemporary aspects of the Crown’s relationship to Aboriginal peoples in the following examples.

The first illustration of a living-tree-like approach to Aboriginal rights is found in the leading case in the field, *Sparrow*.\(^{175}\) While there are contrary tides in the *Sparrow* case, the Court did not generally link Aboriginal rights to a founding moment. Instead it held that the meaning of section 35(1) was to be “derived from general principles of constitutional interpretation”.\(^{176}\) As a result, the Court explicitly developed these


\(^{173}\) *Sappier*, supra, note 157, at paras. 60-67.

\(^{174}\) *Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.)*, supra, note 13, at 180.

\(^{175}\) *Sparrow*, note 73.

\(^{176}\) Id., at 1106.
principles within a “framework for an interpretation ... that ... gives appropriate weight to the constitutional nature of these words”.

To accomplish this task the Court cited the *Manitoba Language Reference* to highlight the fact that section 35(1) was to be interpreted “in accordance with certain principles held as fundamental and certain prescriptions restrictive of the powers of the legislature and government”. These statements are similar to what was said in the *Persons* Case, which declared: “That Act should be on all occasions interpreted in a large, liberal and comprehensive spirit, considering the magnitude of the subjects with which it purports to deal in very few words.”

Putting canons of construction in this broader, more contemporary approach in the *Sparrow* case, the Court held that Aboriginal rights exist to restrict government action. This demonstrates section 35(1)’s living constitutional status, which operates to both channel and constrain government power. In this light, the Court found that section 35 demanded that the government justify “any government regulation that infringes upon or denies aboriginal rights.” It said that “[s]uch scrutiny is in keeping with the liberal interpretive principle enunciated in *Nowegijick* ... and the concept of holding the Crown to a high standard of honourable dealing with respect to the aboriginal peoples of Canada ...”

These are not the words of originalism; instead they measure Aboriginal rights by a contemporary purpose, which is the “affirmation of aboriginal rights.” This is more consistent with a living tree approach. Construing provisions liberally in the *Sparrow* case is aimed at affirming rights, even when they grow significantly beyond their historic roots. Thus, when the *Sparrow* Court appropriately considers the past it does so by simultaneously emphasizing present political realities. As a result, the Court used generous rules of interpretation to highlight that “[t]he relationship between the Government and aboriginals is trust-like, rather than adversarial, and contemporary recognition and affirmation of aboriginal rights must be defined in light of this historic relationship.”

To assist in the development of this relationship the Court wrote that sensitivity to the Aboriginal perspective on the meaning of the right at

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177 Id., at 1016.
179 *Persons Case*, supra, note 6, at 136 A.C.
180 *Sparrow*, supra, note 73, at 1109.
181 Id.
182 Id., at 1106.
183 Id., at 1108.
stake is crucial to its definition. The Court’s focus on Aboriginal perspectives and the constitutional nature of the parties’ current relationship, as opposed to the search for its origins, is more consistent with the Court’s broader living tree approach to constitutional interpretation.

A second alternative to the Supreme Court’s originalism is found in an aspect of the Mitchell case, which emphasized the continuity of Aboriginal rights. An interpretive approach that emphasizes the contemporary, continuing nature of Aboriginal rights is much closer to a living tree model. This is because a focus on continuity takes our gaze away from first contact and emphasizes relations between Aboriginal communities and the Crown since their initial encounters. This is also a more generous interpretive approach. It gives the Court some freedom to look beyond the initial roots of an Aboriginal right to see how its branches have “grown and expanded with their natural limits” (to use the language of the Persons Case). Nevertheless, one has to be careful in considering continuity as an alternative to originalism. Originalism could overtake the continuity thesis if too much weight is given to the common law’s initial recognition of Aboriginal peoples’ pre-existing law and interests. For example, the Mitchell Court is quite clear that Aboriginal rights would only receive protection if they had continuity with “practices, traditions or customs that existed prior to contact.”

In discussing the nature of Aboriginal rights the Court observed that English law “accepted that the aboriginal peoples possessed pre-existing laws and interests” while recognizing that “the Crown asserted that sovereignty over the land, and ownership of its underlying title”: Mitchell, supra, note 116, at para. 9.

In Sparrow, id., at 1112, the Court wrote: “While it is impossible to give an easy definition of fishing rights, it is possible, and, indeed, crucial, to be sensitive to the aboriginal perspective itself on the meaning of the rights at stake.”


This is most consistent with the approach which dominated U.S. Federal Indian case law before the U.S. Supreme Court between 1959 and the early 1980s: see Charles Wilkinson, American Indians, Time and the Law (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Felix Cohen was the most prominent proponent of this approach: see Handbook of Federal Indian Law (Washington: Department of Interior, 1941), at 122-23. During the Rehnquist Court era, Federal Indian case law became more preoccupied with originalism. For a critique of the U.S. Supreme Court’s approach, see Frank Pommersheim, Broken Landscapes: Indians, Indian Tribes, and the Constitution (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Walter Echo-Hawk, In the Courts of the Conqueror: The 10 Worst Indian Law Cases Ever Decided (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 2010); Robert Williams, Jr., Like a Loaded Weapon: The Rehnquist Court, Indian Rights, and the Legal History of Racism in America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
if we recognize Aboriginal peoples as complex contemporary communities, the continuity thesis has greater potential to develop along the lines of a living tree approach because it emphasizes the branches of Aboriginal development, and not their initial recognition. Thus, the Mitchell case holds great potential when it observes that:

European settlement did not terminate the interests of aboriginal peoples arising from their historical occupation and use of the land. To the contrary, aboriginal interests and customary laws were presumed to survive the assertion of sovereignty, and were absorbed into the common law as rights, unless (1) they were incompatible with the Crown’s assertion of sovereignty, (2) they were surrendered voluntarily via the treaty process, or (3) the government extinguished them ... Barring one of these exceptions, the practices, customs and traditions that defined the various aboriginal societies as distinctive cultures continued as part of the law of Canada ...  

The presumption of the survival and continuous exercise of Aboriginal rights can be a key point in rejecting originalism. While Indigenous peoples would strongly resist the three limitations McLachlin C.J.C. placed on the continuity of their rights, there are sound arguments that Indigenous rights, obligations and conflict resolution procedures are compatible with the Crown’s assertion of sovereignty. Indigenous peoples affirm that many of their most important rights were not surrendered by treaties and were not extinguished by clear and plain government legislation. These facts would be clearer if a living-tree-like reconciliation was the lens through which the courts interpreted the

that existed prior to contact. The practice, custom or tradition must have been “integral to the distinctive culture” of the aboriginal peoples, in the sense that it distinguished or characterized their traditional culture and lay at the core of the peoples’ identity. It must be a “defining feature” of the aboriginal society, such that the culture would be “fundamentally altered” without it. It must be a feature of “central significance” to the peoples’ culture, one that “truly made the society what it was” (Van der Peet, supra, at paras. 54-59 (emphasis in original)).


Borrows, Canada’s Indigenous Constitution, supra, note 35, at 136.

parties’ relationships. They hold that their laws co-exist with common law and civil law traditions, and that they could be considered a strong part of Canada’s constitutional law in the present day.

The continuity thesis is therefore a much stronger ground on which to build the interpretation of Aboriginal rights. It highlights the existing nature of Aboriginal rights, which allows for the growth and development of Indigenous law and tradition as part of the law of Canada. This interpretation is more consistent with the Court’s living tree constitutionalism, which states that “[t]here is nothing static or frozen, narrow or technical, about the Constitution of Canada.” For this reason, the continuity theory of Aboriginal rights as discussed in the Mitchell case is an important alternative to the originalism that is found in most Aboriginal rights cases.

The third alternative to the Supreme Court’s originalism comes from the case of Haida Nation v. British Columbia. While history is once again relevant in the Haida case, the Court’s reasons do not inflexibly fasten constitutional rights and obligations to one historic moment. Contemporary obligations are always present under the approach taken in this case. This is apparent when the Court writes that “[i]n all its dealings with Aboriginal peoples, from the assertion of sovereignty to the resolution of claims and the implementation of treaties, the Crown must act honourably.” The implication of this conclusion is that “[r]econciliation is not a final legal remedy in the usual sense ... it is a process.” Under this formulation rights are not time-bound; the fulfilment of a constitutional obligation does not begin and end by reference to the past. Constitutional obligations must be “determined,

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194 See Van der Peet, supra, note 59, at para. 31: More specifically, what s. 35(1) does is provide the constitutional framework through which the fact that aboriginals lived on the land in distinctive societies, with their own practices, traditions and cultures, is acknowledged and reconciled with the sovereignty of the Crown. The substantive rights which fall within the provision must be defined in light of this purpose; the aboriginal rights recognized and affirmed by s. 35(1) must be directed towards the reconciliation of the pre-existence of aboriginal societies with the sovereignty of the Crown.

195 For a wide-ranging discussion of reconciliation, see Paulette Regan, University of British Columbia Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

196 Sakej Henderson, First Nations Jurisprudence and Aboriginal Rights: Defining the Just Society (Saskatoon: Native Law Centre, 2006).


198 Id., at para. 17.

199 Id., at para. 32.
recognized and respected” in the present, especially in circumstances where rights have not yet been reconciled with Crown sovereignty. With the contemporary nature of Aboriginal rights fully on display in the *Haida* case, the Supreme Court developed a test for the contemporary consultation and accommodation of Aboriginal rights. It wrote that constitutional duties arise “when the Crown has knowledge, real or constructive, of the potential existence of the Aboriginal right or title and contemplates conduct that might adversely affect it”. This test reveals that constitutional rights are related to the Crown’s ongoing assessment of the impact of its activities on Aboriginal peoples. The characterization of the Crown’s constitutional obligation does not primarily depend on assigning meaning to past events. Since the constitutional relationship does not solely depend on initial assessments of the strength of the Aboriginal group’s historically based claims, the Court says this can foster “a relationship between the parties that makes possible negotiations”, which it regards as “the preferred process for achieving ultimate reconciliation”. Clearly, the *Haida* case is an alternative to the Court’s originalism in the field of Aboriginal rights.

If the Supreme Court further explored the contemporary implications of the three approaches identified in this section, Canada’s Constitution would be more unified and less discriminatory. Aboriginal peoples’ rights would be considered in a broader light, and Canada would be strengthened. This would be more consistent with the Privy Council’s living tree approach, which is that the Constitution “should be on all occasions interpreted in a large, liberal and comprehensive spirit, considering the magnitude of the subjects with which it purports to deal in very few words”.

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201 *Haida*, supra, note 197, at para. 35.

202 *Id.*, at para. 38.

203 *Persons Case*, supra, note 6, at 136 A.C.
V. ABORIGINAL LEGAL TRADITIONS, LIVING TREES AND ORIGINALISM

The Supreme Court should also consider the state of Indigenous approaches to constitutional law in adopting living tree alternatives. Living tree constitutionalism resembles one significant source of Indigenous law grounded in analogies to the natural world. This environmentally based approach to legal interpretation develops rules for regulation and conflict resolution from a study of the world’s behaviour. Indigenous peoples who practise this form of law draw analogies from the behaviours of ecosystems, watersheds, rivers, mountains, valleys, meadows, lakes and shorelines to guide legal actions. Given this focus it is no surprise that Indigenous peoples would be attracted to constitutional metaphors based on living things. In fact, one of the strongest metaphors Indigenous peoples use in describing their relations with the Crown is “as long as the shine shines, the grass grows, and the river flows”. This metaphor, while possessing much deeper meaning,

204 Indigenous perspectives on the law are relevant to constitutional interpretation. As the Supreme Court of Canada wrote in Sparrow, supra, note 73, at 1112: “it is possible, and, indeed, crucial, to be sensitive to the aboriginal perspective itself on the meaning of the rights at stake”.

205 Indigenous law based on environmental sources is discussed in greater depth in Borrows, Canada’s Indigenous Constitution, supra, note 35, at 28-35 and Borrows, Recovering Canada, supra, note 164, at 29-55.


208 For a discussion of this concept in law, see Wilkinson & Volkman, “Judicial Review of Indian Treaty Abrogation”, supra, note 123. An early use of a similar phrase is found in a treaty made by William Penn with the Conestoga in 1701: see Kevin Kenny, Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn’s Holy Experiment (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), at 15: “as long as the Sun and Moon shall endure”. Benjamin Franklin reported this treaty as saying, “as long as the sun shall shine, or the waters run in the rivers” in Jared Sparks, ed., The Works of Benjamin Franklin: Autobiography, pt. 2 (Boston: MacCoun, 1882). Other associations between treaties and the phrase are found in Harold Cardinal & Walter Hildebrandt, Treaty
usually associated with treaties and emphasizes the perpetual nature of agreements to live together in peace, friendship and respect.\textsuperscript{210} An organic, animate, growth-oriented approach to law is also found in the Haudenosaunee constitution, also called Kaianerekowa or Great Law of Peace.\textsuperscript{211} This constitution binds the Six Iroquois Confederacy together under principles of peace, power and righteousness.\textsuperscript{212} The grand symbol of the Kaianerekowa is a Great White Pine tree with four white roots of peace extending in four cardinal directions.\textsuperscript{213} The tree has long needles that grow as the confederacy prospers.\textsuperscript{214} The nations and its people are allegorically seated in concentric circles around the tree, also illustrating

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\textsuperscript{210} For example, see Deanna Christensen, Ahtahkakoop: The Epic Account of a Plains Cree Head Chief, His People, and Their Vision for Survival, 1816-1896 (Shell Lake, SK: Ahtahkakoop Publishing, 2000), at 5-14, for a brief discussion of laws related to the sun, waters and earth. For an ingenious literary treatment of this idea, see Thomas King, Green Grass, Running Water (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1993).

\textsuperscript{211} For example, when Alexander Morris proposed Treaty 6 he said, “What I trust and hope we will do is not for today or tomorrow only; what I promise and what I believe and hope you will take, is to last as long as that sun shines and yonder river flows”: Alexander Morris, The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories, Including the Negotiations on Which They were Based, and other Information Relating Thereto (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, Saskatoon, 1991), at 202; see similar words in relation to Treaty 3, at 51. This phrase was also used in an 1818 treaty with the Ojibway: see J.R. Miller, Compact, Contract, Covenant: Aboriginal Treaty-Making in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), at 101.


\textsuperscript{213} The Haudenosaunee have in times past invited others to seek shelter in their Confederacy and Great Law: see William Fenton, The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), at 73.

\textsuperscript{214} Fenton, id., at 103.
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growth. A great eagle sits atop the tree to watch for the peace and safety of the confederacy. The Great Law is a living tree.\textsuperscript{215} Aboriginal peoples of the Pacific Northwest also have constitutions related to trees. The Haida, Nisga’a, Gitksan, Wetsuwet’en, Tsimshian, Taltian, Tlingit, Salish, Heiltsuk, Nuu-Chah-Nulth and Kwakwaka’wakw all carve poles that communicate their relationships to territory, ancestors and the natural world around them.\textsuperscript{216} Unlike living trees, which metaphorically grow forever, totem poles are designed to eventually fall down and decay as they return to the earth. This reinforces the idea that constitutional laws, though carved from deep histories, are to be re-inscribed every few generations to ensure they remain relevant through time.\textsuperscript{217} Thus, this metaphor produces effects that are similar to the living tree doctrine. Other Indigenous peoples in Canada also root their highest laws in analogies related to living beings.\textsuperscript{218}

\textsuperscript{215} Anishinaabe people at the time also formulated law based on living trees. One such example comes in a council at Detroit in 1773. In this case a Shawane chief named Tshwabame was speaking on behalf of Anishinaabe people who were accused of murdering several fur traders. In the course of his speech he recalled that when their British Father replaced their French Father at Detroit he “planted a Tree” so that whenever “any bad thing” should happen they could “assemble at said tree & talk together” and “try to moderate any difficulties”: Speech of Tshwabame Shawanese & Minitowabe Chiefs, with Sixteen Sawinan Indians who brot in ye three Murderers of Pond &c., Detroit, 9-10 May 1773, Haldimand Add. 21,670: 42-45. I thank Mark Walters for bringing this reference to my attention.

\textsuperscript{216} For a discussion of First Nations’ use of trees and poles in communicating their laws and political relationships, see Marius Barbeau, \textit{Totem Poles} (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1950); Michael D. Blackstock, \textit{Faces in the Forest: First Nations Art Created on Living Trees} (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2001).

\textsuperscript{217} Johnny Mack has observed that the Nuu-chah-nulth nation cannot rely on a reified constitutional order because they are living in a constant state of renewal, where history is brought to the present by carvers/weavers whose hand is greatly inspired by contemporary, lived experience as well as the past that, of course, constitutes the present. ... [T]he phrase “dead tree constitutionalism” [seems] to capture the corporeal character of the indigenous constitutional order. That is to say, the constitutions, much like ourselves, have a physicality and life expectancy. Thus, we are charged with the responsibility of knowing the histories reflected in the totems and, having lived within the world normativised by them, go about the task of carving/weaving new ones. Personal communication, April 11, 2012. He has written about this issue more generally in Johnny Mack, \textit{Thickening Totems Thinning Imperialism} (LL.M. Thesis, University of Victoria, 2009), at 128-36 [unpublished].

None of the above references suggest that the living tree doctrine as proclaimed by the Privy Council has its origins in Aboriginal peoples’ law. Each legal tradition independently embraced living constitutionalism on its own terms. The same could be said about originalism. Aboriginal peoples can be originalists too, in relation to their own laws, and in relation to Canada’s broader constitutional traditions. In fact, originalist and dynamic interpretative practices are present in most traditions. For example, originalism has similarities to Biblical and Koranic literalism, and living constitutionalism has parallels with biblical hermeneutics and religious syncretism. These examples often have relevance for constitutional interpretation. Aboriginal peoples’ legal perspectives and practices are as varied as other legal traditions in the world, even within particular communities. Thus, when considering Indigenous peoples’ own constitutional traditions it is important to recognize the diversity of approaches within these societies, including originalism.

For example, Indigenous laws privileging originalism in a Cree community are on display in the Sawridge decision. This case consid-
ered a First Nation’s constitutional obligations to accept women as members when they had been disenfranchised and re-enfranchised by the *Indian Act.* Only First Nations women’s legal status was at issue because Indian men did not lose Indian status under the Act. The Sawridge Band argued they had no obligation to accept First Nations women as citizens if they married non-Indian men. Testimony was given to make the point that it was Cree custom “since aboriginal times” until the present day for women to take their husband’s membership status, or lack thereof. Thus, if women “married out” and lost their Indian status, the Band argued that this was consistent with original Cree principles. This law, regarded as fundamental to the way the community constituted itself, was that “woman follows man”. Agnes Smallboy, an elder in the trial, testified as follows:

Q. MR. HEALEY: How did you come to be a member of the Ermineskin Band?

A. When I was young, I married into the reserve to a man who was named Pete Morin.

Q. What Indian band did you belong to before you married Pete Morin?

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A. I was a member of the Sampson Band. In our language, we call it “the land of the willows”. [TT3, at page 270.]

Q. MR. HEALEY: Why did you leave your band and join the Ermineskin Band when you married Pete Morin?

A. I did not know the man before I married him. In our system, a woman ... or the parents made arrangements for the marriage of their daughters. And when my parents told me that I was to go and live with this man, I obeyed my parents. ...

Q. Does the woman always go with the man as you did in the Ermineskin Band?

A. Yes, that was the way it was — or has been.

Q. Is that the Indian way today?

A. It is still the way it is today. ...

The argument to sustain the practice of “woman follows man”, as described in this case, can be labelled as originalist. It seeks to maintain the imputed first intentions of Cree ancestors and the Creator, and it vests this practice with public values considered foundational to Cree political organization, at least by those making these arguments. While we should not forget that there are diverse viewpoints within Indigenous law, some of which may vigorously oppose discrimination, other

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227 Id., at 92-93 F.C.

228 Wayne Roan testified at trial:
... the supreme being that gave me the language to identify these things. That’s the way he said it. That’s the way I believe it, that’s the way I recognize it, and nothing you’re going to say is going to change that. It is part of my way of life. It is not yours, it is my way. All I’m doing here is for you to try and understand I put into place, that’s the way things worked.

Id., at 100 F.C.

229 Elders in the Sawridge case regarded the idea of “woman follows man” as being foundational to Cree organization. They argued that Cree ways would be threatened if women who have non-native husbands did not follow them off the reserve when they married. These values are clearly discriminatory and cannot be excused by reference to original Cree teachings and law. Nevertheless, Elder Sophie Mackinaw testified at trial: “I want to talk specifically about the white husband in this instance. It is not clear that the white husband is going to be able to accept our ways and live the way we are. It may be that the white man who comes to live on our reserve will want to impose his own values, his ways which he is familiar with on us, on our communities”: id., at 29 F.C.

230 For an excellent discussion of the rich diversity of Indigenous legal thought, see Val Napoleon, Ayook: Gitksan Legal Order, Law and Legal Theory (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of
Indigenous communities have also made arguments that originalism requires discriminatory results. As argued above, (Ab)originalism should not be used to sustain discrimination. Discriminatory originalism is problematic, regardless of its nature and source. Whether used by distinguished members of the Supreme Court of Canada, or by respected elders within Indigenous communities, adverse discrimination should be rejected as contrary to other constitutional approaches within each tradition.

There are also reasons to reject originalism even in cases where discrimination is not at issue. As suggested earlier, it is an unbalanced approach because it does not sufficiently contextualize the present and future tenses of constitutional law. Furthermore, originalism does not offer any greater determinacy than alternative interpretive approaches. Though not a Canadian example, the following illustration raises these issues. It involves the Ottawa First Nation, a people also Indigenous to Canada. The Ottawa are Anishinaabek people who are divided by the border between Canada and the United States. As such, they are found on Manitoulin Island in Ontario and in communities around northern Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. The Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, a sub-group of the larger nation, resides on the eastern shores of Lake Michigan around Manistee Michigan. They are organized under a constitution that consists of a nine-member elected Council, an elected
Ogema (Chief) and a Tribal Court. The Ottawa Tribal Court constantly grapples with different modes of constitutional interpretation in making its decisions, as occurs in the other 330 Tribal Courts in the United States. This struggle is found in the case of Champagne v. Little River Band of Indians, decided before the Little River Band of Indians Court of Appeal.

The issue in the Champagne case was whether the Tribal Council’s statutory incorporation of certain provisions of Michigan State criminal law was contrary to the Little River Ottawa Band Constitution. A former Tribal Court judge, who had been convicted of the crime of attempted fraud under an Ottawa Band statute, argued that the adoption of Michigan law that criminalized the crime of attempted fraud was an unconstitutional “abrogation of tribal sovereignty and a violation of tribal customs and traditions”. He contended that the Michigan-inspired

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We, the Little River Ottawa people have asserted our sovereignty throughout history including in the Treaty of Chicago [August 29, 1821; 7 Stat 218], the Treaty of Washington [March 28, 1836; 7 Stat 491], and the Treaty of Detroit [July 31, 1855; 11 Stat 621].

Between the last treaty and the present day, the Grand River Ottawa people who became the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians were known and organized under several names, including members of “Indian Village” on the Manistee River, residents of the Pere Marquette Village or “Indian Town”, Unit No. 7 of the Northern Michigan Ottawa Association, the Thornapple River Band, and finally the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians.

On September 21, 1994, Public Law 103-324 (108 Stat 2156) was enacted, reaffirming federal recognition of and confirming the sovereignty of the Grand River Bands comprising the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians (referred to as the Tribe or Little River Band).

As an exercise of our sovereign powers, in order to organize for our common good, to govern ourselves under our own laws, to maintain and foster our tribal culture, provide for the welfare and prosperity of our people, and to protect our homeland we adopt this constitution, in accordance with the Indian Reorganization Act of June 18, 1934, as amended, as the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians.

The Band also has a bureaucracy consisting of 28 different departments administering programs and processes necessary to running a modern government.


236 Case No. 06-178-AP, June 2007 (Little River Band of Indians Court of Appeal); see also Fletcher, id., at 405-12.

237 Id., at 409-10.
statute was inconsistent with Anishinaabek traditions and tribal law, and was therefore unconstitutional. The Little Ottawa Band Court of Appeal rejected these arguments. While noting that it was laudable to seek the development of a “sophisticated legal system based on Anglo-American legal models [which] preserves the cultural distinctiveness of Ottawa culture through the development of tribal law and the preservation of tribal customs and traditions”, the Court of Appeal nevertheless found that the judge “attempted to procure money that was not owed to him.”

It held that “Justice Champagne does not and cannot identify an Ottawa custom or tradition that would excuse him for his actions.” The accused judge believed that the Band’s statute was unconstitutional because the crime of “attempt” was not found in their pre-contact laws, whereas the Court of Appeal held that the crime of “attempt” was consistent with the First Nation’s broader powers under the constitution unless there was evidence to the contrary. If the Court had concluded its opinion at this point the case would have nicely illustrated two different views of originalism within Anishinaabek constitutionalism. This would have demonstrated originalism’s indeterminacy given the contradictory nature of the parties’ understanding of, and approach to, history.

However, the Little River Band Court of Appeal went one step further and held that appeals to originalism would not completely solve the issue. The Court thus wrote: “It would be a sad day for this community to acknowledge that an action reflecting an intention of an individual to fraudulently procure money from the Band is excused because the word ‘attempt’ does not exist in Anishinaabemowin, as Justice Champagne alleged at oral argument.” Thus, the Court concluded that appeals to history alone would not answer the question in this case. In these and other reasons the Court indicated that concerns aside from originalism would guide their reasons.

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238 Id., at 410.
239 Id.
241 Fletcher, supra, note 235, at 410.
VI. CONCLUSION

Originalism within an Indigenous legal context can be as problematic as it is within Canada’s broader framework. Ultimately, one must make a distinction between history as a source of authority in constitutional law and originalism. Nothing in this paper should be construed as rejecting appropriate historical context when interpreting Aboriginal and treaty rights. Aboriginal peoples’ laws and relations lie at the roots of Canada’s living tree, and are necessary to its subsequent healthy development. History is an important resource in understanding and developing constitutional relationships; without it we would cease to be ruled by law and be cut off from guidance available from the past. Thus, non-discriminatory historical understandings should influence the interpretation of Aboriginal and treaty rights in the Canadian constitution.

Thus, while this paper rejects originalism, it does not reject history. My arguments are a matter of emphasis. My objection to originalism is related to how it excludes other modes of interpretation as applied to Aboriginal peoples. It has been deployed in narrow and inflexible ways. It has been used to hold that constitutional rights do not exist without historic analogues. When used in this fashion originalism trumps other modes of constitutional interpretation. Constitutional claims are limited by what was “integral to a distinctive culture” prior to European contact or the “assertion” of Crown sovereignty.\(^\text{242}\) If an Aboriginal group has signed a treaty with the Crown, constitutional rights cannot be claimed unless they are connected to the common intention between the parties at the time an agreement was made.\(^\text{243}\) All this is to say that the Court has not just looked to history as a source of authority in Aboriginal cases; it has used history to exclude rights that could be recognized through other interpretive forms. This approach and the results it produces are inconsistent with Canada’s broader living tree tradition.

While this paper argues for a clear rejection of originalism, lest I be misunderstood, I want to conclude by re-emphasizing the importance of history as a very important resource for legal reasoning.\(^\text{244}\) I will do so by returning to the Champagne v. Little River Band of Indians case, decided

\(^{242}\) Van der Peet, supra, note 59, at para. 46, and Delgamuukw, supra, note 61, at para. 144.


\(^{244}\) The importance of a non-exclusivist use of history in constitutional law is found in Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.), supra, note 13, at 180: “The doctrine of the constitution as a living tree mandates that narrow technical approaches are to be eschewed,” which means that “the past plays a critical but non-exclusive role in determining the content of the rights and freedoms granted by the Charter.”
before the Little River Band of Indians Court of Appeal, discussed above. While this Court rejected originalism, it did not turn its back on history. In fact, the Court draws upon historical sources in framing its opinion. It did so by citing stories related to Nanaboozhoo, the Anishinaabe trickster. These stories function as law in Anishinaabek communities. Thus, the Court wrote:

There are many trickster tales told by the Anishinaabek involving the godlike character Nanabozho. One story relevant to the present matter is a story that is sometimes referred to as “The Duck Dinner.” See, e.g., John Borrows, Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law 47-49 (2002); Charles Kawbawgum, “Nanabozho in a Time of Famine”, in Ojibwa Narratives Of Charles and Charlotte Kawbawgum and Jacques LePique, 1893-1895, at 33 (Arthur P. Bourgeois, ed. 1994); Beatrice Blackwood, “Tales of the Chippewa Indians”, 40 Folklore 315, 337-38 (1929). There are many, many versions of this story, but in most versions, Nanabozho is hungry, as usual. After a series of failures in convincing (tricking) the woodpecker and muskrat spirits into being meals, Nanabozho convinces (tricks) several ducks and kills them by decapitating them. He eats his fill, saves the rest for later, and takes a nap. He orders his buttocks to wake him if anyone comes along threatening to steal the rest of his duck dinner. During the night, men approach. Nanabozho’s buttocks warn him twice: “Wake up, Nanabozho. Men are coming.” Kawbawgum, supra, at 35. Nanabozho ignores his buttocks and continues to sleep. When he awakens to find the remainder of his food stolen, he is angry. But he does not blame himself. Instead, he builds up his fire and burns his buttocks as punishment for their failure to warn him. To some extent, the trick has come back to haunt Nanabozho — and in the end, with his short-sightedness, he burns his own body.

The relevance of this timeless story to the present matter is apparent. The trial court, per Judge Brenda Jones Quick, tried and convicted the defendant and appellant, Hon. Ryan L. Champagne, a tribal member, an

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245 Case No. 06-178-AP, June 2007 (Little River Band of Indians Court of Appeal); see also Fletcher, supra, note 235, at 405-12.
appellate justice, and a member of this Court, of the crime of attempted fraud. Justice Champagne’s primary job during the relevant period in this case was with the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians. Part of his job responsibilities included leaving the tribal place of business in his personal vehicle to visit clients. While on one of these trips, Justice Champagne took a personal detour and was involved in an accident. The Band and later the trial judge concluded that his claim for reimbursement from the Band was fraudulent. Judge Quick found that Justice Champagne “attempted to obtain money by seeking reimbursement from the Tribe for the loss of his vehicle by intentionally making a false assertion that he was on his way to a client’s home at the time of the accident.” People v. Champagne, Opinion and Judgment at 6, No. 06-131-TM (Little River Band Tribal Court, Dec. 1, 2006) (Champagne III). Justice Champagne was neither heading toward the tribal offices nor toward a client’s home.

Like Nanabozho, Justice Champagne perpetrated a trick upon the Little River Ottawa community — a trick that has come back to haunt him. It would seem to be a small thing involving a relatively small sum of money, but because the Little River Ottawa people have designated this particular “trick” a criminal act, Justice Champagne has burned himself. ...

After this introduction, the Little River Band Court of Appeal’s reasons for judgment go to great lengths to substantiate this conclusion. They demonstrate a positive, non-discriminatory use of history in showing how the crime of attempt is not contrary to Anishinaabek constitutionalism. They simultaneously use history and move beyond it by deploying traditional law in the present tense. Nanaboozhoo’s Duck dinner case is a significant source of authority for judging the wrongfulness of the judge’s attempted fraud. 

Ironically, the Supreme Court
of Canada has not used history in this fashion, to this point because its originalism and “generous” canons of construction have not allowed Indigenous law to grow in this way. Originalism has thus stunted the growth of Canada’s Indigenous Constitution. Fortunately, the citation of Indigenous law, as a past, present and future-oriented part of Canada’s Constitution could help nourish and sustain a living tree constitutionalism.

If living tree principles were applied to Aboriginal peoples, we could one day say about Canada’s Aboriginal and treaty rights jurisprudence: “This metaphor has endured as the preferred approach in constitutional interpretation, ensuring ‘that Confederation can be adapted to new social realities’. We would have an Aboriginal jurisprudence which holds that ‘frozen concepts’ reasoning runs contrary to one of the most fundamental principles of Canadian constitutional interpretation: that our Constitution is a living tree which, by way of progressive interpretation, accommodates and addresses the realities of modern life’. We would also apply the view that: “[t]here is nothing static or frozen, narrow or technical, about the Constitution of Canada.” Thus, we would say, about Aboriginal and treaty rights: “If the Canadian Constitution is to be regarded as a ‘living tree’ and legislative competence as ‘essentially dynamic’... then the determination of categories existing in 1867 becomes of little, other than historic, concern.” This would allow us to reinforce an approach that holds that: “the past plays a critical but non-exclusive role in determining the content of the rights and freedoms” within the Constitution. As such, we could conclude in relation to Aboriginal and treaty rights: “The tree is rooted in past and present institutions, but must be capable of growth to meet the future.” If originalism was rejected in favour of living tree constitutionalism in ways consistent with the spirit of this paper, Aboriginal and treaty rights...
would be more strongly rooted in “a philosophy which is capable of explaining the past and animating the future”. Interpreting Aboriginal and treaty rights as living traditions would mark an important maturation point in the ongoing evolution of Canada’s organic constitution. This would stand in significance alongside the achievement of responsible government, the extension of women’s political rights in the *Persons* Case and the extension of civil rights before the Charter came into force. We must not “read the provisions of the Constitution like a last will and testament lest it become one”. This goes for Aboriginal and treaty rights, as much as it does for other parts of Canada’s Constitution.

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257 Id., at 181.