

SOLIDARITY LOOM

Weaving a Global Network of Engaged Creatives

in a world of rising authoritarianism

virtual series January-June 2026

INDIGENOUS APPROACHES TO GOOD GOVERNANCE

June 18



PRE PORT

June 2026

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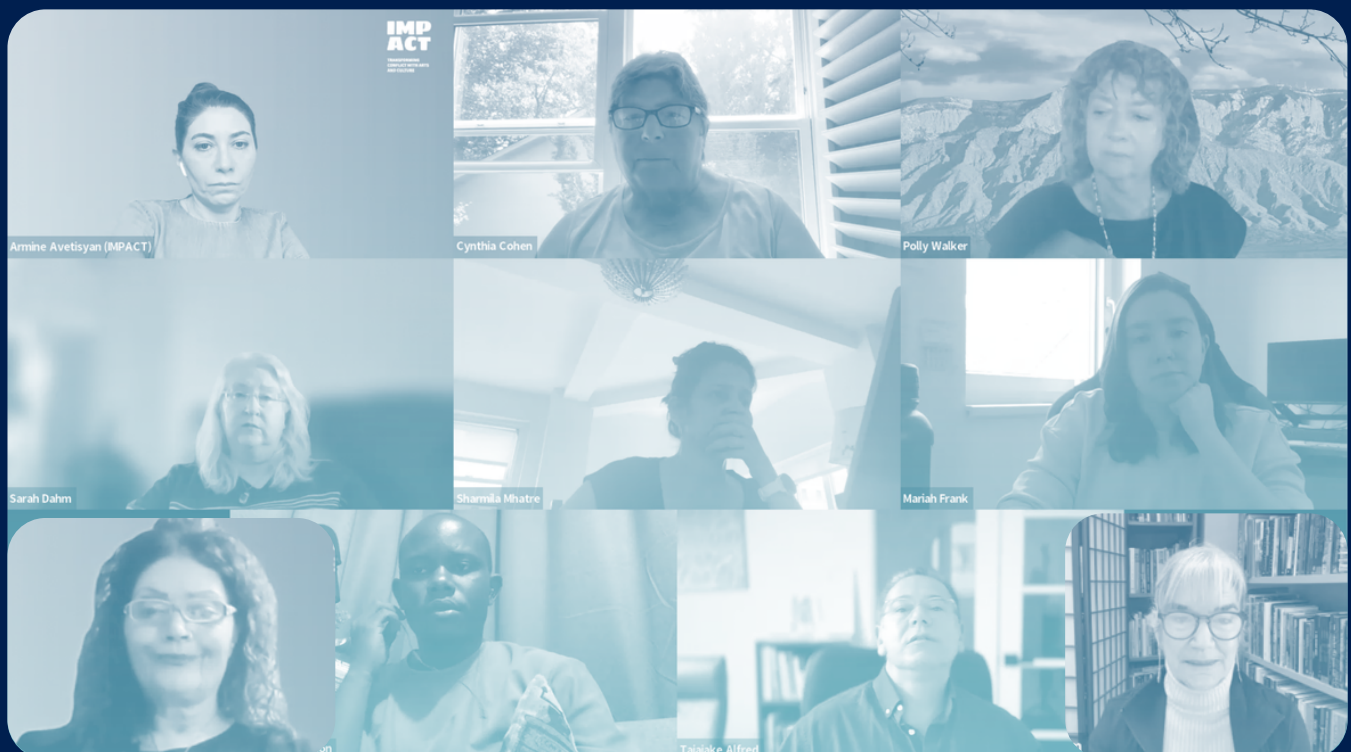


INTRODUCTION

The fifth and final session of the series, explored Indigenous approaches to governance as living alternatives to systems rooted in domination, hierarchy, and extraction.

Through presentations by Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawà:ke Mohawk philosopher, writer, and political strategist) and Dr. Mary Graham (Kombumerri and Wakka Wakka Elder, scholar, and educator), participants were invited to consider governance not primarily as a set of institutions, but as a way of relating—to land, community, ancestors, future generations, and the more-than-human world.

Framed by an opening reflection from Dr. Polly Walker (member of the New Mexico Cherokee Community), the session highlighted Indigenous principles of relationality, reciprocity, autonomy, stewardship, and collective responsibility, offering powerful insights into how societies might cultivate more just, sustainable, and life-affirming futures.



“Indigenous Approaches to Good Governance”

In Numbers

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PARTICIPATED



DR. POLLY WALKER

IMPACT Senior Fellow

OPENING REFLECTIONS: INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE BEYOND DEMOCRACY

- Polly Walker opened the session by introducing herself as a Cherokee descendant whose work is grounded in Cherokee teachings of living in balance and harmony with all beings.
- She reflected on the origins of the session, which emerged from conversations within IMPACT about alternatives to authoritarianism and the limitations of dominant democratic systems, particularly for Indigenous peoples living in settler-colonial states.
- Drawing on her earlier work on racial authoritarianism, she highlighted how democratic institutions have often been used to suppress Indigenous and marginalized communities while privileging dominant groups.
- Rather than seeking a return to unjust systems, she invited participants to imagine forms of governance rooted in justice, sustainability, and collective wellbeing for all.



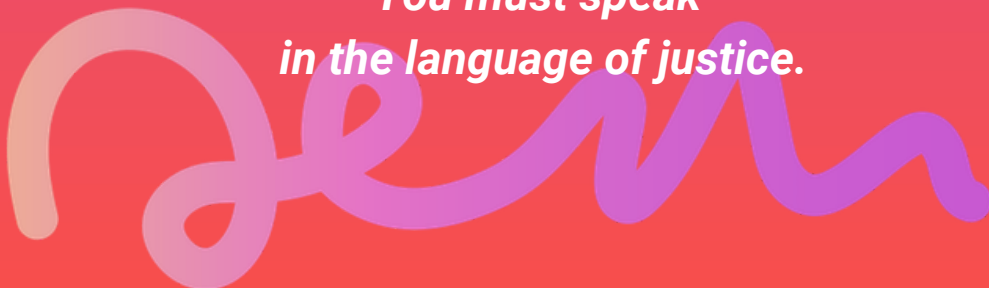
“Rather than return to this type of democracy, our group is envisioning and working towards governance that is just for all.”

“Notice some of the themes that resonate throughout Harjo’s poem: relationality, responsibility, and reciprocity, that include both humans and the more-than-human worlds.”

--Polly Walker--

Polly Wlaker opened the session with an excerpt from Joy Harjo's poem **Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings**.

*Recognize whose lands these are
on which we stand.
Ask the deer, turtles, and the crane.
Make sure the spirits of these lands
are respected and treated with
goodwill.
The land is a being
who remembers everything.
You will have to answer
to your children,
and their children,
and theirs.
The red shimmer of remembering
will compel you up the night
to walk the perimeter of truth
for understanding.
As I brushed my hair
over the hotel sink to get ready,
I heard:
By listening,
we will understand who we are
in this holy realm of words.
Do not parade pleased with yourself.
You must speak
in the language of justice.*



TAIAIAKE ALFRED

Kahnawà:ke Mohawk philosopher, writer, and political strategist

1. REBUILDING THE FIRE: INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE AS CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

- Indigenous governance is not primarily about political institutions or administrative structures; it is about restoring the values, relationships, responsibilities, and ways of being that connect people to each other, their ancestors, and the natural world.
- Governance emerges from a worldview grounded in reciprocity, relationality, and responsibility to place, rather than control, authority, or hierarchy.
- The goal is not simply to recover historical forms of governance, but to revitalize ancestral principles in ways that are meaningful and applicable today.



2. COLONIZATION AS THE DISRUPTION OF RELATIONSHIPS

- Colonization is a deliberate process of erasure that sought not only to take land but also to dismantle Indigenous languages, cultures, governance systems, and relationships.
- Using the metaphor of a communal fire, Taiaiake explained how Indigenous societies once functioned as interconnected systems of language, culture, law, family, and collective responsibility. Colonization scattered these elements like embers, weakening the social and spiritual foundations of community life.
- He emphasized that the deepest impact of colonization was not only structural but relational: it changed how Indigenous people understood themselves and related to one another.

"What we're talking about is really picking up the pieces. You're bringing those embers together. You're breathing life into them, and you're getting that fire going again."

-- Taiaiake Alfred --

STORY: THE FIRE AND THE SCATTERED EMBERS

When Taiaiake was a young man trying to understand how the Mohawk people had come to experience colonization, he asked an Elder a simple but profound question: How did this happen to us? How did a strong, resilient people become subject to displacement, control, and loss?

Rather than answering with historical facts or political analysis, the Elder responded with a story.

He asked Taiaiake to imagine a strong fire burning at the center of a community. The fire represented everything that sustained Indigenous life: language, culture, family, spiritual teachings, governance systems, and relationships to the land. Around the fire stood a circle of stones, symbolizing the laws, leaders, clan mothers, and governance structures that protected and maintained the wellbeing of the community.

For generations, the fire burned brightly.

Then colonization arrived.

Over time, outside forces—patriarchy, racism, Christianity, capitalism, greed, and the drive for territorial expansion—began to chip away at the protective stones. Gradually they penetrated the circle and weakened the fire itself. What had once been a strong, living system became fragmented.

By the time Taiaiake was born, he explained, the fire was no longer burning as one. Instead, there were scattered embers: a family that remembered a ceremony, an Elder who still spoke the language, a story preserved in memory, a teaching recorded in a book. Pieces of a larger whole remained, but they were disconnected from one another.

For Alfred, this image captures both the devastation of colonization and the task facing Indigenous communities today.

The work of Indigenous resurgence is not to recreate the past exactly as it was. It is to gather those surviving embers, breathe life back into them, and rekindle the fire. Language revitalization, cultural renewal, recovering ancestral teachings, restoring relationships, and rebuilding governance structures are all part of that process.

TAIAIAKE ALFRED

3. THE TWO ROW WAMPUM: A VISION OF SHARED SOVEREIGNTY

- Alfred highlighted the Two Row Wampum treaty as a foundational Indigenous framework for coexistence. It envisioned Indigenous and European peoples traveling side by side—like a canoe and a ship on the same river—governed by mutual respect, friendship, and non-interference.
- The treaty represented an early model of shared sovereignty and peaceful coexistence, one that was ultimately violated through settler colonialism, land theft, and policies of erasure.

4. INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE: GATHERING THE EMBERS

- Restoring Indigenous governance begins with gathering the surviving “embers” of ancestral knowledge through language revitalization, cultural renewal, community memory, and intergenerational learning.
- This process requires both acknowledging profound historical loss and actively rebuilding collective strength, identity, and belonging.
- Alfred described resurgence as an ongoing effort to decolonize the mind, recover cultural practices, and reconnect communities to ancestral teachings.

5. GOVERNANCE AS A PRACTICE OF RELATIONSHIP

- Indigenous governance is expressed through everyday practices that cultivate unity, respect, and accountability rather than through rules alone.
- Alfred shared the example of the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen (“Words That Come Before All Else”), a traditional opening that invites participants to acknowledge their relationships with the natural world and bring their minds together before collective decision-making.
- Such practices help restore trust, remind people of shared responsibilities, and orient governance toward balance rather than competition.

6. LEADERSHIP ROOTED IN FUTURE GENERATIONS

- A central principle of Indigenous governance is making decisions with consideration for the wellbeing of future generations.
- Rather than serving short-term interests, leadership is understood as a responsibility to sustain relationships among people, communities, and the more-than-human world over time.
- Governance therefore becomes an ethical practice grounded in care, respect, humility, and long-term stewardship.

THE TWO ROW WAMPUM: A STORY OF PARALLEL PATHS



To illustrate Indigenous understandings of governance and coexistence, Taiaiake Alfred shared the story of the Two Row Wampum Belt, a sacred agreement made when Europeans first arrived in Haudenosaunee territory in the 17th century.

He explained that wampum belts are often misunderstood as decorative objects or forms of currency. In reality, they served as living records of agreements, teachings, and relationships—a kind of library through which knowledge and obligations were passed across generations.

The Two Row Wampum tells the story of two peoples entering into relationship. Against a white background symbolizing peace, two parallel purple rows run the length of the belt. Alfred described these rows as two vessels traveling together down the river of time: an Indigenous canoe and a European ship.

THE TWO ROW WAMPUM: A STORY OF PARALLEL PATHS

The agreement envisioned a future in which both peoples would share the same territory while maintaining their distinct identities, laws, governance systems, and ways of life. The vessels would travel side by side, connected by principles of peace, friendship, and respect, yet neither would attempt to steer, control, or interfere with the other.

For Alfred, the belt represents an early Indigenous vision of shared sovereignty and coexistence—one grounded not in domination, but in mutual recognition and responsibility. It offered a framework for living together while honoring difference.

However, he noted that this relationship was short-lived. As settler colonialism expanded, the principles embodied in the Two Row Wampum were repeatedly violated. The original agreement gave way to land dispossession, cultural suppression, and efforts to erase Indigenous governance systems.

By returning to the story of the belt, Alfred invited participants to reflect on a different foundation for governance—one rooted in respect, reciprocity, and the possibility of multiple peoples traveling together without one seeking to dominate the other.



Q&A HIGHLIGHTS

Q: HOW DO YOU NAVIGATE THE TENSION BETWEEN SHARING INDIGENOUS TEACHINGS AND THE RISK OF APPROPRIATION?

- Alfred reflected on the long history of Indigenous teachings being taken and repurposed by colonial systems. While some individuals have been transformed by Indigenous ways of relating to land and community, colonial institutions have largely continued patterns of extraction and domination.
- He noted that many Indigenous communities are cautious about sharing deeper teachings because they have repeatedly been misunderstood, misused, or reframed to serve colonial agendas.
- Alfred pointed to the example of the Two Row Wampum, whose original meaning of shared sovereignty was later appropriated and reinterpreted within Canadian government policy.
- He also expressed concern about the growing risks posed by digital technologies and AI, which can further detach teachings from their original context.
- As a result, the governance work he is currently involved in prioritizes face-to-face learning and community-based sharing rather than public dissemination.

Q: HOW WOULD YOU OPERATIONALIZE A TRUER INDIGENOUS UNDERSTANDING OF THE WAMPUM? WHAT TOOLS AND PRACTICES HELP A SOCIETY LIVE WITH KINDNESS AND TREAT ONE ANOTHER LIKE FAMILY?

- Alfred emphasized the importance of cultivating relationships with individuals and groups who demonstrate a sincere commitment to living according to these teachings.
- He shared that meaningful change often happens through local relationships—with neighboring communities, municipal leaders, and public officials who are willing to engage respectfully and rethink their assumptions.
- While large colonial structures remain difficult to transform, he sees value in rebuilding relationships at the community level and creating opportunities for people to experience Indigenous values in practice.
- For Alfred, the most important work lies in transforming lived relationships and everyday interactions, allowing principles such as respect, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility to shape public life.

DR. MARY GRAHAM

University of Queensland, Australia

1. LAND AS THE SOURCE OF IDENTITY AND KNOWLEDGE

- Indigenous identity is inseparable from place; people are connected culturally, spiritually, and historically to the lands of their ancestors.
- Land is not simply territory or property—it is the source of life, knowledge, belonging, and responsibility.
- Graham described Aboriginal understandings as holding that people are not separate from the land; rather, the land itself “grew us up” and continues to sustain and shape human life.

2. RELATIONALISM AS THE FOUNDATION OF GOVERNANCE

- One of the core principles of Indigenous governance is relationalism: understanding that all beings exist within networks of relationships and mutual obligations.
- Human beings are responsible for caring for the very land and ecosystems that sustain them. Looking after country is both a practical and spiritual obligation.
- Governance begins with recognizing interconnectedness among people, animals, plants, landscapes, and future generations.

3. COUNTRY AS A LIVING GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

- What may appear as language groups or territorial divisions are, in fact, governance systems shaped by particular ecological regions and relationships to place.
- Governance emerges from understanding and responding to the specific needs, responsibilities, and conditions of each region rather than from centralized authority.



“Aboriginal knowledge systems is a sacralized, ecological, collaborative, self-regulating stewardship system.”

—Mary Graham—

DR. MARY GRAHAM

4. AUTONOMY WITHOUT HIERARCHY

- Indigenous governance is built on the principle of autonomous regard: communities are autonomous yet interdependent.
- No region or group is inherently superior to another; domination and hierarchy are viewed as both irrational and unsustainable.
- Communities are expected to govern themselves while maintaining respectful relationships with neighboring groups.

5. COLLABORATION OVER COMPETITION

- Cooperation is not merely a moral ideal but a practical necessity for collective survival and ecological balance.
- Graham emphasized that overexploitation, competition, and domination undermine the reciprocal relationships needed to sustain both people and the land.
- Indigenous governance therefore prioritizes collaboration, stewardship, and mutual responsibility over competition and accumulation.

6. GOVERNANCE AS HUMAN ORDER-MAKING

- Aboriginal governance systems represent a long-term experiment in "human order-making" developed over tens of thousands of years.
- Governance is not primarily about institutions or power structures, but about creating ways of living together that sustain relationships, balance, and collective wellbeing.
- Culture provides purpose by helping people understand their place in the world and their responsibilities to others.

CORE PRINCIPLES HIGHLIGHTED

- **Relationalism** – all life exists through relationships and reciprocal obligations.
- **Autonomy** – communities govern themselves while respecting the autonomy of others.
- **Balance** – maintaining equilibrium between human needs, community wellbeing, and the natural world.
- **Place** – governance emerges from deep knowledge of and responsibility to specific lands.

ABOUT IMPACT

IMPACT is a diverse global organization, advocating for arts and culture to transform conflict and build more creative and just societies. IMPACT is governed by a diverse and dynamic board comprised of artists, scholars and practitioners in the field of arts, culture and conflict transformation from around the globe, including Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Israel, Kenya, Japan, Serbia, and the Philippines.



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