

A climate of silence



By Nate Smelle

When I first began reporting here in Bancroft in 2012 it was amid the rise of the Idle No More movement's nationwide campaign to raise awareness of Indigenous issues and the Stephen Harper government's abuse of Treaty rights through its omnibus bill, Bill C-45. One of the main points of contention with this legislation was that under the guise of creating 'jobs and growth', it stripped away the government's own ability to protect Canadian waters by removing thousands of lakes, rivers, and streams from federal protection under the Navigable Waters Protection Act. Recalling one of the Idle No More demonstrations I covered in Bancroft's Millennium Park in December 2012, I decided to take a look at some of the photos I had taken at the gathering. As I scanned the images of the 150 or so demonstrators, I thought about how each of them had left the comforts of their homes that cold morning to let the Harper government know that their lack of concern for Indigenous people and the environment was unacceptable. Reminiscing about standing out in the frigid winter weather that morning, I remembered the people I spoke with as well as our conversations about the Harper Conservatives' anti-science agenda and refusal to honour the longstanding Treaties with Indigenous people and First Nations. Reading the signs people were carrying in each of the images, I was reminded of the hopeful feeling I experienced that day as I walked around the park taking pictures and speaking with people. Now, more than a decade later, this hopefulness for the future I once harboured is long gone. Not because we haven't made any progress on Indigenous issues, or the environment since Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was first elected nearly nine years ago; but because an equal if not greater amount of progress has been made by those fighting to suppress and deny the science which helps us navigate our way towards a more healthy and sustainable future. While I was going through the photos of the Idle No More demonstration long ago, I found myself listening to a report by BBC News about a hurricane in Florida. My gaze shifted from the photos on my laptop to the news on the television when I heard the reporter say they expected Hurricane Milton to hit Florida on Oct. 9. 'Milton? Wasn't it named Helene?' I thought to myself. 'Oct. 9? Didn't I just read another report about the recovery efforts being underway?' Paying full attention now, I listened as the reporter explained how Hurricane Milton had intensified to a Category-4 storm in less than 18 hours; and, how it would likely become a Category-5 or even Category-6 hurricane by the time it made landfall. 'Category-6? Isn't a Category-5 the strongest hurricane possible?' Coming across a report by USA Today on Monday, Oct. 7, I confirmed that the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale used to measure the strength of a hurricane was capped at a Category-5. Still, USA Today, reported: 'The hurricane grew very strong, very fast Monday after forming in the Gulf of Mexico, exploding from a 60-mph tropical storm Sunday morning to a powerhouse 180-mph Category-5 hurricane - an eye-popping increase of 130 mph in 36 hours. The rapidly developing hurricane that shows no signs of stopping won't technically become a Category-6 because the category doesn't exist at the moment. But it could soon reach the level of a hypothetical Category-6 experts have discussed and stir up arguments about whether the National Hurricane Centre's long-used scale for classifying hurricane wind speeds from Category-1 to 5 might need an overhaul.' Thinking about how Hurricane Helene - a Category-4 hurricane - had already killed at least 232 people in six states, I imagined the feeling of helplessness that those in its path must be experiencing at the moment. Digging deeper online, I found several reports about former

U.S. president Donald Trump spreading dangerous misinformation about the federal government's recovery efforts, while people were still coping with the aftermath of Helene, and awaiting the arrival of Milton. Having witnessed time and time again how easily politicians like Trump, his running mate JD Vance, and the Conservative Party of Canada's Pierre Poilievre can lie to the people they are supposed to be representing and protecting, I took another look back on my notes about the Harper government's efforts to muzzle scientists back in 2012. What caught my eye buried in the piles of papers I had saved, was an article in the HuffPost entitled, 'EPA Chief Met With Canada's Scientist-Muzzling Ex-Prime Minister Before Scientist Purge'. Highlighted on one of the printed pages was a quote from the Calgary-based environmentalist and author, Chris Turner's 2014 book, *The War on Science: Muzzled Scientists and Wilful Blindness in Stephen Harper's Canada*. Highlighting the dangers of the Harper government's anti-science agenda, Turner wrote: 'Harper's record on environmental regulation is that he thinks there's entirely too much of it, he thinks funding science that gets in the way of your policy goals is no way to run a government, and he's somebody who did extraordinary damage to Canada's environmental regulations nationwide.' There is no denying the value that credible science and technology adds to our society and economy. So why is it that so many of our so called 'leaders' are not willing to acknowledge scientific facts especially those discovered by climate scientists when they stand in the way of the short-term profits of the already obscenely wealthy fossil fuel industry? As I continued searching through my files I stumbled upon a collection of photos from the March for Science protest I attended in Washington, D.C. back in April of 2017. At the top of the folder was a photo showing a stack of protest signs left behind outside the U.S. Capitol building to send a message to the lawmakers inside. Propped up like a flag in the middle of the pile there was one that I remember lured me into to take the photograph. Quoting Spock, the Starship Enterprise's science officer from the sci-fi series Star Trek, it read, 'Insufficient facts always invite danger.' Although I may not feel as hopeful for the future as I did back in 2012, we need to recognize and celebrate those who defend our access to facts. With this in mind I would personally like to extend my sincere gratitude to the members of South Algonquin Township council who voted in support of keeping their constituents informed by continuing to share their meetings online. By listening to the voices of their constituents, South Algonquin council has raised the bar for all municipalities thinking about taking their meetings offline. In turn, they have also shown us that there are still some politicians who understand the true value of transparency in government.