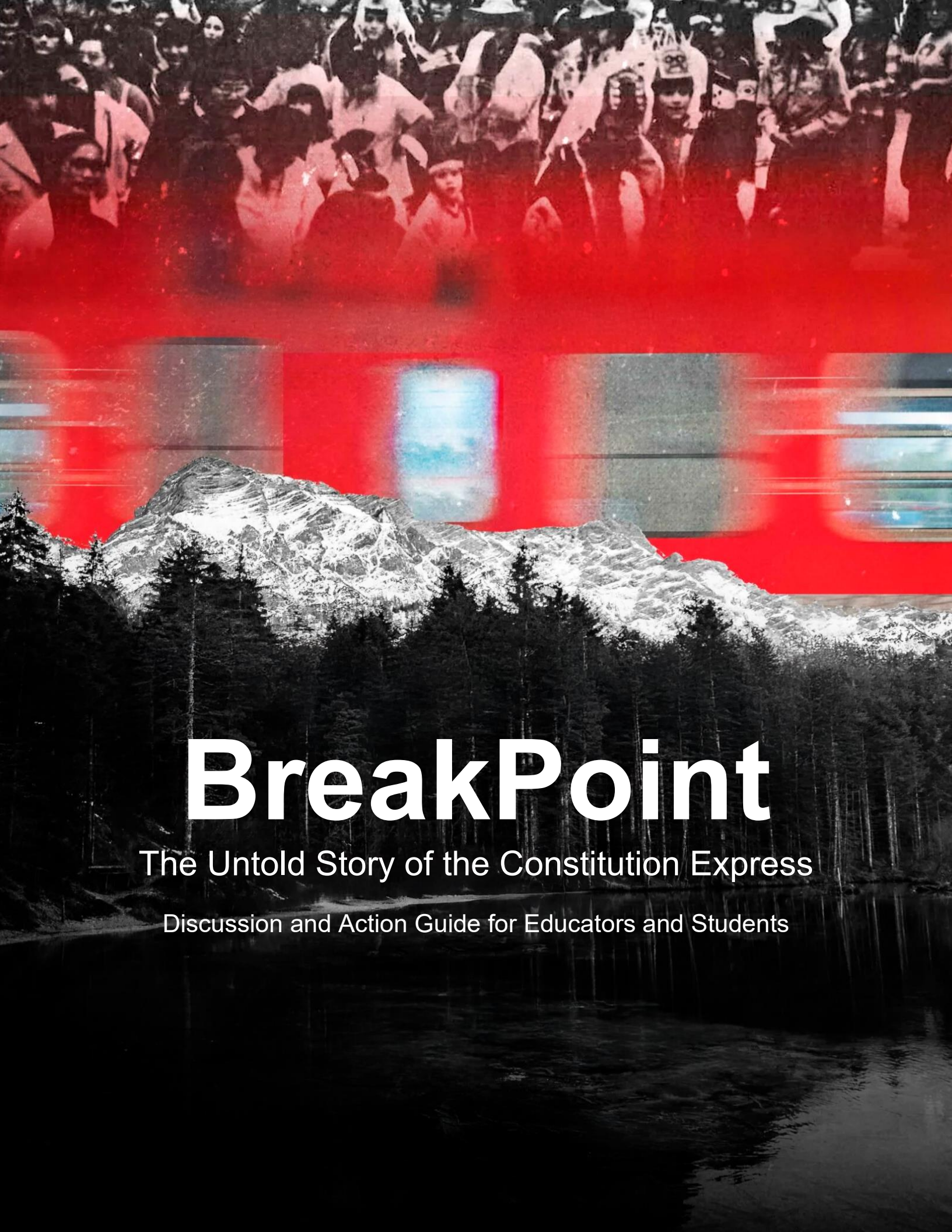

BreakPoint

The Untold Story of the Constitution Express

Discussion and Action Guide for Educators and Students

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Discussion and Action Guide for Educators and Students

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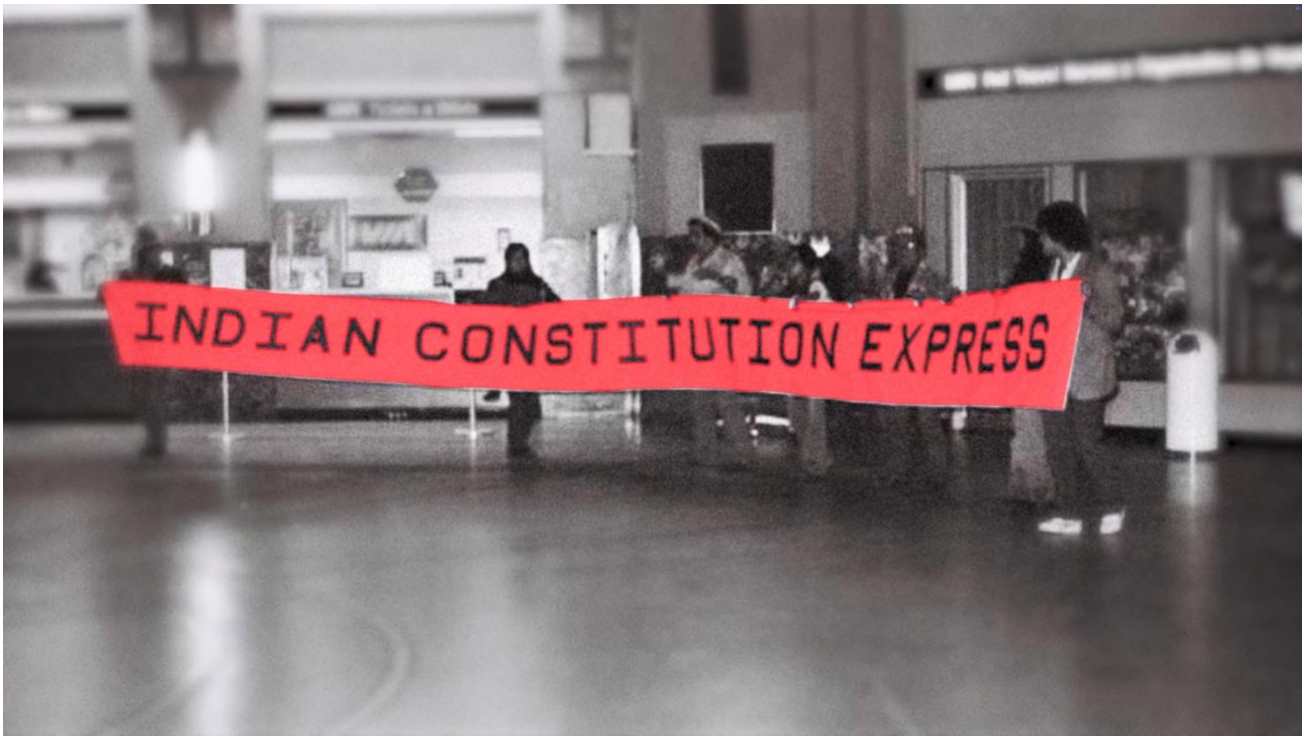

Delegates arriving at the station, 1981. The Constitution Express united Indigenous nations across Canada in a historic effort to defend their rights and bring their concerns to the international stage.

This Educator's Guide accompanies the documentary

BreakPoint: The Untold Story of the Constitution Express.

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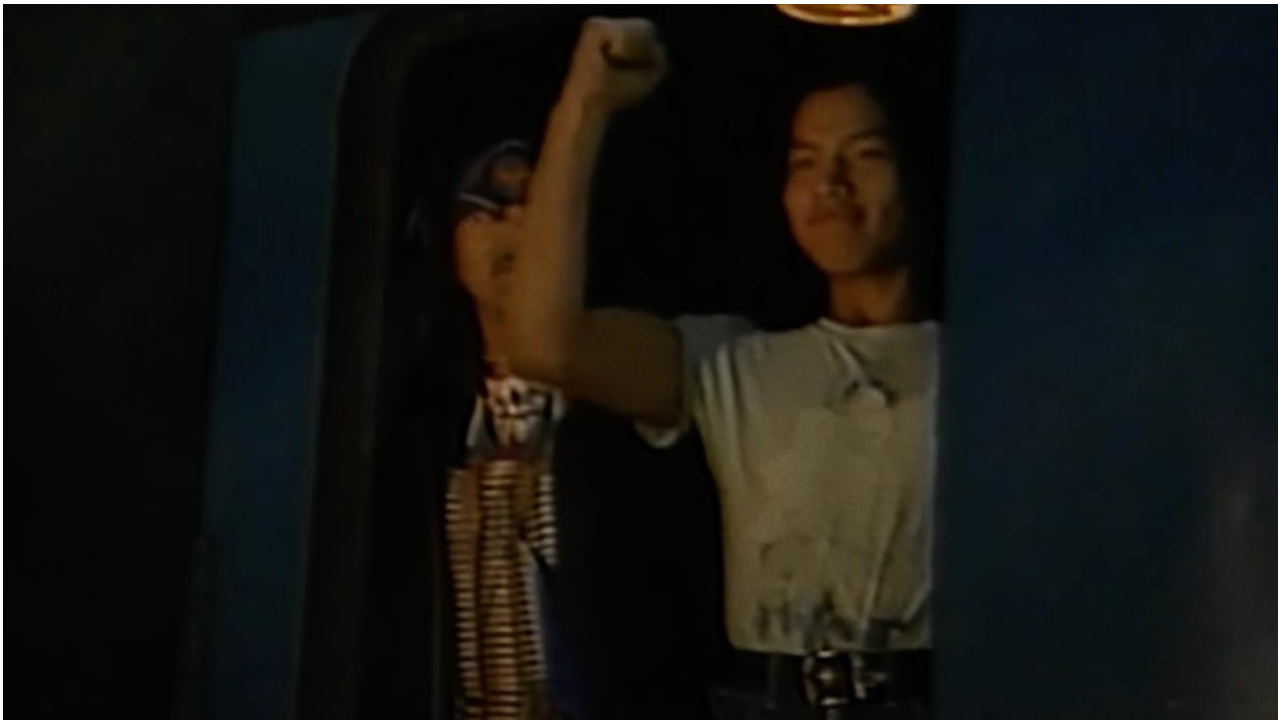

The Constitution Express Arrives in Ottawa, 1980. Source CBC

Acknowledgment

Created with respect and gratitude to the First Nations and Peoples whose voices and histories are shared in this film.

Dedication

This guide is dedicated to the leaders, Elders, activists, and community members whose courage, vision, and persistence continues to assert Indigenous Peoples' self-determination.

We honor those who traveled aboard the Constitution Express and all who worked, often at great personal sacrifice, to ensure that Indigenous voices would be heard in the conversations that helped shape the future.

May the next generation carry forward their courage, wisdom, and belief that another future is always possible.

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Constitution Express Bulletin Nov. 5, 1980. Courtesy of the UBCIC Library.

Purpose of the Guide

This guide accompanies BreakPoint: The Untold Story of the Constitution Express and supports inquiry-driven learning for students in Grades 11 and 12 and at the university level. It is intended for educators in Canada and the United States and can be adapted for use by other interested audiences.

The documentary follows Indigenous organizing during Canada's constitutional debates of 1980–1981, including the events that preceded the movement and its lasting implications. The guide places the Constitution Express within a longer history of colonial law, treaty relationships, and struggles over land and political authority. Students examine the proposals and policies that preceded the Constitution Express, the people and communities who made the movement possible, and the distinction between recognizing rights in a constitution and respecting those rights in practice.

Throughout the guide, students engage with participants' accounts, historical documents, scenes from the film, and additional interviews found on the film's website at https://cwis.org/constitution-express-film/. These sources invite them to consider whose knowledge and authority shaped the movement, how collective action was organized, and what questions about Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty remain open today.

The guide centers Indigenous knowledge and leadership, places the events depicted in the film within broader histories of colonialism, and encourages students to reflect on their own perspectives and responsibilities toward reconciliation and the ongoing struggle for Indigenous rights and social justice.

Curriculum Standards Alignment: Canada and the USA

This guide aligns with curriculum in Social Studies, History, Civics, Indigenous Studies, Law, and English Language Arts. Activities ask students to analyze historical sources, interpret the documentary, and investigate how Indigenous Nations asserted authority over their lands and political futures. The appendices identify specific curriculum standards and connections for British Columbia, Ontario, Washington State, and Oregon.

Canada: The guide aligns with the curriculum addressing Indigenous Peoples–Crown relations, constitutional history, Aboriginal and treaty rights, Indigenous self-government, collective political action, and questions of land and jurisdiction. Students examine the Constitution Express as a major Indigenous-led movement during the constitutional debates of 1980–1981, including how Indigenous Nations organized across communities and regions to assert their rights and political authority. They explore the movement's efforts to influence the constitutional process, the recognition of Aboriginal and treaty rights in Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, and the continuing questions of land, jurisdiction, sovereignty, and self-government that constitutional recognition did not resolve in practice.

United States: The guide aligns with curriculum addressing Indigenous sovereignty, treaty rights, self-government, collective political action, and cross-border Indigenous relationships. Students examine the Constitution Express as a Canadian movement and part of a broader network of relationships among Indigenous Nations and peoples across the Canada–United States border. They analyze how participants challenged government claims to authority, explore the role of cross-border relationships in Indigenous political organizing, and compare these questions with issues in U.S. history and civics, while distinguishing between the two countries' legal and constitutional frameworks.

General Learning Objectives

Through the activities in this guide, students will be able to:

- Explain the political issues surrounding the Constitution Express and analyze how Indigenous Nations and their representatives organized across communities, regions, and borders to assert their rights.
- Analyze how colonial policies and competing claims to authority over land shaped the movement.
- Explore how experiences of personal adversity can influence activism and collective action.
- Use participants' accounts, historical documents, and scenes from the film to develop evidence-based interpretations and analyze how the documentary presents these sources.
- Explain the significance of Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, and identify questions about land, jurisdiction, and self-determination that constitutional recognition did not resolve.
- Reflect on how their understanding has changed and consider what respectful relationships with Indigenous Peoples might require in practice.

Teaching with the Film

Guiding Inquiry and Discussion

Center Indigenous voices: Begin with participants' accounts of their goals, decisions, and experiences. Encourage students to notice differences in perspective and avoid treating any one person as representative of all Indigenous Nations.

Keep land and authority in view: Ask who claims the authority to make decisions about land, waters, resources, and rights, and on what grounds. Tuck & Yang (2012) emphasize that decolonization is not simply a change in awareness or educational practice; it is fundamentally concerned with Indigenous land and life.

Begin with place: Identify the Indigenous Nations connected to the territory where the school is located. Ask students to consider what a land acknowledgment means, what responsibilities might follow from it, and what critiques have been raised about land acknowledgments that become symbolic or routine without corresponding relationships or action.

Distinguish recognition from authority: When discussing Section 35, ask what constitutional recognition changed—and what it did not. Consider who retained decision-making authority over land, resources, jurisdiction, and governance.

Historical Background and Context

Canada's Timeline: Indian Identity and the Indian Act (1850–2026)

KEY MOMENTS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

(1867–1982) Timeline

Confederation and the British North America Act

1867

Canada becomes a country through a colonial framework that does not recognize Indigenous nations as sovereign governments. Indigenous peoples are treated as wards of the state, not as partners in Confederation.

The Indian Act

1876

The federal government consolidates earlier colonial laws into the Indian Act, controlling nearly every aspect of Indigenous life — land, governance, movement, and identity.

Resistance and Survival

1880s–1950s

Despite oppressive policies, Indigenous peoples maintain languages, ceremonies, and governance. Leaders such as the Nisga'a, the Allied Tribes of BC, and the League of Indians of Canada advocate for land rights and recognition.

Section II — Activities

Before Watching the Film

These activities invite students to consider what they already know, encounter key concepts and language, and develop questions to carry with them as they view the documentary.

Activity
Key Terms

Learning Objectives

By completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Explain key terms and concepts that help provide context for the Constitution Express and the constitutional debate.
- Distinguish between related concepts such as sovereignty, treaty rights, and constitutional recognition, recognizing that Indigenous Nations and Canadian governments may understand these concepts differently.
- Use these terms to discuss the events, perspectives, and issues presented in the documentary.

Instructions

- **Brainstorm:** Write the six terms below on the board without showing their definitions. Ask students what they already know, have heard, or associate with each term. Record their ideas and questions without evaluating them at this stage.
- **Match:** Have students work individually or in pairs to match each term with a definition.
- **Discuss:** Review the answers together. Return to the ideas and questions recorded on the board. Invite students to consider whether their initial understandings have changed, where those understandings may have come from, and which concepts they expect to be most important in the film.

Activity

People, Strategies, and Collective Action

Learning Objectives

By completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Explain how different participants contributed to the Constitution Express.
- Connect the movement's goals with the strategies used to defend existing rights and assert Indigenous political authority.
- Develop an interpretation supported by evidence from the documentary.

Instructions

1. Compare viewing notes. In small groups, ask students to review the people charts they completed during the film. Have them identify a person or contribution recorded by several group members and one that only some noticed. Where their notes differ, students should return to the scene or statement they recorded rather than guessing.

2. Build a class map. On the board, write the movement's central goals as students identify them. Ask each group to contribute one strategy shown in the film, the people involved, the audience it sought to reach, and a scene or statement that supports their account. Draw connections between strategies. Place uncertain details and questions in a separate area for later research.

3. Discuss the map. Use two or three of these questions to move beyond a list of individual leaders:

- Why did the movement use different strategies? What could each accomplish?
- How did the work of organizers, community members, legal advocates, and speakers depend on one another?
- Whose contributions are most visible in the documentary? Whose might require other sources to understand?
- What does the movement's approach reveal about Indigenous self-determination and the limits of constitutional recognition?

Activity

Mapping the Constitution Express

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Trace the two routes of the Constitution Express and explain how the movement continued beyond the train journey.
- Research the people, Nations, and organizations documented at different points along the routes.
- Explain how travel, community support, political education, and relationship-building helped strengthen the movement.

Instructions

Divide the class into teams and assign each one a part of the journey:

1. **Vancouver and departure:** Who organized the trains, and what were people being invited to join and support?
2. **Southern route:** Follow the train through places including Calgary and Regina.
3. **Northern route:** Follow the train through places including Edmonton and Saskatoon.
4. **Winnipeg:** How were the trains received, and what happened when the two routes came together?
5. **Ottawa:** What did participants do when they arrived, and whom did they seek to address?
6. **Beyond the trains:** Why did smaller delegations take the movement to New York and, later, to Europe?

Give each team a map and the sources below. Ask them to identify two or three documented places or events in their assigned section. For each, they should record:

- Where and when did it happen?
- What happened there? Was it a train stop, a welcome, a workshop, a protest, or a meeting?
- Which people, Nations, or organizations does the source actually name? What was their role?
- What remains unknown from the sources they consulted?

Teams may also research the Indigenous Nation or Nations with longstanding and continuing relationships to the lands through which their route passes. Students should distinguish between Nations whose territories include these places and Nations or

organizations documented as participating in the Constitution Express; they should not assume participation unless a source confirms it.

Bring the teams together to build one class map showing both train routes, their meeting in Winnipeg, the arrival in Ottawa, and the later international delegations. Each team adds its findings and cites the source for at least one detail.

Close by discussing: What did the movement gain by travelling through communities, building relationships, and organizing across a wide geographic area before reaching Ottawa?

Resources

- Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, Constitution Express Digital Collection, for archival materials.
- “Introduction: The Constitution Express Revisited,” BC Studies, especially pp. 15–17, for documented stops, participants, and the gathering in Winnipeg.
- Millie Poplar, “Reflection,” BC Studies, especially pp. 39–40, for an organizer’s account of life and learning aboard the train.

Photo Courtesy of the UBCIC Library, Constitution Express Digital Collection

Glossary

Aboriginal Rights – Existing rights of Indigenous Peoples recognized and affirmed in Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982. In Canadian law, these rights can arise from Indigenous Peoples' distinctive practices, traditions, customs, and longstanding relationships with their lands and territories. Section 35 recognizes and affirms these rights; it does not create or grant them.

Aboriginal Title – A specific form of Aboriginal right recognized in Canadian law relating to Indigenous Peoples' longstanding occupation of and relationship with their territories. Aboriginal title is distinct from, and does not encompass the full extent of, Indigenous Nations' own laws, jurisdiction, and relationships with their lands.

Assimilation – Policies and practices intended to absorb Indigenous Peoples into the dominant society by suppressing or replacing their cultures, languages, laws, governance, identities, and ways of life.

Band – A legal and administrative designation under Canada's Indian Act for a body of First Nations people recognized by the federal government. A band is not necessarily the same as an Indigenous Nation or a Nation's own traditional system of government, citizenship, or belonging. Many communities use "First Nation" rather than "band" when referring to themselves.

Ceremony – Practices that may include song, dance, prayer, storytelling, gathering, or other forms of cultural and spiritual expression. Ceremonial practices and their meanings vary among Indigenous Nations and communities.

Clan – A kinship and social structure found within some Indigenous Nations. Clan systems, responsibilities, membership, and meanings differ among Nations and should be understood within their specific cultural and political contexts.

Collective Action – People organizing and acting together toward a shared political or social goal.

Colonialism – Systems and processes through which an outside power claims lands, imposes political and legal authority, controls peoples and resources, and attempts to suppress or replace existing cultures, laws, governance, and institutions.

Constitution – The fundamental laws and principles that establish how a state is governed, distribute political and legal authority, and define or recognize rights and responsibilities.

Appendix A

Curriculum Alignment for British Columbia, Canada

The documentary connects most directly with the following British Columbia Social Studies courses. 20th Century World History is referenced in the cross-jurisdiction activity table because they also offer strong entry points for studying constitutional change, rights movements, Canadian identity, and civic participation.

BC Curriculum Area	Primary Curriculum Fit
Contemporary Indigenous Studies	Indigenous self-determination, colonial impacts, resilience, land, identity, well-being, advocacy, and reconciliation.
B.C. First Peoples	B.C. First Peoples histories, governance, cultural resilience, land relationships, colonialism, and resistance.
Law Studies	Section 35, constitutional rights, Indigenous law, Canadian law, legal reform, and individual/collective rights and responsibilities.
Political Studies	Power, authority, governance, ideology, political participation, collective action, and democratic decision-making.
Social Justice	Colonialism, inequity, systems of oppression, advocacy, ethical reflection, and social movements.

Curriculum Framework

- Social Studies Curriculum Standards
- B.C. Grade 12 Social Studies
- Big Ideas and Key Competencies

BREAK POINT

The Untold Story of the Constitution Express

WWW.CONSTITUTION-EXPRESS.COM

CWIS.ORG