

Bill C-92: Recognizing Indigenous authority over child and family services

May 13, 2021

On June 21, 2019, the Government of Canada passed Bill C-92: *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Metis children, youth and families* (Bill C-92 or the Act). The Act officially came into force on January 1, 2020. Bill C-92 is an historic piece of legislation which represents a critical step in recognizing Indigenous jurisdiction over the provision of child and family services.

Below we provide an overview of Bill C-92, summarize the processes required to establish a child and family welfare services law under the Act, and discuss practical implications Indigenous governing bodies may wish to consider.

Bill C-92: Background and objectives

Bill C-92 demonstrates how the federal government is attempting to implement Canada's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The Act affirms the inherent right of self-government of Indigenous groups and gives federal backing to laws of Indigenous groups exercising legislative authority related to child and family services. The Act also sets out principles, or "minimum standards," for the provision of child and family services in relation to Indigenous children, whether those services are delivered pursuant to provincial laws or Indigenous laws. These principles emphasize the best interests of the child, cultural continuity, and substantive equity (section 9).

The Act presents an opportunity for Indigenous groups to pass their own laws and move beyond "delegated" or "devolved" arrangements with provincial authorities that define the current approach to child and family services for many Indigenous groups. The path to exercising that jurisdiction is fairly straightforward, but with many challenges and considerations.

Process for establishing an Indigenous child and family services law

Three key steps are required for Indigenous groups seeking to exercise jurisdiction:

1. Provide notice of intention to exercise legislative authority, pursuant to subsection 20(1).
2. Issue a request, pursuant to subsection 20(2), that Canada and the relevant provincial government enter into a coordination agreement that addresses:
 1. The provision of emergency services;
 2. Measures to enable Indigenous children to exercise their rights effectively;
 3. Fiscal arrangements relating to the provision of child and family services by the Indigenous group; and
 4. Other matters related to the effective exercise of legislative authority.
3. Draft and enact the law pursuant to subsection 18(1).

Practical considerations

1. Funding. While the *Act* embraces the need for sustainable funding for administering the Indigenous law, it does not clarify who will provide that funding. The federal government is currently offering capacity funding to Indigenous groups interested in exercising jurisdiction under C-92. While this initial capacity funding is welcome, the more significant funding issue is who will fund ongoing administration costs once the law is implemented. At present, the provincial and federal governments share responsibility for the cost of delivering child and family services to Indigenous groups. The question of who funds and delivers the services is largely influenced by whether families are located on- or off-reserve, and whether the Indigenous group participates in a delegated arrangement with the relevant provincial authority.

Negotiating a coordination agreement presents an opportunity (or a risk, depending on perspective), for federal and provincial governments to revisit their relative financial obligations. It is also important to remember that provincial governments are not compelled to participate in negotiations of a coordination agreement. At present, there is no binding dispute resolution process in place if negotiations do not succeed.

2. Relationship of laws. In drafting their own laws, Indigenous groups will have the opportunity to depart significantly from the approach found in existing provincial laws to key issues such as apprehensions and how to support children in care. Where there is a conflict between Indigenous and provincial laws for child and family services, section 22 of the *Act* provides that Indigenous laws are paramount to provincial laws, but subsection 21(3) qualifies that this only occurs if the Indigenous group has entered into a coordination agreement, or made "reasonable efforts" to do so for at least one year.

Negotiating coordination agreements provides an opportunity for provinces and Indigenous groups to confirm how their respective jurisdictions and administrations will interact with each other. This could be captured in the coordination agreement itself, as well as in the parties' respective laws, policies, and procedures.

Indigenous groups may also want to consider mechanisms to coordinate jurisdictions with other Indigenous groups where, for example, families include members from different Indigenous groups, each of whom have enacted their own laws.

3. Liability. Persons and organizations exercising authority under provincial laws relating to child and family services generally have the benefit of various types of protections from liability, whether through statute, insurance, employment and service agreements, training, or policies and procedures. In exercising authority under their own laws, Indigenous groups will need to consider how to establish their own approach to managing risks.

Indigenous groups may want to consider how the opportunities and risks associated with exercising jurisdiction under the Act contrasts with the status quo, including delegated arrangements. For those who do proceed with developing their own law, the process of passing a law and negotiating a coordination agreement may also take much longer than one year.

The Government of Canada seems to have acknowledged the scale and scope of work required by announcing \$542 million for a capacity-building fund to assist Indigenous governing bodies with developing legislation and delivery models, participate in coordination agreement tables, engage their communities, and consult outside experts.

Takeaways

Bill C-92 provides an important pathway for Indigenous groups to exercise their inherent rights. The decision to do so requires careful consideration of significant political, legal, administrative, financial and cultural issues.

BLG's dedicated lawyers work extensively in Indigenous law and government relations. Reach out to any of the key contacts below if you have further questions regarding Bill C-92.

By

[Chris Roine, Brett Carlson](#)

Expertise

[Indigenous Law, Government & Public Sector](#)

BLG | Canada's Law Firm

As the largest, truly full-service Canadian law firm, Borden Ladner Gervais LLP (BLG) delivers practical legal advice for domestic and international clients across more practices and industries than any Canadian firm. With over 800 lawyers, intellectual property agents and other professionals, BLG serves the legal needs of businesses and institutions across Canada and beyond – from M&A and capital markets, to disputes, financing, and trademark & patent registration.

blg.com

BLG Offices

Calgary

Centennial Place, East Tower
520 3rd Avenue S.W.
Calgary, AB, Canada
T2P 0R3

T 403.232.9500
F 403.266.1395

Ottawa

World Exchange Plaza
100 Queen Street
Ottawa, ON, Canada
K1P 1J9

T 613.237.5160
F 613.230.8842

Vancouver

1200 Waterfront Centre
200 Burrard Street
Vancouver, BC, Canada
V7X 1T2

T 604.687.5744
F 604.687.1415

Montréal

1000 De La Gauchetière Street West
Suite 900
Montréal, QC, Canada
H3B 5H4

T 514.954.2555
F 514.879.9015

Toronto

Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West
Toronto, ON, Canada
M5H 4E3

T 416.367.6000
F 416.367.6749

The information contained herein is of a general nature and is not intended to constitute legal advice, a complete statement of the law, or an opinion on any subject. No one should act upon it or refrain from acting without a thorough examination of the law after the facts of a specific situation are considered. You are urged to consult your legal adviser in cases of specific questions or concerns. BLG does not warrant or guarantee the accuracy, currency or completeness of this publication. No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior written permission of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. If this publication was sent to you by BLG and you do not wish to receive further publications from BLG, you may ask to remove your contact information from our mailing lists by emailing unsubscribe@blg.com or manage your subscription preferences at blg.com/MyPreferences. If you feel you have received this message in error please contact communications@blg.com. BLG's privacy policy for publications may be found at blg.com/en/privacy.

© 2026 Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. Borden Ladner Gervais LLP is an Ontario Limited Liability Partnership.