Indigenous Governance: Authority Beyond the Table

Who holds decision-making power and accountability?



November 4, 2026
Clinical Trials Ontario (CTO) Conference


Self-Location



Act I —
The Invitation

What are we really being invited to do?

An invitation can open a door — without transferring any power.



ADVISORY

Asked for perspective. Others retain the final decision.

AUTHORITATIVE

Holds a defined mandate to shape, make and answer for decisions.

The tension between advice and authority

Advice

Perspective is welcomed; decision power stays elsewhere.

Tokenism

Presence can become symbolic when influence is undefined.

Self-determination

Authority changes who sets priorities, makes choices and carries accountability.

II

Act II —
Advice Is Not Sovereignty

Understanding the distinctions

Consultation

Seeking input without transferring decision power.

Participation

Involvement in the process without final authority.

Shared governance

Collaborative decisions with authority explicitly shared.

Indigenous authority

Sovereignty and self-determination exercised in governance.

Governance spectrum: from advice to authority

Consultation

one-way advice

Participation

invited voice, no final say

Shared governance

joint decision frameworks

Indigenous sovereignty

full authority + accountability

Power grows only when mandate, decision rights and accountability move with it.

III

Act III — Governance in Practice

The Grandmothers’ Council

A council model rooted in matriarchal collective wisdom, relational accountability and intergenerational responsibility.

AUTHORITY

Distinctions-based. Guidance versus direction. Trust in local decision-making.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Make answerability to community visible — alongside the challenges of resourcing, scope and institutional uptake.

WCHRI’s Indigenous Governing Council

A governance body within Women’s College Hospital Research Institute focused on Indigenous health research and policy.

ROLE

Define priorities, standards and the scope of council decision-making.

MECHANISM

Connect authority to transparent accountability, community relationships and research impact.

The proposed CANReview model

A concept for moving review from consultation toward shared Indigenous authority.



Implementation must specify jurisdiction, resourcing, legal alignment and how disagreements are resolved — before participation can become power.

IV

Act IV —
A Practical Redesign Framework

Moving from advisory inclusion to authority

01

Decision authority

Establish Indigenous authority at governance tables.

02

Community accountability

Define who is answerable, to whom, and how.

03

Balanced power

Create shared structures with explicit decision rights.

04

Sovereignty in practice

Institutionalize authority in policy and everyday practice.

Key steps in the redesign process

01	**Assess**	Map current structures and power dynamics.
02	**Co-design**	Engage Indigenous leadership in the framework.
03	**Reform**	Align law and policy with authority and accountability.
04	**Evaluate**	Use Indigenous metrics to monitor effectiveness.

“The question is not whether Indigenous Peoples have a seat at the table, but who holds authority at that table, what decisions are theirs to make, and to whom they are accountable.”

Thank you.

Questions, reflection, and discussion

What would change if authority — not just participation — became the starting point?