This article was originally published as: Alexander, D. (2018). Remembering the work of our Elders: Arthur Manual. The Vancouver Observer.

Retrieved from:
https://www.vancouverobserver.com/%5Btermalias-raw%5D/remembering-work-our-elders-arthur-manuel
One of the great elder statesmen of social change whose vision and persistence has made a difference in our world is Arthur Manuel, who passed away suddenly in January 2017.

Arthur was the son of the internationally renowned Indigenous leader, George Manuel. Born in 1951 on the Neskonlith reserve in Secwepemc territory (near Kamloops) of a Ktunaxa mother and a Secwepemc father, Arthur studied at Concordia University and at Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto.

He began protesting while still in residential school; at 16, he sought to lead a hunger strike against the substandard food he encountered there. In the early 1970s, he became
president of the national Native Youth Association and occupied the head offices of the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa. Other highlights included being elected four times as Chief of Neskonlith, and three times as chair of Shuswap Tribal Council. He also served as spokesperson for the Interior Alliance of indigenous nations in the south-central Interior of BC, and co-chaired the Assembly of First Nations Delgamuukw Implementation Strategic Committee (DISC), seeking to compel the federal government to act on that landmark decision of the Supreme Court.

While spokesperson for the Interior Alliance and the Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade (INET), Arthur pioneered initiatives on indigenous logging, expansion of indigenous territorial authority, and the macro-economic dimensions of indigenous rights at an international policy level. Manuel was also the lead author of two books: Unsettling Canada, A National Wake-up Call, and The Reconciliation Manifesto: Recovering the Land, Rebuilding the Economy, both with Grand Chief Ronald Derrickson of the West Bank First Nation. The first of these was a non-fiction bestseller, and the second was published posthumously.

Internationally, Manuel participated in the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues from its beginning, and served as co-chair of the Global Indigenous Caucus of the UN and of the Forum’s North American Indigenous Peoples caucus. He made submissions on human rights violations against indigenous peoples by Canada to UN human rights bodies, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and was an active participant in the several Conferences of the Parties of the Convention on Biodiversity.

Since 2003 until his passing, he served as spokesperson for the previously Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade (INET), a network of indigenous nations working on the international level to achieve recognition of indigenous title and rights. Working through INET, Manuel succeeded in having indigenous title and treaty rights injected into international financial forums. Three of INET’s briefs were accepted by the World Trade Organization and one by the North American Free Trade Agreement, showing how Canada’s failure to recognize and compensate indigenous peoples for the lumber taken off their traditional lands was a form of subsidy to the lumber industry. These rulings set important precedents for the recognition of indigenous title and rights in Canada. Manuel’s pioneering work remains a crucial issue today as indigenous peoples were totally left out of the recently established U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

This focus on intervening at the international level, something his father also pursued, set him apart from many other First Nations leaders. Whereas some of them focused on negotiating land treaties, the pace of which has proved glacial, Manuel sought to shame Canada in international forums – particularly through leveraging the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) – showing that Canada’s policies have violated international human rights.
While he was an indefatigable activist, he never sought change through violence. He accepted that the newcomers had a right to live here, but argued tirelessly that they needed to recognize indigenous peoples’ land and human rights. Moreover, he felt strongly that the key to lifting indigenous peoples out of poverty and out of the various social challenges left as a byproduct of colonialism and the residential school system was to have much greater control over their land, and to derive a much bigger proportion of the resource rents from these territories. Throughout his life Manuel was a major proponent of community economic development and food security on traditional indigenous lands, a perspective he shared with his co-author, Ronald Derrickson.

I am grateful to Arthur Manuel’s widow, Nicole Schabus, for providing additional information for this article. Nicole is the co-editor of Whose Land Is It Anyway? A Manual for Decolonization produced for the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC (FPSE).