



Truth and Reconciliation is Canada's last chance to get it right

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There are good and bad things in our society, successes and failures. But there is only one fundamental reality that remains unaddressed. That is the situation of indigenous peoples.

This is the single most important issue before us, whether we are recently arrived in Canada or have been here for centuries. This is the prime issue on which we should be judging governments and potential governments.

And we have been warned repeatedly.

There have been thousands of speeches, addresses and court cases over the last 150 years in which indigenous leaders have laid out the situation. And there is a remarkable consistency in these aboriginal arguments, as well as clarity and generosity, and what I would call patience. Patience as we have repeatedly acted badly on almost every front, attempting to destroy indigenous cultures. We have done nothing to earn the politeness and patience with which we have been treated.

The 382-page summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report is perfectly clear. It is written with elegance. There is nothing mysterious or extravagant in its 94 recommendations. Its use of the term cultural genocide is clearly explained. The definition used is reasonable and the facts are undeniable.

Their recommendations are both specific and broad, precisely because the aim of the residential schools was specific and broad. After all, the system was designed to destroy indigenous civilization. So what the commissioners call for is designed to deal with that breadth. And their arguments dovetail with the recommendations of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which in turn dovetail with those of the 1977 Berger Commission, *Northern Frontier*, *Northern Homeland*.

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As I said, we have been warned. Repeatedly. We have chosen not to listen and not to act. Is this our last chance? Quite possibly.

Commissioners Murray Sinclair, Marie Wilson and Wilton Littlechild are trying to make it easy for us. Reconciliation, they explain, is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples. This requires an "awareness of the past, acknowledgment of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes and action to change behaviour." We must change behaviour, each of us. Then we must make our governments change behaviour.

Think about it. There is nothing to stop us from rectifying educational underfunding, adopting a respectful approach toward the reform of the education system, concentrating on how to remove the barriers to postsecondary education. In a global era of endangered languages, we are among the worst offenders in the world. Within what we call Canada, there are some 55 indigenous languages – not imported such as English and French, but born here. Some 45 are in danger. Yet our government spends only \$9.1-million to support all 55. We spend hundreds of millions of dollars in support of French and English through a multitude of programs such as English as a second language and French immersion, which is as it should be. The problem is not what we are doing. It is what we are not doing.

We know that the criminal-justice system doesn't work for indigenous people. We know the resulting statistics – the prison numbers, the disastrous effects of sentencing policies. Nothing about the current situation in prisons is an accident or inevitable. It is the direct result of government policy. And when policies fail, you change them. That we do not change them is a matter of choice. We know that we need to understand why aboriginal women are being murdered and victimized in such numbers. This is not a matter to be solved by policing. The inquiry being called for would be an attempt to get at what is wrong, yet out of sight. Then we could all set about changing the situation.

We know that the curricula in schools and universities do not reflect the reality of the country. Curricula are always intellectual constructs, often ideological interpretations. Ours, for example,

largely exclude the fundamental building block of our society – that is, the indigenous reality, past and present

All of this is a matter of choice and of policy. Where are the policies? Why have these choices not been made? Because our political culture continues to marginalize indigenous issues. Why? Because it remains fixated on outdated concepts of what is at stake. We are still acting like settlers who wish the indigenous reality would evaporate. And our civil service, in particular the ministries of aboriginal affairs and justice, remain immersed in the old culture of power – a culture in which Canada can win only if indigenous people lose. They must lose power, land, treaty rights. All in the name of an elusive European concept of how a nation-state is supposed to work. This model – our governmental official model – does not reflect or suit the Canadian reality. Ask yourself this simple question: Why would we want to erase treaty rights? We all signed these treaties. We are all treaty people. We all lose as that Canadian model is erased.

Over \$100-million of your money is spent every year to fund federal lawyers to fight against indigenous people being treated with respect. At the same time, \$1-billion allocated by Parliament for spending on aboriginal social programs was simply withheld over the past five years. The combination of these two sums tells you what our policy is.

Our lawyers and civil servants are still fighting to extinguish treaty rights as the price for any settlement. Yet the large 2002 Cree-Quebec Agreement – *La paix des braves* – was done without extinguishing rights. The Quebec government used its imagination and acted ethically. The Canadian government cannot bring itself to do either.

Our governments attempted to ignore the recommendations of the 1996 Erasmus Royal Commission. We allowed them to do this. What do any of us think is going to happen if once again we, as citizens, allow government to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by doing nothing? There is a wise comment in the commissioners' report – "At stake is Canada's place as a prosperous, just and inclusive democracy within [the] global world."

Does anyone really imagine that we will get through the celebrations of 2017 without being ridiculed at home and abroad if we have not begun urgently to listen and to act on the indigenous front? Already I see growing signs of this as I travel from country to country. No matter where I go, people question me – *What's wrong with Canada? Why are you acting this way?* Our reputation around the world and our respect for ourselves is at stake.

The Commission's report is very clear about how reconciliation works – respectful relationships, restoring trust, reparations, concrete actions leading to societal change. To put it bluntly, reconciliation without restitution would be meaningless. It is not so difficult to work out what restitution means. Part of it is laid out in this report. Above all, it is not about winners or losers. If indigenous peoples have more and do better, we will all do better.

In 1996, Georges Erasmus and his fellow commissioners wrote, "Canada is a test case for a grand notion – the notion that dissimilar peoples can share lands, resources, power and dreams while respecting and sustaining their differences. The story of Canada is the story of many such

peoples, trying and failing and trying again, to live together in peace and harmony. But there cannot be peace or harmony unless there is justice.”

Since then, indigenous peoples have more than played their part – leading the way with constructive arguments, developing an ever larger new leadership, re-establishing their cultures, winning repeatedly at the Supreme Court. The rest of us have done very little.

And the Canadian people – you and I – have not taken the stand we need to take. We have not given that fundamental instruction – the instruction of the ethical, purposeful voting citizen. Justice Sinclair and his colleagues have shown us what to do. We are the only barrier to action being taken.

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