

Answering Calls to Action

By Brock Weir

Since the discovery of the remains of 215 Indigenous children in the grounds of a Kamloops residential school, reaction from coast to coast, from First Nations and settlers alike, has been one of horror ? but also of raising questions about what happens next.

Some were looking for words from the Prime Minister and the Pope to act as the next stone on a path to healing, but were undoubtedly left disappointed when their words offered little more than what has already been said.

?The sad discovery further raises awareness of the pains and sufferings of the past,? said Pope Francis on Sunday. ?May the political and religious authorities of Canada continue to collaborate with determination to shed light on that sad story and humbly commit themselves to a path of reconciliation and healing.

?These difficult moments represent a strong appeal for all of us to move away from the colonizing model and also from the ideological colonization of today, and walk side-by-side in dialogue, in mutual respect, and in the recognition of the rights and cultural values of all daughters and sons of Canada.?

While the Government of Canada said the Pope's words were not enough, the Prime Minister offered some of his own just a few days earlier to mark the start of National Indigenous History Month.

?The recent, distressing news? is a painful reminder that the impacts of residential schools are still felt today,? said the Prime Minister. ?Sadly, this heartbreaking discovery is not an exception or an isolated incident. Over decades, thousands of Indigenous children were taken from families and communities, and everything was stolen from them. We must all unreservedly acknowledge this truth and address these historical and ongoing wrongs so we can build a better future.

?The government continues to work with Indigenous peoples to build a true nation-to-nation, Inuit Crown, government-to-government relationship ? one based on the affirmation of rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership. We must continue to learn about and support various existing governments, laws, and traditions that govern Indigenous nations to help Indigenous peoples build capacity to implement their vision of self-determination.?

While Mr. Trudeau noted investments made to ?close gaps in housing, health and education? for Indigenous communities, the simple fact is it is not enough. One only needs to look as far as the lack of clean water in many Indigenous communities as well as lack of mental health care in the face of soaring suicide rates and other markers.

We saw several demonstrations take place over the past weekend in solidarity with our Indigenous peoples ? some organized by First Nations individuals themselves and others by settlers ? each with an individual message under a unified umbrella.

Images and videos depicting the topping of the statue of Egerton Ryerson from the Toronto university which currently bears his name might be the ones that stick in our collective consciousness from the last few days, but others had a simple message for everyone:

?We ask you to step forward and do something in solidarity with us,? said Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley of Turtle Clan, who carries the Spirit Name of Head or Leader of the Fireflower. ?We need Canadians to become familiar with the TRC (Truth & Reconciliation Commission). It gave you 94 calls to action, something to do. If you haven't read it, I encourage you. It's free. Learn what was suggested in there because we knew this time would come. This is one of many discoveries that are going to turn up across the country.?

The calls to action should be, at minimum, required reading to both spur action and also the asking of very important questions that

need to be posed to the elected officials we task with providing the answers.

If you're a settler, finding some way to have a positive impact on reconciliation can seem like an overwhelming task, but it doesn't need to be.

Contained within the Calls to Action are several things individuals and governments can do to forge a better path ahead, including developing age-appropriate curriculum so students can learn what is so vital to know about residential schools, treaties and the historical and contemporary contributions Indigenous peoples have made to Canada.

That just one example offered by the Commission.

The development of youth programs with appropriate government dollars to deliver programs and services on reconciliation, along with the development of a national network of such groups to share best practices, is another.

Business leaders have been called upon to go into "meaningful consultation" to build "respectful relationships" with Indigenous peoples before going forward with economic development projects; to ensure that Indigenous peoples have equitable access to jobs; and provide education for management and staff on the realities of Indigenous history, including residential schools, for intercultural skills, conflict resolution, human rights and anti-racism policies.

Not exactly re-inventing the wheel.

But the gears in our governmental machinery move slowly "and needlessly so.

Was a Commission required to call on the Feds to acknowledge that Indigenous rights include language rights?

How about to recommend all levels of government to "enable residential school survivors and their families to reclaim names changed by the residential school system" by waving the costs currently in place for the name-change process?

Or that sustainable funding just might be needed to address the "physical, mental, emotional support, and spiritual harm" caused by ripping children from their families' arms to be placed in the residential school system?

Or that Indigenous healing practices might just have a place in determining the best health care path for Indigenous persons, should they request it?

Had the Calls to Action regarding education, calls that were not new to the TRC list, been heeded some time ago, the Commissioners might have had significantly less work cut out for them with education begetting action.

Perhaps, with sufficient education programs in place, vocal demonstrations over First Nations communities still being without a reliable supply of safe drinking water, not to mention tragically high suicide rates in these communities, would have been as loud and prominent as those related to getting fuel from Alberta's oil sands from Point B.

At the very least, a 10-minute read of the 94 Calls to Action "a lengthier read time if you choose to delve deeper, and you should" will indeed make you better equipped to ask questions, make informed decisions on the governments you want to represent you, and even inspire your own ideas on how, if I can borrow an expression born out of the pandemic, to build a nation of nations better.

For more, visit trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.