

Encouraging and fostering Truth & Reconciliation

by BROCK WEIR

Canada has come a long way since Orange Shirt Day first gained traction across the country as a way to build awareness of the residential school system and what really happened behind the walls of such institutions.

The Day was first brought forward by residential school survivor Phyllis Jack ? the name of which was inspired by a new orange shirt given to her by her grandmother, which was subsequently stripped off her and tossed aside on her first day there.

While the name Orange Shirt Day persists in many parts of the country, and orange shirts of various designs, symbolism, and legends, most commonly ?Every Child Matters?, are the order of the day, the observance itself gave way to National Day for Truth & Reconciliation in 2021, inspiring a greater national movement on such an important path we all need to walk together.

How the day is marked varies according to which part of the country you call your own, and where you work. As a statutory holiday, of course, Federal employees have the day off, as do government employees in Alberta, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. If you happen to live in British Columbia, Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, the Northwest Territories and Yukon, chances are you probably have the day off as well.

Not us here in Ontario, alas, but that has, in my opinion, some benefits ? making the effort to carve time out of your workday, or delaying your trip home to observe, seems to have a bit of added poignancy.

September 30 is an extraordinary day where so many of us have to listen to hard truths, reconcile ourselves with some of the darker parts of our collective history, some of which is diametrically opposed to what we learned in school, and a chance to brainstorm collectively what we can do to make the world, not just what we now call Canada, a better place for all.

As it's typically a workday for us media people, I find we sometimes approach the event from a slightly different angle than attendees at large. While we're attuned to the message, of course, we also have an eye on attendance, crowd chatter, and even the ambiance of where these observances are held.

One observance that had the most impact on me was the first one I attended back in 2021 at Aurora Town Park. A popular greenspace where the community has gathered for an incalculable number of observances since it was first established in the last quarter of the 1800s had great resonance, underscoring how far we've collectively moved the dial.

But that's not what moved me the most.

As Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley, Elder Pat Floody, and others shared very personal stories, the evening's sunset backlit the nearby Wells Street School building which still presides over the park ? a school which operated concurrently to the residential school system and for more than a decade after the last one was shuttered.

Words illustrating the atrocities that went on within such residential schools could not have been in starker contrast to the educational edifice a stone's throw away. It was hard not to think about how the students who walked the halls at Wells had such a vastly different educational experience, quite possibly having no inkling of what their Indigenous peers were going through.

That first year, just about every piece of grass at the Park had been claimed by those wishing to take part in the gathering ? the discoveries at Kamloops still fresh in the minds of many ? but crowds have generally ebbed with each subsequent year. (Although, in my estimation, there was a slight uptick in attendance at this year's gathering held at nearby Aurora Town Square)

But, why?

Is it a matter of the old hackneyed 'been there, done that' school of thought? Is it a matter of what Wheatley has previously noted as 'news fatigue' as more and more stories of abuses have come out?

Or was it this, on the tenth anniversary of the Final Report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, including its 94 Calls to Action therein, that the sheer lack of visible, demonstratable action has led to apathy?

Perhaps.

Take two contrasting statements released by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition on September 30.

'The Residential School System' a product of big government, 'Ottawa-knows-best' approach' led to horror and heartbreak,' said one. 'That abuse of state power tore families apart, silenced languages and shattered lives. True reconciliation is about restoring control to Indigenous peoples over their own lives' control that should always have been theirs' and partnering to deliver real results.

'Working side by side, we will end the government overreach resulting in horrors like the Residential School system. We will acknowledge the survivors and pursue reconciliation: unlocking responsible resource development with willing Indigenous partners, creating good-paying jobs, building revenue for communities, and protecting firearms rights needed for hunting and traditional ways of life. On the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, we commit to healing historical wrongs by unleashing opportunities for all Indigenous peoples as true partners in prosperity.'

And the other?

'The federal government is moving forward on the important work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, including supporting Indigenous communities to uncover unmarked and undocumented graves and burial sites at residential schools. We are advancing the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act.

'We are building together' in health care, housing, education, and economic opportunity' upholding Indigenous rights and empowering communities with security and prosperity. Canada's new government will be a steadfast partner by respecting self-determination, by prioritising Indigenous equity and co-ownership as vital principles of building, and by recognising that true partnership first requires shared understanding and that building Canada requires Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices to lead in the shared stewardship of this land.

'Because it is vital that we build, but equally vital how we build' with Indigenous leadership, prosperity, and opportunity being foundational. Reconciliation is a generational task' lived and practised every day.'

The first statement came from Opposition Leader Pierre Poilievre, while the second came from Prime Minister Mark Carney. While both underscored the importance of Indigenous prosperity, it was encouraging at the very least that the PM acknowledged there is more work to be done on addressing the Calls to Action.

Citing the residential school system as purely an example of government overreach' sidestepping, of course, the role churches played in this debacle, while also tying it to party platform planks' shows, in my opinion, a lack of vision for what's truly needed for the reconciliation challenges ahead, and needlessly adds fuel to an already politicized fire.

Indigenous peoples have every reason to be skeptical of getting true action from their leaders at this point, regardless of party, but I know which statement I found more encouraging.

We may have come a long way from the first Orange Shirt Day in 2013, but we still have a long, long way to go' and leaders need

to meet the moment.