

Truth and Reconciliation Commission - Cont'd



Canada in "a relationship based on the knowledge of our shared history, a respect for each other and a desire to move forward together" as promised nine years ago.

Words are not enough. Reconciliation requires deliberate, thoughtful and sustained action. Political action will be required to break from past injustices and start the journey toward reconciliation.

The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also recognizes the urgent need to respect and promote the rights of indigenous peoples affirmed in treaties and agreements with other nations.

To this end, we call upon the Government of Canada, on behalf of all Canadians, to jointly develop with Aboriginal peoples a Royal Proclamation of Reconciliation to be issued by the Crown.

The proclamation would build on the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which stated in no uncertain terms that all lands which had not been purchased or ceded to the Crown, were reserved for the Aboriginal inhabitants of the land.

Through the course of time however these agreements were disregarded and ignored by Canada's governments.

As we have learned, governments took further steps to hinder the expression and strength of Aboriginal sovereignty through a variety of means, one of which was the residential school system.

The courts have recognized this history and upheld the nationhood and the rights of Aboriginal people in their legal decisions. Now it is time for Canadian governments and Canadian society to do their part. This Royal Proclamation of Reconciliation would reaffirm and restore a commitment to the nation-to-nation rela-

tionship between Aboriginal peoples and the Crown.

In addition to adopting and implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation, we call for the proclamation to include a repudiation of the concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples such as the doctrine of discovery, to renew or establish Treaty relationships based on principles of mutual recognition and mutual respect, and to reconcile Aboriginal and Crown constitutional and legal orders to ensure that Aboriginal peoples are full partners in Confederation.

Survivors, their families and their communities are looking to our political leaders to display the conviction and the courage to honour the commitments made to Aboriginal people in Canada - to start a new chapter in the story of Canada; one that we can all be proud of.

Political will, however, can only be sustained by the wishes of the people who demand change. We must all call for the ongoing progress of reconciliation, regardless of political affiliation, cultural background or personal history of connection to this dark history.

Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem - it involves all of us.

Our recommendations should not be seen as an itemization of national penance, but as an opportunity to embrace a second chance at establishing a relationship of equals: an opportunity for Canadians to prove to themselves and to the international community that Canada respects and protects the cultures of all peoples within it.

We must accept the challenge of enacting effective solutions to the cycles of violence, abuse and poverty experienced

too often and too disproportionately by Aboriginal people.

We therefore call upon the prime minister of Canada to issue an annual "State of Aboriginal Peoples" report, which would outline the government's plans for advancing the cause of reconciliation.

Many recommendations put forward by our commission include detailed public reports on the progress of the reconciliation process. In this way, some aspects of reconciliation will be manifested as concrete goals, against which the efficacy of government actions can be measured.

These annual reports would include: details of the state's care for Aboriginal children, information on funding of education for Aboriginal children on and off reserves, evidence on the economic attainments of Aboriginal peoples in Canada compared to non-Aboriginal people, action on the problem of overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in custody and the justice system - especially Aboriginal youth.

Also, the reduction of the gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities with respect to key health indicators, and the reduction of the rate of criminal victimization of Aboriginal people, including information related to homicide and family violence victimization.

While we are hopeful that these recommendations will be adopted, we realize that committing to annual progress reports will be the source of some apprehension for political leaders. Regular evaluations will be unequivocal in showing progress or the lack of it. This, however, is precisely the point.

Again, all the people in Canada must be clear, loud, and united in expressing their heartfelt belief that reconciliation SHOULD happen. I ask you today to

embrace this statement: you don't have to believe that reconciliation WILL happen, you need to believe that reconciliation SHOULD happen.

Those seeking or holding office must understand that reconciliation must be a priority from the highest to the most local levels of government. Our leaders must not fear this onus of reconciliation. The burden is not theirs alone to bear, rather, reconciliation is a process that involves all parties of a this new rela-

tionship.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people from coast to coast to coast, the young and the elderly, are interested in taking part of the discussion about reconciliation and being part of making reconciliation a reality.

The eyes of the world and the gaze of history is upon us. What we do now and in the years ahead matters a great deal. It matters not only for those who are with us today, but also the generations

to come and the spirits of those who are not with us here today whose memories we must honour.

We must work together. We must speak the truth. At its heart, reconciliation is about forming respect. The sacred fire lit at sunrise a few days will be extinguished in the coming days; now we must light this fire within ourselves and let our conviction, courage, commitment and our love keep this fire burning.