

The challenge of reconciliation

Setting the context

Canada has a long history of colonialism in relation to Aboriginal peoples. That history and its policies of cultural genocide and assimilation have left deep scars on the lives of many Aboriginal people, on Aboriginal communities, as well as on Canadian society, and have deeply damaged the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. It took a long time for that damage to have been done and for the relationship we see to have been created, and it will take us a long time to fix it. But the process has already begun.

An important process of healing and reconciling that relationship began in the 1980s with church apologies for their treatment of Aboriginal peoples and disrespect of their cultures. It continued with the findings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, along with court recognition of the validity of the Survivors' stories. It culminated in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement and the prime minister of Canada's apology in Parliament in June 2008, along with the apologies of all other parliamentary leaders. That process of healing and reconciliation must continue. The ultimate objective must be to transform our country and restore mutual respect between peoples and nations.

Reconciliation is in the best interests of all of Canada. It is necessary not only to resolve the ongoing conflicts between Aboriginal peoples and institutions of the country, but also in order for Canada to remove a stain from its past and be able to maintain its claim to be a leader in the protection of human rights among the nations of the world. Canada's historical development, as well as the view held strongly by some that the history of that development is accurate and beneficent, raises significant barriers to reconciliation in the twenty-first century.

No Canadian can take pride in this country's treatment of Aboriginal peoples, and, for that reason, all Canadians have a critical role to play in advancing reconciliation in ways that honour and revitalize the nation-to-nation Treaty relationship.

At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) Traditional Knowledge Keepers Forum held in June 2014, Chief Ian Campbell said, "Our history is your history, as Canada ... until Canada accepts that ... this society will never flourish to its full potential."¹