

Dale Swampy: Land acknowledgements have become empty gestures. But there is a path to reconciliation

Before practically any public gathering nowadays, there is an acknowledgement that the event is taking place on the traditional territories of First Nations. It's a nice sentiment, a recognition of past injustices. But over time, as the status quo has remained the same, it has become hollow and without any real value.



© Provided by National Post Flags mark where ground-penetrating radar recorded hits of what are believed to be 751 unmarked graves in this cemetery near the grounds of the former Marieval Indian Residential School on the Cowessess First Nation, Sask.

It is as though First Nations people are being told, "We acknowledge that we stole your land, but we are not giving it back. So as long as we acknowledge our misdeeds, we are all

good, right?" Actually, far from it. What Canada's First Nations want is action, not acknowledgement. We need reconciliation that has real value, not empty gestures.

Such empty gestures have a long history in Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples all paint a bleak picture of harmful government policies that have resulted in poverty and social dysfunction in too many First Nations communities. They also offer solutions and actions that would help heal those communities and help them get back on their feet.

But the sad reality is that they sit on government shelves, ignored and mostly forgotten. Few, if any, meaningful actions have been taken to begin the long path to reconciliation with Canada's First Nations population.

But there may finally be an opening. Canadians were shaken to the core after the discovery of unmarked graves at numerous residential schools, and the accompanying national conversation about some of the atrocities that took place at those institutions. Although this sorrow was well known in Canada's First Nations communities, it came as a sobering shock to the rest of the nation.

The event highlighted to Canadians that it is far past time to begin walking the path towards reconciliation. The question many Canadians are asking is: how?

In truth, all that is required is the political will from MPs of all political parties to follow this road map towards reconciliation.

First, MPs must commit to a process that will ensure that the full story of residential schools is told. They must demand the disclosure of all documents from the organizations that ran them, and build upon the work of the TRC to compile a full list of every person who was forced to attend the schools. This should include all those who lost their lives at these facilities, so they will no longer be anonymous. Then, steps should be taken to allow those who perished in residential schools to be put to rest by their own people.

Second, the government should erect a national monument in Ottawa that's dedicated to the victims of residential schools. They are part of our history, and we dishonour the victims if we allow the lessons we have learned from them to be forgotten.

Third, Canada should build a "National Museum of Reconciliation." This country has museums dedicated to the Holocaust, yet none that examine our country's own genocidal policies. A museum dedicated to the history of Canada's First Nations will help non-Indigenous Canadians understand how we have ended up with so many First Nations people living in poverty and despair.

Fourth, there should be a national push to create a school curriculum that will be adopted by all provinces, in order to educate young Canadians on First Nations history, rights and culture. Fears, prejudice and bias are rooted in ignorance. Canada's First Nations people are just as important a part of our national story as European settlers, yet they are barely visible in our history books.

Finally, we must work to lift First Nations out of poverty. It is painfully clear that sweeping Indigenous-Canadians onto reserves with few resources has resulted in unimaginable levels of poverty and despair. Without innovative new policies, this cycle is likely to continue.

To break this cycle, Canadians must recognize the rights that First Nations have to the land and allow them to be full participants in the development of our abundant natural resources. Inclusion means more than consultation and occasional employment. It means being part of the operation, management and having equity ownership in Canada's natural resources.

It will take time for some First Nations communities to develop the skills to manage and lead these projects. And we need to be prepared for, and even expect, failures along the way. It will not be a smooth road. But we have no choice. The time has come for First Nations to be active participants in the development of Canadian resources, to ensure they are not still living in poverty and despair a generation from now.

Canada had a brutal wake-up call on the need for reconciliation. We all understand that past practices have been a failure and are no longer acceptable. The studies have been done. The facts are known. The solutions are ready to be acted on. The question is: are we ready to walk the path towards true reconciliation?

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