

Honouring a call to action



By Nate Smelle

In June of 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released a multi-volume final report, that included 94 "calls to action." The report, entitled, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, was created with the intention of redressing the legacy of residential schools and advancing the federal government's process of reconciliation with Indigenous people. Using an Indigenous lens, the TRC's 94 "calls to action" focus on issues such as: child welfare; education; languages and culture; health; justice; the Canadian governments and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People; the development of a Royal Proclamation and Covenant of Reconciliation; and, missing Children and burial information.

To gather the information needed to complete the report, the TRC spent six years travelling throughout Canada, listening to the stories of more than 6,500 survivors and witnesses of Canada's residential school system. The commission also hosted seven national events across Canada to engage with people, and educate the public regarding the sinister history and painful legacy of the residential schools system. By listening to, sharing, and honouring the experiences of former students and their families, the TRC was able to establish a historical record of the residential schools system.

More than six years years after its release, the TRC's comprehensive record of the Canadian government's role in the genocide waged against Indigenous people continues to evolve.

Last May, many people around the world were shocked to learn of the bodies of the 215 Indigenous children hidden on the grounds of a former school in Kamloops, British Columbia. By the end of August, The Guardian reported that the bodies of more than 1,300 Indigenous children had been found in unmarked graves on the property of five former residential schools across Canada.

Even more shocking "to me at least" is how little media attention the discovery of the 1,300+ missing Indigenous children's bodies has received. Sadly, members of the TRC have indicated that in light of existing records, the number of missing Indigenous children buried at Canada's former residential schools is more likely to be anywhere from 6,000 to 25,000.

I know we are amid an extremely short federal election cycle, however, I can't help but wonder why there has been so little discussion regarding this disgusting discovery disgracing our nation. As depressing and discouraging as it may be, we will never bring about true reconciliation until we deal with this hard and shameful truth.

There is no doubt that the federal government under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has made improvements in terms of reconciliation. Especially since the days of former Conservative sub-prime minister Stephen Harper, who once proudly declared his

indifference and contempt for Indigenous people by telling Canadians that a public inquiry into missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls was not high on his government's radar. Still, when it comes to fostering truly meaningful and long-lasting reconciliation, no matter who wins next week's race, we as Canadians most certainly have a long, long, long way to go.

Recently, I was pleased to learn that the federal government would be transforming these words into an act of reconciliation by following through with the TRC's 'Call to Action #80.' For those who have yet to read the report, this directive calls on the government to establish a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation to honour Survivors, their families, and communities, and ensure that public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process[Call to Action #80].?

Unfortunately, as usual when addressing human rights issues pertaining to Indigenous people, this small step forward did not come without a simultaneous step or two backwards. Although the federal government passed legislation recognizing Sept. 30 as a statutory holiday last June, Ontario's Premier Doug Ford announced this week that they would not be honouring the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation as a statutory holiday.

I have one question for Mr. Ford: why not?

Is it my magnifying glass, or am I starting to notice a trend here among Conservative politicians and how the party approaches truth and reconciliation with Indigenous people?