FROM THE EDITORS

Truth & reconciliation?
Redefining Canadian citizenship in the twenty-first century

Sheena Kennedy Dalseg & Jerald Sabin

Truth and reconciliation. Our shared future depends on both.

In early June, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released its summary report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*. Its release brought with it a wave of attention and discussion about Aboriginal-Canada relations—and with good reason. The report found that:

For over a century, the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as “cultural genocide.”

Canada’s actions damaged communities, ripped apart families, and destroyed practices and traditions that had flourished in these lands since time immemorial. The TRC uncovered this truth.

We’ve included a map of residential school locations across Canada to demonstrate the breadth of the federal government’s program of assimilation and cultural genocide. No part of Canada was left untouched. The federal government estimates that at least 150,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students attended residential school since the system was first created in 1883. In all, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement provided compensation to students who attended 139 residential schools and residences in Canada.

The history laid bare by the TRC gives us both an opportunity to reflect and mourn, but also serves as the basis for reconciliation. Reconciling the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, and between Aboriginal nations and the
Crown – has become a pressing and vital issue. Since the summary report’s release, our shared future has been debated by prominent leaders and public figures in traditional media outlets, and by citizens using social media to share their perspectives across the country. These dynamic and engaging discussions about the TRC have encouraged Canadians to confront Canada’s historic and ongoing colonial relationship with Aboriginal peoples and how the legacies of that relationship continue to shape lives, communities, and opportunities today.

These discussions take place on the heels of a series of important and related initiatives, including the Idle No More movement, the release of the Qikiqtani Truth Commission Report in 2013, the formation of Canadians for a New Partnership, and many other important opportunities for all peoples who share this land to discuss their past and look to the future.

One of the common threads among these initiatives is the action of sharing personal and collective histories. Through its statement gathering process, the TRC made it possible for Aboriginal voices to be heard and to form part of the public record of what happened in this country. The hope, shared by many, is that by identifying and illuminating historic and current injustices, by educating the general public, that a renewed relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada will be possible. A renewed relationship must be based in truth – one that recognizes the events and experiences of the past, as well as one that recognizes that the legacies of those events and experiences live on for all of us.

Following the TRC closing events in Ottawa, a grassroots social media campaign called #readtheTRC emerged. The #readtheTRC project was initiated by a small group of citizens to increase access to the written TRC materials through digital media. Dozens of Indigenous and non-Indigenous contributors posted videos of themselves reading different sections of the report. These videos will help extend the reach of the TRC’s important work, and they will contribute to a growing digital archive of Indigenous perspectives on a range of topics and issues, which includes a great deal of Northern content available on IsumaTV’s website (www.isuma.tv).

However, reconciliation cannot be based on truth alone. As the Commissioners, Survivors, and many others remind us, reconciliation is not a passive phenomenon. The TRC report points out that reconciliation must take place on many levels, and requires personal, group, community, provincial/territorial, and national action. An abridged version of the TRC’s Calls to Action appears throughout
Education plays a key role in the move from truth to reconciliation. The TRC understood this and made clear recommendations for the education of Canadians both at events and in published materials. At the closing events in Ottawa this past June, Commissioner Marie Wilson called on governments to incorporate a more comprehensive history of Canada into school curricula that includes lessons on residential schooling, treaties, and the contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canada. Her remarks are reproduced in this issue.

In the lead up to Canada’s next federal election in October 2015, the link between education, reconciliation, and citizenship will become even more important. A new place for Aboriginal peoples in Canada also means a new place for non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. Truth and education are necessary prerequisites for reconciliation, and through reconciliation will come a new meaning of Canadian citizenship – for all of us.

This issue is the result of collaboration between the Gwich’in Tribal Council, Memorial University and Northern Public Affairs. The purpose of this collaboration was to share some of the content from, and reflections on, the 2015 Gwich’in Tribal Council Post-Secondary Academic Conference – Aboriginal Citizenship in the 21st Century: A Time of Challenge and Possibility, which took place at Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland between March 23 and 27, 2015. This conference is an example of the types of activities that are critical for reconciliation in Canada.

The conference materials that appear in this issue include a guest editorial by conference co-organizers, Patrick Tomlinson, former Director of Intergovernmental Relations at the Gwich’in Tribal Council, and Professor Peter Trnka of Memorial University; a piece by Tomlinson highlighting the possibilities and successes that can emerge through (perhaps unlikely) collaborative partnerships; keynote remarks by former National Chief, Assembly of First Nations, Ovide Mercredi, on the nature and challenges of Aboriginal citizenship in the 21st century; an article by Trnka reflecting on the critical relationship between negotiation and direct action vis-à-vis Indigenous self-determination; a wide-ranging and engaging conversation among four Gwich’in youth and future leaders – Jordan Peterson, Crystal Norris, Jaycee Firth-Hagen, and Lindsay Bodnar-Mcleod – inspired by their experiences at the conference; and finally, a letter of greeting and support sent to conference participants from Maori scholars in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Readers will also find an abridged version of the conference agenda included in the issue, as well as a number of photographs from the conference.

We would like to thank our collaborators, Patrick Tomlinson, Jordan Peterson, and Peter Trnka, for their editorial contributions to this issue of Northern Public Affairs. We hope to collaborate again, and look forward to future years of the Gwich’in Tribal Council Post-Secondary Academic Conference.

Sheena Kennedy Dalgis is a Founding Editor of Northern Public Affairs and a doctoral candidate in the School of Public Policy and Administration at Carleton University.

Jerald Sabin is a Founding Editor of Northern Public Affairs and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto.

Contributors

Patrick Hunter is an Ojibway painter from Red Lake, Ontario. He’s a neo-Woodland painter drawing inspiration from Norval Morrisseau & Daphne Odjig, as well as the Group of 7 painters. Patrick’s paintings resonate feelings beyond the pictorial. The electricity in the oscillations of a wolf’s howl are described in the simultaneous contrast of white and blue; Patrick adds motion to the flat surface through his skilful use of colour, transforming the static into the spiritual. Hunter currently divides his time between working in Toronto as a full time visual artist / graphic designer, and retreating to the land that continues to inspire him – Red Lake.

NPA is please to include Patrick’s sketches on pages 11, 39, 57. For more, visit www.patrickhunter.ca.