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On the long road to reconciliation

By RY MORAN

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What makes us Canadian? From beer commercials to first-year political science classes, this question has echoed throughout much of our history. For many years, we carefully built the narrative that we are a peace loving peoples — true, north, strong, and free.

We are these things. I believe that. But we are also much, much more complicated than that.



Residential school survivor Lorna Standingready is comforted by a fellow survivor in

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later, a study by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation reveals, "reveals Canadians remain trapped in a blissful hope of peace with Canada's original inhabitants while remaining ignorant of the demands of indigenous peoples for a respectful structural relationship that empowers indigenous self determination since long before the first treaties were signed in this country," writes Ry Moran. (SEAN KILPATRICK / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

We are a country that has been denounced by senators, chief justices and former prime ministers as being genocidal in its treatment of indigenous people. We are a country that ran residential schools for more than 150 years. Together, one year into the implementation of the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we are a country that is making promising gains, but still has much work to do in terms of righting past wrongs.

A new national survey released today by the Environics Institute in collaboration with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and other partners shows Canadians are ready and willing to embrace change:

- Eighty per cent of Canadians want to learn more about indigenous peoples, while even more recognize that indigenous peoples face discrimination, sometimes or often.
- Eighty per cent of Canadians recognize there is a moderate to significant gap in the standard of living between what nonindigenous peoples enjoy and what indigenous peoples face.
- Ninety per cent of Canadians support closing the gaps that exist in indigenous education, housing and access to clean drinking water in addition to implementing mandatory curriculum on indigenous peoples history.
- Eighty per cent support funding to ensure protection of indigenous languages.

But there are others figures that indicate just how far we still need to go. While there has been a marked increase since 2008, more than 30 per cent of people still have not even heard of the residential schools that inflicted so much harm on indigenous peoples. Canadians remain largely unaware that indigenous peoples have unique treaty and constitutional rights that in turn masks deeper understanding of many of the issues unfolding across the country. Likewise, nearly 60 per cent of people are not even aware this country had a truth commission and few can name any of the 94 comprehensive calls to action.

Taken together, these findings say we are a country eager to improve our relationship with indigenous peoples, but are still deeply uncertain of what it means to reconcile. They also indicate we have a long way to go before true reconciliation is achieved. This will take time, but the clock doesn't stop running just because there are many in society who still need to get up to speed – this relationship is active and continues to unfold on a daily basis.

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nonindigenous peoples are truly closing? Who determines what successful steps forward look like? The survey results released today are part of this. But many critical questions remain, which we plan to address next week when the NCTR and its partners hold the Pathways to Reconciliation conference in Winnipeg.

The TRC proposed a vision of reconciliation that goes beyond just simply getting along. It called for a move away from the fundamental concepts that underpin the creation of a Canadian state, such as the concept this was 'empty land,' and push us collectively toward a nation-to-nation relationship.

One year into these calls, we are collectively taking steps toward the realization of some of these goals. But success is not certain. If anything, the survey released today reveals there is much ground yet to cover.

Our ability to bring about the meaningful change called for by the TRC will be shaped by Canadian's perceptions and understanding of indigenous peoples. Deepened collective understanding of the history, cultures and rights of indigenous peoples is the path and Canadian's seem willing to walk down it.

So what makes us Canadian? This survey indicates we are ready to find out.

Ry Moran is the director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation based at the University of Manitoba.

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