

Title: "A Journey Toward Decolonization: One Step at a Time"

Author: Peter R. Elson

Published in: *The Philanthropist*, Indigenous Communities and Philanthropy

ISSN 2562-1491

Date: November 26, 2018

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2018/11/a-journey-toward-decolonization-one-step-at-a-time/>

Date of PDF Download: December 17, 2018

# A Journey Toward Decolonization: One Step at a Time

By Peter R. Elson

*This article is the second in a renewed collaboration between The Philanthropist and The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. The goal is to highlight Indigenous philanthropy and share Indigenous perspective and wisdom on reciprocity as well as Indigenous-focused work happening in the philanthropic community.*

In 2007, I wrote one of my first articles on the non-profit sector in Canada. It was published by *The Philanthropist* and was called, "A Short History of Voluntary Sector-Government Relations in Canada." [1] I went on to expand the article and include it in my first book, *High Ideals and Noble Intentions: Voluntary Sector-Government Relations in Canada*. [2] This writing, and other research activities I have engaged in since completing my post-graduate studies, have focused on exploring broad themes associated with Canada's non-profit and charitable sector. [3] These themes have included provincial government-non-profit sector relations, social enterprises, and, more recently, charitable foundations.

But the missing piece in nearly all of this work was my own lack of awareness of Indigenous people, their historical and ongoing impact on the nature and fabric of Canada, and their particular relationship to the non-profit sector. Looking back now, for example, a much more appropriate title for the 2007 article would have been "A Short *Colonial* History of Voluntary Sector-Government Relations in Canada." What I will attempt to outline here is how my awareness, knowledge, and understanding has shifted, and what small steps I am taking to engage in the process of self-decolonization.

Several events, including attending a cultural perspectives training workshop conducted by the Indigenous Perspectives Society in Langford, BC, and my direct connection with a courageous and kind residential school survivor, led me to face my own position and privilege as an educated, white, male settler. Like others, I came to realize that "it starts with me." [4] This experience has led, over time, to my current enrolment in a new graduate certificate program in Indigenous Nationhood at the University of Victoria. [5] This program, a blend of Indigenous studies, governance, politics, and law, is open to independent students, like myself, and to students currently enrolled in graduate programs in political

science, law, or Indigenous governance. My own desire to undertake this program was threefold. First, I wanted to address my own substantial lack of knowledge about Indigenous people in Canada; and second, I wanted to take steps to decolonize my own way of seeing and being. Third, I wanted to make whatever steps I took toward decolonization and reconciliation to be purposeful and meaningful.

It's not been an easy process, and it's not over. I realize now that my commitment to this path will be a life-long journey. I had to move from interested observer to engaged participant. It was time to invest in engagement and action. Heading back to graduate school as I approach 70 years of age was the least of my worries. Beyond the challenge of absorbing the tremendous depth and breadth of Indigenous scholarship present in the graduate courses, I have found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the Indigenous orientation to respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility with my everyday world of exploitation, individualism, commercialism, and particularism. As I am only half way through the graduate certificate program, this article reflects my own particular journey; a journey that is continually evolving.

My investment to date has led to actions that have changed my personal and professional life. Primarily, I am starting to shed the artificial boundaries that I have created between my personal and professional life. I am more conscious and think more carefully about how I walk through my whole day, including my impact on the planet and my relationships with all beings: human and non-human. Within the context of a university, where I work, I am now more aware of the ways in which Indigenous students, staff, and faculty face discrimination, bias, and overt or covert violence. It's also an environment in which I am challenged to face the colonial perspectives that are perpetuated through policies, programs, and courses, including my own. Every university in Canada sits on Indigenous land.[6]

Membership on a decolonization and indigenization committee within the School of Public Administration has provided opportunities to address some of these colonial perspectives, but at the heart of my own decolonization is the privilege I have to participate in the Indigenous Nationhood graduate program – more often than not, I am a minority in a class of Indigenous students and professors. At the same time, it is important that I explicitly acknowledge my white, male privilege and my symbolism as a perpetrator of colonial violence and dispossession. Beyond the classroom, the colonializing nature of the university is ever close at hand.

There are at least four possible broad institutional responses universities have demonstrated regarding the acknowledgement of Indigenous students, staff, faculty, and Indigenous lands. One is denial. Denial that Indigenous history, Indigenous philosophies, or ways of being can have an impact on policies, practices, programs, pedagogy, and course content. Denial that in any given course there could be an alternative paradigm that contextually shifts meaning, understanding, and relationships. Denial that history influences the present and future as well as a denial of history. A second response is indigenization – interpreted as infusing colonial structures with Indigenous content and acknowledgements. In this response, there is little or no attempt to address the colonial policy and program structures that support ongoing colonialism and racism. This is paramount to changing the wallpaper to give one's living room a new look. From an Indigenous perspective, "research," a cornerstone of universities, is seen as one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary.[7]

A third type of response is decolonization. This is tough work. It involves a candid and honest assessment of the colonial structures that perpetuate bias and privilege, and the creation of safe spaces that Indigenous people can occupy. Decolonization can take many forms. Leanne Simpson refers to

individual level decolonizing dispossession as building a deep, reciprocal, consensual attachment to land and relations.[8] In this context, decolonization is a rare event in academia. Yet it can happen and most often does when individual scholars take the time to build strong and abiding relationships with Indigenous communities within their own communities, away from the university campus, and do so with cultural humility.[9]

A fourth response, Indigenous resurgence, centres a deep and everyday personal commitment to land, culture, language, and relations (Corntassel, 2012).[10][11] Relations include family, kinship ties, and nation as well as land, water and waterways, and other-than-human relations. As Jeff Corntassel has noted, resurgence asks the question, “How will your ancestors and future generations know you as Indigenous” (p.88)? Resurgence is personal, familial, social and political.

As Gina Starblanket and Heidi Stark argue, “it is not enough to make space for Indigenous knowledge. We must allow for this [academic] space to be reconfigured by Indigenous knowledge.”[12] These spaces must also be systematically and positively reinforced with adequate training, staffing, and budgets.[13] Decolonization, as distinct from resurgence, can and should be created and reinforced by allies and Indigenous people acting in solidarity. Resurgence, on the other hand, within traditional and decolonized space, must be defined and populated by Indigenous people.

One step at a time

It took some time before my new sense of awareness was able to manifest itself in some form of action. Initially I held on to a profound sense of inadequacy and ignorance. Over time, though, I kept coming back to words that were shared with me by a residential school survivor, “now that you know, it’s ok to take action.” Knowing that any sustained action and connection with Indigenous people was right on my doorstep, as it may be with you, I chose to start with the context in which I live and work. That is, with the non-profit course that I teach and writing that I undertake. I asked students to identify the Indigenous territory where they are living or grew up. Others were able to identify that there was a residential school or racially-segregated “Indian hospital” in their community. For example, I grew up in Algonquin territory and I now live and work in the traditional and unceded territory of the Lkwungen-speaking peoples and the Songees, Xwsepsum (Esquimalt), and WSÁNE? peoples who continue to care for this land. A territorial acknowledgement is included with course materials and course readings, which includes the series published by *The Philanthropist* on Indigenous Communities and Philanthropy, the history of residential schools from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Patrick Johnston’s article on the Sixties Scoop.[14] As Paulette Regan so eloquently points out in *Unsettling the Settler Within*, these reports call us to re-think our ideas of what constitutes violence and the subtle forms of violence embedded in Indigenous-settler relations.[15]

These readings all connected the course material to Indigenous histories and experiences that are an important part of the history of the non-profit sector. I also realized that their previous absence fell into the “denial” response category. Just one small step. Over time, I plan to revise more of the course curriculum, but even so, this is an example of indigenization, not decolonization, and certainly not resurgence. By participating on a decolonization and indigenization committee within the School of Public Administration, broader institutional policy and program issues are being addressed in incremental yet important ways. I have found that it is important to pause and reflect after taking a step to either indigenize or decolonize a practice. As my own internal landscape changes, so does the landscape around me, and this is something I now take time to contemplate and appreciate.

On other occasions I have attended Indigenous research conferences and Indigenous community events, both on and off-campus. I am working to create space, within my own work, for Indigenous voices to be heard. For example, I am currently editing a book on Canadian foundations and Indigenous authors have written three chapters. I am applying the same intention to any research projects in which I am involved. I wouldn't have considered these possibilities a year ago. As time goes on, opportunities and challenges that I am not aware of now will likely emerge. It's not headlining work; it's an everyday journey. One step at a time.

*Acknowledgements: I would like to express my appreciation to James Stauch, Director of the Institute for Community Prosperity, Mount Royal University for his valuable support for my journey; and to HeidiKiiwetinepinesiik Stark, Director, Indigenous Nationhood program and Jeff Corntassel, University of Victoria, for their encouragement and guidance. Thanks also to James Stauch and Astrid Pérez Piñán for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.*

[1] Elson, P. R. (2007). A Short History of Voluntary Sector-Government Relations in Canada. *The Philanthropist*, 20(1), 36–74.

[2] Elson, P. R. (2011). *High Ideals and Noble Intentions: Voluntary Sector-Government Relations in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

[3] I completed my MSc in Voluntary Sector Organisation at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2002, and my PhD from the University of Toronto in 2008.

[4] “It starts with me” is a quote from Tesla II Dr Evan Adams, Chief Medical Officer, First Nations Health Authority in his foreword to the FNHA Policy Statement on Cultural safety and Humility. (p.1)

[5] See: <https://www.uvic.ca/interdisciplinary/indigenounationhood/>

[6] Devon Abbott Mihesuah, & Wilson, A. C. (2004). Introduction. In Devon Abbott Mihesuah & A. C. Wilson (Eds.), *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming scholarship and empowering communities*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

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