
Renewed Commitment from the Philanthropic Sector – and Ottawa – is Necessary to Address the “Unfinished Business” of Reconciliation: Sector Leaders

At the beginning of a new term of Parliament and almost a dozen years after former Prime Minister [Stephen Harper issued a historic apology for Canada's residential schools policy](#), Marie Wilson has a simple but critical question: what's happened to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's [94 calls to action](#)?

As one of the TRC commissioners, Wilson knows better than most that very few have been implemented in the five years since the final report was published. But one particular set draw her attention: numbers 53 to 56. These call for the establishment of a national council for reconciliation, whose mandate would be to track progress on the calls to action and hold governments, and Canadians generally, to account. She notes that some of the culturally genocidal practices identified by the TRC, such as child apprehension, still occur. “We’ve got tens of thousands of people in our midst who are still dealing with inherited traumas and a lack of safe spaces.”

During the Imagine Canada Sector Champion event held last August in Winnipeg, Wilson recounted the experience of serving on the commission and spoke about how the TRC did its painstaking work, including listening to honorary witnesses. She also reflected on what genuine reconciliation demands: sustained political will at all levels of government and material resources. Additionally, the process requires the engagement of civil society groups to ensure that the TRC's calls to action, as well as the subsequent findings of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), don't drop off the public agenda.

Wilson asserts that the philanthropic sector needs to do more to ensure that political attention doesn't wane, as happened with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. “It isn't just about what you can do,” she says. “It is also about what you can influence.”

With the TRC's close focus on the past actions of churches and child welfare organizations, as well as the evolving role of museums, archives, and youth organizations in reconciliation, the philanthropic sector responded quickly to the report. About half a year after it was published, a group of foundations issued the [Philanthropic Community's Declaration of Action](#), which has since been signed by 79 organizations, ranging from local arts groups and rural community foundations to the philanthropic arms of charter banks.

That declaration “galvanized” people in the sector, observes Kris Archie, executive director of The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal People in Canada (“The Circle”), an Ottawa-based charity that builds relationships between the sector and Indigenous organizations. “It was a moment in time. This country has never had that conversation before.”

Five years on, Wilson still has trenchant questions for philanthropic organizations: are they bringing Indigenous people into senior management and governance positions, and have they

established funding streams specifically for Indigenous causes? “That is kind of a sticking point.”

Peter Dinsdale is one of the few senior Indigenous executives in the philanthropic sector – a former CEO of the Assembly of First Nations who now serves in the top position at YMCA Canada. He worries that Canadians have passed what he calls “peak reconciliation.” He recalls that moment when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised the late Gord Downie that his government would lean into Indigenous issues. “Are we on a downward slope?”

For a federated national charity like the YMCA, Dinsdale’s task has been baking reconciliation principles into the way his team runs the organization. “It has to happen on the ground.” That’s meant cultural competency training, inviting the MMIWG commissioners to talk to local branches, and figuring out how to audit progress. The YMCA federation also established a [statement of reconciliation](#) that not only commits the organization to a range of high level principles, but also identifies some of the specific calls to action that it can address directly with its programming. “I’m not going to say we’ve got it figured out,” he concedes. “We don’t. We’re on a journey to reconciliation but we’re not there yet.”

Dinsdale has geared his efforts at both the national level and with more local Ys. At the last annual general meeting, for example, Indigenous elders took the entire delegation of directors through a [blanket exercise](#) to learn about the impact of residential schools. In Calgary, the city’s YMCA hired an elder to visit public schools, while more remote branches, such as the YMCA of Northern BC, have taken to delivering mobile services, including on reserves and in remote Indigenous communities.

Archie says that, over the past two years, The Circle has sought to make similar inroads with other non-profits and foundations, offering cultural competency training and peer learning about how such organizations have addressed, or ignored, Indigenous issues and individuals in the past. In many cases, she says, these groups had little or no previous experience, and the point of the engagement with The Circle is to listen and learn. “People realize they’re not alone in trying new things.”

But echoing what Dinsdale observes about the YMCA, Archie says it can be difficult to translate the intentions expressed by a board of directors into new hiring, granting, or programming practices. “You have to be thinking about how to engage the wisdom of Indigenous people and the people you’re aiming to serve,” she adds. “[Otherwise], you are missing a critical component.”

This coming June, The Circle will be presenting the lessons it has gleaned from working with philanthropic organizations over the past couple of years to a gathering of foundations. The report, says Archie, will highlight a range of practices and policies that can be “embedded” in charities and non-profits as they move ahead with their own reconciliation efforts. But, she adds, The Circle’s approach aims to persuade organizations to move beyond checklists and measuring outcomes. “People get caught up in the metrics and put aside the capacity for reflection.”

“It’s not necessarily about trying new things, but also about doing other things in new ways,” says Wilson, citing the example of Winnipeg, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups have created new forms of developing community-based social services. The Winnipeg

Boldness Project, in the city's north-end, is a six-year-old Indigenous-run organization that focuses on health, wellness, early childhood development, and other services. It was established with long-term funding from the province and the McConnell Foundation's social innovation granting stream and grew from the foundation's goal of establishing Indigenous grantmaking programs.

Dinsdale, however, points out that the reconciliation work taking place inside the philanthropic sector must be a part of a much larger societal project. It extends from the TRC calls to action to the MMIWG recommendations, as well as stalled negotiations over treaties, jurisdiction, and resource management.

As a veteran of Indigenous politics, he recalls the fate of the 1996 Royal Commission, which called for a [20-year renewal](#) program that the federal government ultimately failed to deliver.

Archie, for her part, feels more optimistic about the TRC's impact, especially on the charitable sector. Asked to look ahead five years, she offers this goal: "If we see 2-5% of annual grantmaking going to Indigenous-led organizations, that would be amazing."

She also expects there will be more Indigenous managers, directors, and grantmakers working within the sector. "I'm feeling hopeful about what's going to happen."

With a new minority government in place in Ottawa, Wilson offers up this "provocation" to Canada's philanthropic leaders: "read and re-read" the 94 calls to action, make sure they're well understood throughout their organizations, and then contact their local MPs to find out when Parliament will finally establish that national council on reconciliation. "It's hugely important unfinished business."