

Speaking Notes: September 16, 2015 – UBC House of Learning Mike Degagne, President, University of Nipissing

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Recommendations

The 94 Recommendations provided by the TRC are rooted in work conducted over the past two decades. Work by Canada's major churches, RCAP, and national Aboriginal organizations all should inform the TRC's work.

In a positive sense the TRC Recommendations are comprehensive and they speak to many aspects of Aboriginal life and the difficult challenges faced by Aboriginal people and communities. There is "something for everyone". Further these recommendations seem to have struck a chord, and many sectors of Canadian society feel the necessity to respond to some of these recommendations.

From a critical standpoint these recommendations leave much to be desired. Although they are comprehensive they are too broad and apply to too many disparate aspects of Aboriginal life. "You cannot chase all of the rabbits at once." By attempting to address all problems we may find ourselves rooted in place, taking no meaningful action on any of them.

Here are some principle concerns with the TRC Recommendations:

1. The recommendations are not rooted in the TRC's research.

The TRC was charged with witnessing and facilitating public events which established the historical record; educating Canadians about residential schools; and making recommendations regarding the IRS system and experiences.

With respect to truth telling the TRC gathered many thousands of stories of Survivors. But where are the voices of Survivors reflected in the recommendations? By comparison the RCAP report and the work of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation were rooted in 10's of millions of dollars of commissioned research. These recommendations could well have been written in advance of the TRC's work.

2. The recommendations reflect a relatively narrow group of interests.

What would these recommendations have looked like if a poet, a writer, and a sculptor developed them? These recommendations focus altogether too much on legal issues and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. They further propose using the UN Declaration as a "framework" for reconciliation. This is not practical given the structure of the Declaration. The Declaration is a list of rights inherent in the lives of Indigenous people. In Canada these rights already exist. It is the implementation and the realization of these rights that pose problems.

3. The recommendations are not reflective of the TRC's mandate.

The TRC was developed, conceived, and negotiated by a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. However the recommendations that emerged are principally concerned with Aboriginal issues and challenges. In the words of Phil Fontaine: "This is not an Aboriginal Commission. It is a Canadian Commission about Aboriginal people."

The TRC was intended in part to: "... This (Commission) is a profound commitment to establishing new relationships embedded in mutual recognition and respect that will forge a brighter future. The truth of our common experiences will help set our spirits free and pave the way for reconciliation."

As a Commission concerned with bringing groups together, how do the recommendations as currently conceived accomplish this? They appear as a long list of well-established troubles, which will strike the non-Aboriginal public as unachievable and costly.

4. The recommendations do not reflect what has been done to date.

There is a sense from these recommendations that thinking and work on reconciliation begins with the TRC. It is more useful to think of ourselves standing in a stream, with all of the work proceeding ours bearing down upon us, and downstream the possibility for us to take action and do still more.

Before the present day we have benefited from the work of RCAP, the AHF, the Legacy of Hope Foundation, and the major churches. They are not acknowledged in these recommendations, nor is all of the practical work done by schools, child welfare systems, and individuals. They were supported by reports and research, which should form the basis of contemporary thinking on reconciliation.

5. The recommendations rely on the work of others.

All but one of these recommendations rely on actions to be taken by non-Aboriginal governments. We cannot continue to "call upon the government" for our way forward.

I quote an unpublished op ed by John Graham: Shelby Steele, the American writer and commentator has said: "Human beings, individually or collectively, cannot transform or uplift themselves without taking full responsibility for doing so. This is a law of nature. Once full responsibility is accepted others can assist as long as it is understood that they cannot be responsible. But no group in human history has been lifted into excellence or competitiveness by another group."

One suggestion for using these recommendations could be that each of the recommendations be annotated with a concrete example of how the recommendation has already been attempted or put in place. The recommendations could be distilled into principles, the most important of which is that reconciliation empowers the Aboriginal community to help itself.