

Canadian bishops, religious push for passage of indigenous rights bill

With the legislation already forwarded to the Senate for study and third reading in the House of Commons expected within days, Canada's bishops and religious orders have come out strongly in support of Bill C-15, a law that would implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

"We strongly encourage Parliamentarians currently debating Bill C-15 to work diligently, in consultation and solidarity with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, so as to ensure the timely and necessary inclusion of UNDRIP within Canadian law and thus contribute to truly respectful and just relations in this land," said an April 26 statement from the executive committee of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The CCCB's statement comes on the heels of an April 21 endorsement of the proposed law from the Canadian Religious Conference, which represents Canada's 11,000 religious order sisters, brothers and priests.

It was the bill "instrumental for renewing the spirit of reconciliation in Canada and encouraging the work of decolonization, in order to establish right relationships and a common vision for the future of our country."

The bill would force the federal government to bring all of Canada's laws into line with the UNDRIP. This is the second time since the United Nations passed the non-binding declaration in 2007 that Ottawa has tried to fold the UNDRIP principles into Canadian law.

A 2018 private member's bill sponsored by NDP MP Romeo Saganash passed the Commons with government support, but met with opposition and delay from Conservative Senators. The bill died in the Senate when Parliament dissolved for the 2019 election.

In 2016 both the CRC and the CCCB jointly declared their support for UNDRIP as a framework for reconciliation. That statement was part of the Catholic Church's response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call To Action 48, which asked faith communities to adopt the principles of UNDRIP.

The CCCB's most recent response to Bill C-15 is the result of many discussions with the Guadalupe Circle of bishops and Catholic Indigenous elders.

"Several Indigenous groups are not supporting Bill C-15 and some are highly in favour," Keewatin-Le Pas Archbishop Murray Chatlain, co-chair of the Guadalupe Circle, wrote in an e-mail before the release of the bishops' statement.

“We have tried to study the reasonings from both sides. We continue to encourage the incorporation of the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Canadian legislation.”

The Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians in Ontario is the most prominent of several smaller Indigenous organizations who believe C-15 doesn't go far enough in recognizing prior Indigenous sovereignty over lands and resources.

On the other side, several Conservative provincial governments have objected that conceding free, prior and informed consent for resource and infrastructure projects on traditional Indigenous territory goes too far.

While the outstanding issues are thorny, the religious orders believe that once passed the process of promulgating regulations to implement C-15 can answer the unanswered questions.

“Consultations with Indigenous peoples in the development of an action plan, following the passing of the legislation, must allow for the necessary revisions and amendments to the legislative framework to ensure its compatibility with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” the CRC statement said.

The CCCB concurred that there's still work to be done, but the passage of the bill is a necessary step in the reconciliation process.

“It's incorporation into Canadian legislation, ensuring that its spirit and principles are in harmony throughout our society, is an important and vital step forward in this journey,” the statement said.

Watching this legislation fail a second time would undermine Indigenous trust in any process of reconciliation, said Sr. Sue Wilson of the Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph's Office for Systemic Justice.

“I think we've lost a path forward (if it doesn't pass),” Wilson said. “Some Indigenous people are skeptical about the commitment to moving forward. Each time a bill like this comes forward and doesn't go anywhere it can feed into that skepticism.”

Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples in Edmonton, the Sisters of St. Joseph, the Jesuits and several other Catholic institutions have joined Faith In The Declaration, an ecumenical coalition in support of C-15.

“The bottom line is that our support for Bill C-15 comes from our desire to engage in reconciliation with Indigenous people,” said Wilson. “For us, this is one way – not the only way, but one way – of saying we're committed to listening to and learning from Indigenous people; to try to forge a new relationship. We're committed to doing our part against discrimination, racism and poverty.”