

Indigenous reconciliation continues despite political setbacks

Reconciliation efforts with indigenous Canadians continue to make progress, despite political fallout from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's ousting of Jody Wilson-Raybould from the party.

The former justice minister was the first indigenous Canadian to hold such a high political rank. Trudeau dismissed her from the Liberal caucus, after weeks of conflict regarding her contention she experienced inappropriate pressure in the trial of SNC-Lavalin on bribery and fraud charges related to contracts in Libya.

He also kicked out Treasury Board president Jane Philpott, who defended Wilson-Raybould.

"The process of reconciliation is much more than what the government is doing," said Ken Coates, an expert on indigenous rights at the University of Saskatchewan.

Because government created most of the problems, that gives rise to the mythology that government policy is going to solve them, he said. The big story is "how well (reconciliation) is working outside of government."

"The Trudeau government from 2015 on had over-promised," and "had made a whole bunch of wild proposals," and now the "glow has come off the apple," Coates said.

However, he noted the problems between Wilson-Raybould and Trudeau started before the SNC-Lavalin controversy, because she is "not a gradualist" and had taken Trudeau at his word.

"She wanted real dramatic changes and not small potatoes," Coates said. For her it "was about changing fundamentally the relationship between the government of Canada and Indigenous peoples."



Experts say indigenous reconciliation will continue despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's dismissal of Jody Wilson-Raybould and Jane Philpott from the federal Liberal caucus. Canadian Catholic News

The more important story is how well reconciliation is working outside of government, especially regarding the churches and business, Coates said.

“The churches have made some really major moves and adaptations of policy, and have reached out to indigenous communities in ways people thought impossible even two or three years ago,” Coates said. Another “major force” for reconciliation is in the business world.”

“Reconciliation really means that people are getting together on the ground, in the workplaces and doing business together,” he said. It comes back to the population as a whole, and an overall agenda.”



Deacon Rennie Nahanee

“It’s one door slammed and another opened,” said Deacon Rennie Nahanee, a member of the Squamish First Nation in British Columbia who serves on the Our Lady of Guadalupe Circle as a member of the Canadian Catholic Indigenous Council.

“I hope (Wilson-Raybould) stays in politics, no matter which party and that she continues her good work, because the best ethics and politics go together. She would be the one to do that.”

Nahanee said expects the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB), the founder of the Circle, to release a letter to indigenous people in the fall regarding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Calls to Action.

“The Church is finding ways to make amends and work together with indigenous peoples in a new relationship, one of equality, not like in the past where the Church pretty much ran the show,” said Nahanee. “Now things have changed. We want to have a new good, working relationship with indigenous people.

“I would like to see the Church actually come up with a strategy and a plan on how to implement these calls to action, which then hopefully will lead to reconciliation all across Canada,” Deacon Nahanee said.

“The big hope is that Pope Francis or his successor, after reconciliation has taken place, will come to Canada,” said Nahanee. “I think he needs a sign that reconciliation has taken place. Otherwise what’s the point in coming here?”



Harry Lafond

Harry Lafond, a former member of the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council and a member of the Muskeg Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan, said “it’s the political side of our society that’s at odds.

“When we think about reconciliation we have to pay attention to what the people are doing,” he said. “That’s where the solution lies, that’s where the movement lives.”

“I don’t think we’re far removed from our agenda to try to make the TRC come alive in the communities,” Lafond said. “And I think the institutions like the Church can keep that awareness happening among their congregations that real reconciliation is occurring, and will continue to occur inside of their own groups.”

“It would be very off track for us to depend on a political institution to lead this,” Lafond said. “They can respond to it, support it, and can sound as if they’re leading it, but in reality it’s the people in the communities, in the groups, in the congregations that take control of the process.”

In Saskatoon, a large group of organizations has been meeting regularly around reconciliation since 2015, Lafond noted.

“It doesn’t seem to be dying down,” he said. “I don’t hear people saying, let’s just give it up because the politicians can’t get along.

“If we’re going to talk about this in a hopeful way, let the politicians deal with their political discourse and let us deal with the agenda of living together,” Lafond said.

Lafond points out Canadian newcomers are part of this group.

"A number of organizations of these newcomer groups have extended their hands out to First Nations communities and people to try to understand the history and the possible ways of connecting so that both groups are asking the right questions and seeking the answers that help people live together."

Lafond is also working with the Prince Albert diocese, teaching clergy the Cree language, since the diocese has a high population of mostly Cree Indigenous communities. The bishop (Bishop Albert Thévenot) is really encouraging his clergy to open up and listen to the Indigenous population."

Coates, however, said the "beating up on the Catholic Church on the residential schools" is not going to disappear.

"The new concept of multi-generational trauma is now entrenched," he said. "We're starting to ask more questions on what it is."

"I think personally the churches are going to be major actors in reconciliation," Coates said. "I think non-state actors are more important than government in reconciliation."

Coates also sees great progress in the business community, in the form of mutually beneficial business projects between businesses with Indigenous partners.

"We're as a society much more comfortable with Aboriginal folks being a problem," Coates said. "It's kind of odd. We're not conditioned to see success and achievement."

Among those achievements, the much higher numbers of Indigenous people in post-secondary education; successful land claim settlements that see personal income of members go up 30 per cent; and how Canada's resource sector is the biggest employer of Aboriginal people in Canada.

Indigenous-owned companies are buying and building pipelines, he said. "These are stories completely contrary to the crisis narrative."

Cecil Chabot, an adjunct professor of First Peoples Studies at Concordia University, said "a deficit paradigm," focusing on the problems often ignores the positive stories and the successes.

While indigenous peoples in Canada have often suffered from what Chabot calls a "reductionist narrative" that has painted them and their culture in a negative light, he raised concerns about a competing "anti-colonialist" or "anti-settler" narrative that similarly reduces the other side to a strictly negative picture.

"Reductionist interpretations on one side and on the other are a huge problem. There's not sufficient nuance and it doesn't lend itself to reconciliation," he

said. "Nor does it lend itself to people doing what they can in their sphere."

"The problem of dehumanization of indigenous peoples is still there," Chabot said. "But now we also have the dehumanizing of the other. You can't resolve the problem of racism by simply inverting it."

Chabot said the Church has had a mixed record in terms of relations with Indigenous peoples.

"Where things went right, it was where the Church was consistent with Catholic social teaching," he said.

When the Church focused on human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity things went well. "When things did go wrong, the Church acted in a way inconsistent with those teachings."

"Where things went wrong, it was significant, but in uncovering those things, there's a tendency to reduce things to that," Chabot said.

"But then we're missing part of the picture. It was never only about that. And if people are only presented with the worst side of one culture or history, how is that supposed to inspire reconciliation or hope thereof?"

Chabot believes reconciliation can only move ahead with a focus on mutually recognizing the human dignity of all people moving toward reconciliation.

He also worries the Church is a "perfect candidate for scapegoating."

The Church is in a difficult position, largely through its own fault or the fault of those who failed consistently with their faith. It has to avoid responding defensively when legitimate criticisms are raised, he said.

"But if the Church and its members allow themselves to be reduced to the worst of their collective or individual failings, then they lose the capacity to do any good."

"The same is true of any culture or religion, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, that is reduced to its worst failings – usually failings to live up to its own message," he said.

"After the departure of those who have used or misused Christianity for their own ends, those who genuinely struggle to live it are left with the pieces and the blame."