

Reconciliation barely getting started, says former head of Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Canada is barely off the starting line when it comes to reconciliation with its Indigenous people, Senator Murray Sinclair told a packed hall at King's University as the Catholic college kicked off its annual Veritas series of public lectures.

"It's not going to happen in my lifetime," the 68-year-old Sinclair declared at the Sept. 26 lecture.

As a judge, Sinclair led the five-year Truth and Reconciliation Commission into Canada's residential schools, culminating in a landmark 2015 report into the history and future of Indigenous relations with Canadian government and society.

The fact that reconciliation isn't a headline issue during this year's federal election campaign, despite government and business determination to build a new pipeline for Alberta bitumen, is just one indication that "we're not there yet," Sinclair told his London, Ont., audience.

In the absence of serious changes by governments, it will be the courts who increasingly define the Indigenous-government relationship, according to Sinclair.

From the Royal Proclamation of 1763 through all the treaties signed since Confederation, the courts are going to apply the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to find solutions to long-standing failures to provide Indigenous Canadians with the same level of services and protections as the rest of Canada, he said.

"This history is not going to stay in the past," said Sinclair. "It is going to get critical."

The most important message Sinclair had throughout his nearly two-hour presentation was his warning that reconciliation is going to take a long time, said Tracy Sillaby of the Chippewa of Georgina Island First Nation and an Indigenous educator with the Thames Valley District School Board in London.

"With reconciliation, we're not done. We're just beginning," Sillaby said. "It just doesn't happen overnight. It's going to take a long time. Everybody has to get that message."

In a talk aided by music videos produced by Aboriginal youth, Sinclair placed his hope in future generations and in education.

"It's not going to happen in my lifetime," he said. "Along the way, we're going to have lots of fights."

Summing up the history of residential schools that removed children from their families and institutionalized them, Sinclair explained how the residential school system developed post-Confederation to cut the tie between Indigenous children and their identity.

Without family life or their own language and culture, Indigenous children couldn't answer the basic questions all children ask, "Where do I come from and where do I belong in the world?" he said.

"It's about belief. It's about faith. It's about acceptance," Sinclair said.

"The residential schools story is about where we come from," Sinclair told his mostly white audience. "We need to understand how things are out there."