

Six Indigenous scholars share their views of Canada at 150

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Most of them won't be celebrating.

Confederation has been described as a turning point for the worse in the lives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada. Britain's Royal Proclamation of 1763 recognized certain Indigenous rights. In 1982, Canada's repatriated constitution "recognized and affirmed" the "aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada." However the extent and content of those rights and what they mean to Canada continue to be disputed. Even rights recognized under treaty have not been respected in the post-Confederation era, it's been well-argued.* There was a steep decline in the vitality of Indigenous cultures and languages, and in people's well-being, particularly after the Indian Act of 1876. The country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, looking into the legacy and abuses of the residential school system for Indigenous children, wrote in its 2015 report that "national reconciliation is the most suitable framework to guide commemoration" of Canada's 150th anniversary, calling it "an opportunity for Canadians to take stock of the past, celebrating the country's accomplishments without shirking responsibility for its failures." The following are reflections from six Indigenous scholars at Canadian universities on their vision for a "reconciled Canada."

Naiomi Metallic, *assistant professor and holder of the Chancellor's Chair in Aboriginal Law and Policy, Dalhousie University. Mi'kmaq, from Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation, Quebec.*

The 150th anniversary does not have the same celebratory tone for us as it would have for other Canadians. What we hope other Canadians would reflect on, especially after the TRC report, is how we can move the discourse forward into concrete action. There is a lot to atone for. The status quo cannot continue.

In a reconciled Canada there would be a renewal of our treaty relationship, a recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination, and a renewed nation-to-nation relationship. Among other things, this requires a legislative response in partnership with Indigenous people. For far too long the government has done things by policy and that can change with each government; legislation demands greater accountability. For example, recognition of the right to self-government in at least core matters relating to the good government and welfare of Aboriginal peoples could be legislated, such as child welfare, social development, housing, language and culture, and other matters of an internal nature to communities. That could act as a foundation for subsequent negotiation around other issues where there are overlapping interests and jurisdictions between Indigenous and other governments, such as lands, water and resources.

Indigenous people and communities would be treated as respected partners, rather than as stakeholders, often consulted after the fact. It would involve the phasing out of the Indian Act according to the desires, needs and capacities of the different Indigenous nations. This direction would require emphasis on capacity-building within Indigenous communities, as well as resources dedicated to helping achieve the goal of self-government. Universities could provide space, research and other services to help communities vision where they want to go and how to get there, and assist in the capacity-building that has to happen. Self-determination does not mean that Indigenous people separate from the Canadian polity; in a reconciled Canada it would be the opposite. There are many areas of overlapping interests and jurisdiction that affect us all. To have a genuine partnership and nation-to-nation relationship, we must share space in the places of power in this country, like in Parliament, the Senate, and on the judicial boards and tribunals – that's part of reconciliation too.

Shirley Williams/Migizi ow-kwe, *elder and professor emeritus, Nishnaabemowin language, Indigenous studies, Trent University. Odawa-Ojibway, from Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario.*

Canada's 150th is not a time of celebration for Anishinaabe people; this period represents 150 years of oppression. What we can celebrate is my people's history of resistance, resilience, resurgence and restoration. Reconciliation means telling the truth about what happened to us. It means that we have to rebuild, together, what was broken.

I attended St. Joseph's Residential School in Spanish, Ontario, from age 10 to 16. The government and the priest came to get me when I was seven, but my father was able to keep me at home longer by telling them he would teach me himself, including the catechism – but he did not say in which language. This meant that my Nishinaabemowin language was instilled in my mind; I did not learn English until I went to residential school.

The greatest thing that Canada could do for reconciliation would be to help us restore the languages and cultures that were destroyed. There are still barriers to getting funding to design and publish Indigenous-language teaching materials that are attractive and appealing to students, the same as is done for other languages. We also need to eliminate barriers against First Nations students receiving language instruction at school, such as requiring at least 15 students before offering a program or only offering it during lunch. There should be programs for adults who have lost their languages through the Sixties Scoop, as well as programs to train and accredit fluent speakers as teachers so that they can pass on what they know without having to go through years of university credits. We need immersion programs, too.

In a reconciled Canada there would be a new relationship between First Nations people and Canada, one without racism, so that there is peace, harmony and understanding. It is possible, but the relationship will not be rebuilt unless we mean it. Only then will we both accept each other. There has to be commitment.

Janet Smylie, *associate professor, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto and holder of the CIHR Applied Public Health Chair in Indigenous health knowledge and information. Métis, with kin ties to Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan.*

In a reconciled Canada, every Indigenous infant would be born into a family, community and society where all of their needs and gifts would be met and nurtured. Relationships between adults, children and youth would be strong so that Indigenous knowledge and practice could be passed on.

This means there would no longer be inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in the distribution of health and social resources. The mortality rate among Indigenous infants in Canada is two to four times higher than for non-Indigenous infants. That is an important indicator of health and well-being and it's tragic. There would be a serious redistribution of wealth – our work shows more than 80 percent of Indigenous people in Canadian cities are living below the poverty line.

Land claims would be settled. Since the majority of Indigenous people now live in cities, we would see them reclaiming beautiful Indigenous spaces there too. This would not preclude non-Indigenous people from using them, but these spaces would be self-determined and Indigenous-led. The Toronto Birth Centre is an example. All people in Toronto are welcomed but it was an Indigenous-focused group of midwives who led its development, and it is governed by an Indigenous-majority board.

Universities would partner with Indigenous communities and organizations to help create Indigenous-led centres of learning and training – in health or the arts, for example – where at least 50 percent of the curriculum is based on Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Indigenous languages would flourish among our children. Adults would have access to language recovery programs designed for their learning style and busy schedules.

For all this to happen, non-Indigenous Canadians must recognize that they're our kin on this land – we are like stepbrothers and stepsisters. It will require rewiring the individual and collective Canadian psyche, recognizing that we are really cool siblings and have a lot to offer. Every Indigenous infant is an opportunity to make that change.

Bob Kayseas, *professor of business and associate vice-president, academic, First Nations University of Canada. Nahkawe (Saulteaux), from Fishing Lake First Nation, Saskatchewan.*

I understand the sentiments of people who feel that celebrating the 150th anniversary of Confederation is an affront and a slap in the face. On the other side of the coin, there's a shared history on this land. It hasn't always been good and the relationship is still very challenged. But if you look at how Canada is today, we have opportunity; it is a great place to live. We should celebrate it but with recognition that we still have work to do.

In a reconciled Canada we would see companies involved in resource extraction around First Nations communities reaching out in a sincere way at the beginning of a project and actively engaging with the community about it at a higher level than happens now, even giving them an equity position. Businesses would have relationships with Indigenous businesses in the same way they have relationships with other businesses. The Canadian government would publicly show its support and champion Indigenous business deals the same as it does for other companies. At the moment, it's as if we have to succeed in spite of everybody else. Our success should be seen as Canada's success.

In order to grow those businesses and investment, the federal government needs to settle land claims. Unsettled and claims create uncertainty, settled claims create opportunities. In Saskatchewan we had the Treaty Land and Entitlements process in 1992, which saw nearly half-a-billion dollars transferred to First Nations so that they could buy land and mineral rights [to settle a Crown land debt]. This led to economic growth for First Nations and the province.

There would be more active involvement of Indigenous people in the labour market and entrepreneurship. This requires educational support as well as understanding, not judgment, of where Indigenous people are coming from. Indigenous entrepreneurs are often first-generation, so they need start-up support. We won't see a reconciled Canada until Indigenous entrepreneurs and business people are no longer paraded as exceptional but instead are the norm.

Karla Jessen Williamson, *assistant professor, educational foundations, University of Saskatchewan. Inuk, from Maniitsoq, Greenland.*

It has been very trying for Indigenous populations to have their existence annulled – that's what the last 150 years have been. The 150th anniversary has to be marked by the fact that things have to change. We must confront our colonial thinking and attitudes and redefine what Canadian-ness means. We must move beyond the false notion that Canada was founded by the French and the English, recognizing that we started off with the First Nations, Métis and Inuit, and have become a society that thrives on diversity and knows how to share resources fairly among everyone.

In a reconciled Canada, taking care of the interests of Indigenous peoples would be done without question. The mental, physical and spiritual health of Indigenous people would be restored – what kind of Canada is it when 70 percent of people in Nunavut are hungry? For the Inuit, it would mean self-determination.

There would be respect and recognition for Aboriginal knowledge systems. Funding institutions currently do not recognize the uniqueness of these, so there's no funding set aside for Indigenous populations to develop and systematically bring these knowledge systems into the academy. Funding cannot be obtained unless a project is done in one of the official languages. In a reconciled Canada, it would be possible to do an entire research project in an Indigenous language using an Indigenous knowledge system, and which could then be reinvested into the institutions where the researchers are working.

Universities would also appreciate the special effort Indigenous researchers make to bring Indigenous knowledge into the academy in an authentic way that is respected by our home communities. Indigenous researchers often work with a "two-eyed" perspective, negotiating Western and Indigenous ways of seeing the world as we conduct and present our research. There needs to be sensitivity towards this. The processes in academia have repeatedly

shown themselves to be well-oriented towards colonization and can easily bulldoze the unique contributions and knowledge brought by Indigenous scholars.

Reconciliation has a lot of hope, but I'm hoping that real actions will take place.

Qwul'sih'yah'maht/Robina Thomas, *associate professor, school of social work, and director of Indigenous academic and community engagement, University of Victoria. Coast Salish, from Lyackson First Nation, B.C.*

I don't think Indigenous people are at a place where we want to talk about a reconciled Canada. By definition, reconciliation is the action of making one's view or belief compatible with another. What views or beliefs are we trying to reconcile? Who needs to reconcile with whom?

I don't think we're even close to beginning to do that. I get concerned that by focusing on reconciliation, we turn away from the crimes of the past and ignore their connections to the present.

Atrocities continue to happen that are related to residential schools: the murdered and missing Indigenous women, girls and two-spirited people; and the alarming rate of Indigenous children who are apprehended and placed in strangers' care. Upwards of 50 percent of the children in care in Canada are Indigenous, even though we make up four to five percent of the population. Some of the families of murdered and missing Indigenous women say they feel left out of the federal inquiry process, so whose views are we aligning? The federal government has been taken to the Federal Court and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal over discrimination against Indigenous children in child welfare; we win that case yet nothing really changes. We will never have a reconciled Canada if this level of violence continues – our children continue to go missing through the child welfare system and our mothers, sisters, daughters and grandmothers go missing on our streets and in our communities.

Education is key. We must start with young people, sharing the true history of the legacy of colonial policies and practices, and how they impact Indigenous people. If children grew up knowing this, they would at least have an opportunity to understand Indigenous people in Canada differently and would not have to “unbecome” or confront their Canadian identity later in life – a painful process.

I am very conflicted about Canada 150. I have never celebrated July 1 – it's hard to celebrate when we can't honour all people, but especially our Indigenous women and children. I do think some Canada 150 events will be respectful and honour Indigenous people and Indigenous ways of knowing and being; I will seek out those events.

**Editor's note: the wording in the introduction has been changed from the original to give a more accurate and complete description of the historical record.*