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## **Calls to Action Accountability: A 2021 Status Update on Reconciliation**

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# Executive Summary

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**AS OF DECEMBER 15, 2021**, six years have passed since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its six-volume Final Report. In addition to providing a documentary record of Canada's genocide as experienced by Indigenous children, the TRC released 94 Calls to Action to address the ongoing legacy of the Indian Residential School System (IRSS). These Calls to Action challenge the structures and attitudes in Canadian society that continue to perpetuate the marginalization of Indigenous peoples so as to advance the process of reconciliation.

**This is the third year we have been formally tracking the completion of the Calls to Action. While there was the rapid adoption and implementation of three Calls to Action this year—a rarity—a survey in the general Canada-Indigenous relationship also reveals some low points.**

Amidst a global pandemic, and despite promises to the contrary, clean drinking water is still not guaranteed for many First Nations communities. This is a scourge that is, in part, the outcome of generations of chronically underfunded infrastructure. The re-elected Liberal government continues to battle St. Anne's Residential School survivors in court and to appeal Canadian Human Rights Tribunal orders to compensate First Nations children who have been racially discriminated against by the federal government. Industry continues to violate Wet'suwet'en law, forcing the construction of natural gas infrastructure through their pristine lands and waters without the consent of hereditary chiefs. And, finally, as the country reeled from the discovery of hundreds of graves of children outside former Indian Residential Schools, the Prime Minister went on vacation on a day that his own government set aside to honour residential school survivors. As one survivor put it, "His words don't match his actions." We find this to be an apt description of Canada's engagement with the TRC's Calls to Action.

## Considerations this year

This year, we want to offer a caveat to our analysis. While checking the completion of the Calls to Action is a useful exercise in determining institutional commitments to reconciliation as set out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is a partial picture of the composition of reconciliation in this country.

Throughout the years, and with each deep analysis of the Calls to Action, we came to understand two key things that we bring to bear on this year's report:

- 1) Not every Call to Action requires Canada and Canadians to make the kinds of lasting, permanent and structural changes necessary to transform the relationship substantively. Some Calls to Action are symbolic, while others are structural, and Canada is choosing to complete the symbolic calls with expediency while neglecting the structural changes called for by the TRC.
- 2) Completing the Calls to Action is being treated as a kind of tallying exercise in which reconciliation can be achieved via a crude colonial balance sheet: once a Call to Action is complete, Canadians can then forget about it and feel better about themselves. We remind Canada that relationality—which, to our mind, is what reconciliation is trying to achieve—is an ongoing process, not a single event or box to check.

Like in previous years, we draw upon the work of previous Yellowhead Institute releases, Indigenous scholarship, Government documents where available, and various news coverage and media to inform our discussion.

Our analysis is also enhanced by the expert insight of Indigenous scholars and practitioners from across the country with whom we spoke: Dr. Cindy Blackstock, Dr. Brent Debassige, Dr. Jaris Swidrovich, Kris Statnyk, Dr. Kisha Supernant, and Dr. Janice Forsyth.

## 2021 Findings:

### Three Calls Completed, Low Hanging Fruit

In last year's 2020 report, we highlighted five Calls to Action that could be realistically completed within the year if there was enough political will. From that list of five Calls, the following three were acted upon in the three weeks following the first revelations of children's graves outside Residential Schools:

**#15 - Appointed a language commissioner**  
(Announced June 14, 2021)

**#80 - National Day for Truth and Reconciliation**  
(Announced June 3, 2021)

**#94 - Citizenship Oath**  
(Announced June 21, 2021)

That is more movement on the Calls to Action in three weeks alone than in the last three years!

Where "reconciliation" happened this year, it was in response to pressure brought to bear by all of the international attention focusing on this growing evidence of Canada's history of genocide.

**Any completed Call to Action is welcome news. But why did it take the profoundly disturbing revelations of thousands of unmarked graves being found on the grounds of residential schools across the country to see Canada begin to make reconciliation a priority? And what does it mean that the Calls to Action that Canada did complete were also arguably the easiest, most of the symbolic gestures we allude to as "low hanging fruit" in this year's report?**

We even wonder if some of these symbolic calls actually tended to benefit Canadians more immediately than Indigenous communities. When considering the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation and the amendment of the Citizenship, Dr. Supernant aptly captured what many others had been telling us: "I think, unfortunately, Indigenous peoples' needs are still not the ones that are being met."

One challenge we find is that it's increasingly difficult to continue reporting each year without being overly repetitive when the same structural barriers prevent meaningful action.

Barriers to meaningful action include:

1. **Paternalism:** The deep-rooted, ongoing paternalistic attitudes and behaviours of politicians, bureaucrats, and policy-makers, resulting in a "we know best" mentality that prevents Indigenous peoples from leading on issues with their own solutions.
2. **Structural anti-Indigenous discrimination:** Canada asserts legal myths to justify the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the subsequent manufactured poverty of Indigenous peoples.
3. **"The Public Interest":** Policy-makers and Canada's legal teams have used the interests of a non-Indigenous Canadian public to shore up their inaction on compensation for First Nations children and as the beneficiary of exploited Indigenous lands.
4. **Insufficient resources:** There's no shortage of promises, but with ongoing and rampant funding inequities, meaningful reconciliation will always be out of reach.
5. **Reconciliation as exploitation or performance:** In the cases where "reconciliation" purportedly occurs, exploitative or predatory behaviour is rampant, and in the case of performative measures, actions serve to manage Canada's reputation.

All the same, we find new examples and new themes informed by this year's events to lend to our 2021 analysis.

#### Part I: Legacy

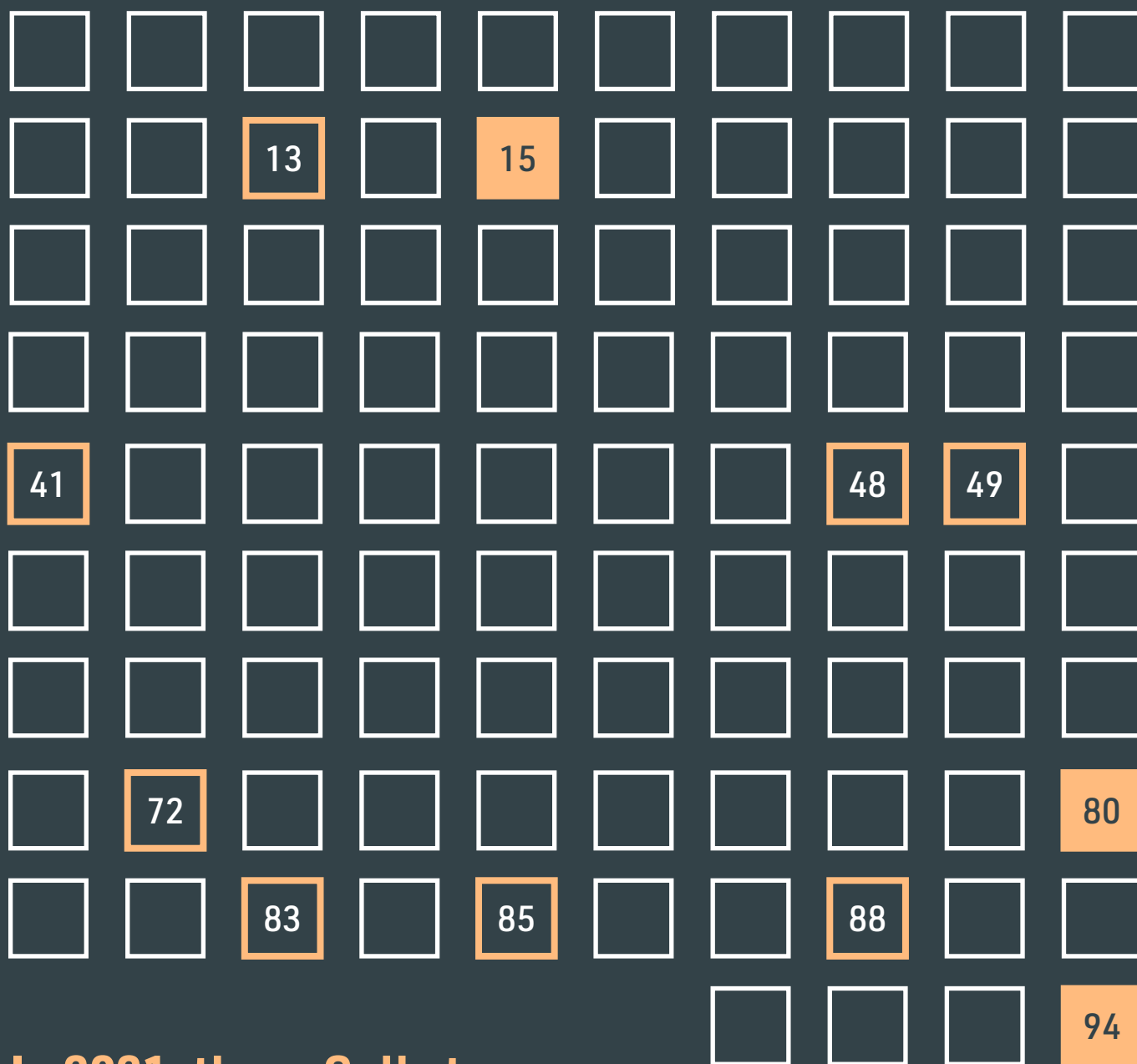
Part I engages Indigenous experts on the structural Calls to Action, from Child Welfare to Justice Reform. These Calls to Action continue to see very little progress. We provide in-depth details about why this continues to be the case.

#### Part II: Reconciliation

While the symbolic Reconciliation Calls to Action have made the most progress, Part II focuses on the substantive Calls to Action that seek to advance relationality in Canada, from the continued work on UNDRIP legislation to Missing Children and Burial Information.

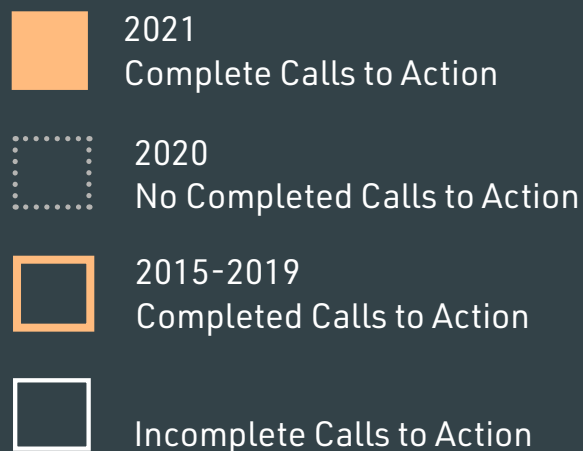



Visit [yellowheadinstitute.org/trc](https://yellowheadinstitute.org/trc) to read the full report.



**In 2021, three Calls to Action were completed, all in the month of June.**

Following the discovery of 215 unmarked graves on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, this is more action on the Calls to Action in three weeks than the last three years.





**“ To the question, “When will it be enough?” we say: it will be enough when the systems of oppression no longer exist.**

**We will arrive at reconciliation when Indigenous peoples in this country experience, at the bare minimum, a living standard that reflects their visions of healthy and prosperous communities.”**

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**- DR. EVA JEWELL & DR. IAN MOSBY**