

Calls to Action Accountability: A 2023 Status Update on Reconciliation



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ABSTRACT

2023 marks eight years since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action.

This year also marks the fifth year of authors Eva Jewell and Ian Mosby tracking Canada's progress on completing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action. In this edition of their annual Calls to Action Accountability analysis, Jewell and Mosby reflect on the past five years of reconciliatory movements in Canada. What barriers to reconciliation have been witnessed? What has compelled Canada to act? Who has pushed progress on these Calls to Action forward? By framing reconciliation in 2023 against the backdrop of trends seen in the last several years, Jewell and Mosby identify the ongoing issue of inaction on reconciliation and what it means for the future of accountability work.



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 Incomplete Calls to Action

 2015-2022
Completed Calls to Action

Zero Calls to Action
were completed in 2023.

Eight years since the release of the 94 Calls to Action,
81 Calls remain unfulfilled.

Introduction

IT HAS NOW BEEN eight years since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report and the 94 Calls to Action. Eight years since Trudeau personally promised to fully implement all 94 Calls to Action, a promise he reiterated a few years later when expressing that no relationship was more important to Canada than the one with Indigenous peoples.

If, like us, you have been following Canada's progress towards completing the Calls to Action, these have been eight long years — characterized by everything but action. Most of the Calls to Action remain incomplete as bureaucratic roadblocks, endless debate, and nearly every excuse imaginable delay progress. Indeed, when reflecting on the lack of movement in reconciliation this past September, former minister of Crown-Indigenous relations Marc Miller admitted, "My biggest battles and fights and challenges have been with our own institutional mechanisms."

All the while, we have seen another eight years of residential school survivors waiting, aging, and passing on while a new generation of Indigenous children inherits a colonial system riddled with chronic inequities.

In the grand scheme of things, eight years isn't much. But add it to 150 years of enduring colonial violence. Add it to the centuries of conflict, land dispossession, genocide, biological warfare, apartheid, manufactured poverty, and colonial rule that mark this country's founding and ongoing existence. Add it to the lives of living Indigenous peoples who have been told to wait for basic services most Canadians take for granted, whether they are survivors themselves or descendants of survivors of this colonial violence. Add it to the lived reality of communities under endless boil water advisories, housing crises in their own lands, inadequate or non-existent schools, high youth suicide rates, and resource gaps in health, education,

justice, and child welfare.

Add to it all the communities desperately advocating for, and awaiting the change that is routinely promised but never delivered.

Then consider eight years of ongoing natural resource extraction, soaring corporate profits, climate emissions, smiling handshakes, business dealings brokering stolen resources, supreme court rulings justifying land theft, and a legal architecture that criminalizes those who challenge this "common sense."

In the short time we have been annually observing Canada's record on its supposed progress, we've held the tension of the promise of reconciliation with the actual reality — and are exasperated by the deep chasm between the two and frustrated by the discrepancy between inaction and Canada's fantastical myths of benevolence.

A Brief History of Calls to Action Accountability

This project began five years ago when we — two energetic newly hired professors — joined Toronto Metropolitan University with the hope of using our training and access to the resources at Yellowhead Institute (the only Indigenous-led policy think tank in Canada) to elevate an issue we deeply cared about. Ian had been tracking the Calls to Action for three years at that point (beginning in 2016), work emerging from research illuminating nutritional experiments on Indigenous children in residential schools. This experience compelled him to ensure his government was at least living up to its own Truth and Reconciliation process. Meanwhile, Eva, who grew up on a First Nation and experienced Canada's colonialism firsthand — as a day-school attendee, granddaughter of residential school survivors, and hailing

from a community that the second-ever residential school in Canada occupied — had a vested interest in the Calls’ completion. Both of us sought to hold the state accountable for its genocidal policies impacting Indigenous people.

At first, the project invoked hope and determination. If only the Canadian public knew about their government’s lack of action, we believed, perhaps things would change.

That hope, as those who have followed us on this journey may have noticed, has begun to diminish in the fifth year of this project.

And with yet another year of no Calls to Action — *zero Calls to Action* — being completed, we hope you might forgive us if frustration and anger have made us question what exactly the point of this work is.

We are no strangers to these scarce years as far as reconciliation goes. In fact, most of our past reports lament the glacial pace. In 2020, when we last reported zero completed Calls to Action, we expanded our then-brief-length policy paper to our first full-length special report because we had much to say about a year of no action. It was a difficult year, given that 2020 saw governments worldwide responding to a global pandemic. But we argued that ignoring the many critically important Legacy Calls to Action (1–42) — particularly in health and education — would deepen the already-existing inequities Indigenous communities were experiencing.

Then, in 2021, after the country was left reeling in shock at the revelation of child graves outside several Residential Schools around the country, an aggrieved Canadian public turned to the progress reports on the Calls to Action in a

bid to find assurance that something — anything — was being done to address this shame. Our report provided no solace. Not only were there no Calls to Action completed the previous year but by the summer of 2021, many inequity gaps Indigenous peoples in Canada faced actually widened due to the pandemic.

Then, in the three weeks following the first revelations of child graves outside Kamloops Indian Residential School in 2021, three Calls to Action were completed: the highest number completed we have ever seen in our five years of tracking. We quickly realized that the swift fulfillment was an attempt to manage Canada’s image in the eyes of an international media spectacle.

However, once the pressure of the increased attention abated, the scarcity returned. All of the Calls completed since then have been through the work of non-governmental organizations. The federal government, for its part, has not completed a single Call to Action.

This time around, we can’t help but wonder: What will compel Canada to act? When they aren’t actively denying that they exist, the Canadian public is no longer shocked by the news of child graves. The federal government has more than proven an unwilling partner in meaningful reconciliation and is now attempting to shift discourse toward “economic reconciliation” (a manufactured co-optation that Survivors of Residential Schools have not identified as a goal).

Perhaps the answer is that nothing will compel Canada to act on the Calls — shoring up support for their ongoing colonial violence instead has been and continues to be the priority.



from Calls to Action Accountability:
A 2019 Status Update on Reconciliation by Eva Jewell & Ian Mosby

“We, therefore, maintain that analyzing the full completion of a Call to Action is a better metric than measuring ‘progress’ or ‘steps taken’ on an item. At what point, after all, is ‘making progress’ meaningful when so many Calls to Action remain unfulfilled?”

...With four years of data indicating glacial progress on the Calls to Action and reconciliation generally, it is becoming increasingly clear that transformative change is required. It is difficult to imagine, even with a new government. But our hope in Indigenous communities to force that change remains. It is our hope, too, that this analysis can support those efforts.”



Methodology

IN DECEMBER 2019, we began our annual exercise of tracking the completion of the Calls to Action. Our [2019 brief](#), the first in this annual series, articulated our critical methodology, which states a Call to Action is complete when all aspects of the Call are satisfied. The methodology also allows for the revocation of a “complete” Call to Action to hold all parties accountable for completing it. For example, in 2019, we found that while two Calls to Action had been completed, one had regressed, requiring us to revoke its completion status.

Ours is a relatively simple but stringent methodology that differs from our contemporaries’ approach. For example, [CBC’s Beyond 94](#) tracks the Calls to Actions’ progress by identifying initiatives that are a) not started, b) projects proposed and in progress, c) projects underway and in progress, and d) complete. On the other hand, when [Indigenous Watchdog](#) launched in 2020, it began using a similar methodology to ours but with much more expansive data and information on news and updates surrounding each Call to Action. Indigenous Watchdog, it has become increasingly clear, is an invaluable repository of data, information, and analysis. Like CBC, it expands on the progress of the Calls, but with more rigour, demonstrated through the “stalled” Calls to Action category. “Stalled” illustrates how a current government project might meet obstructions in the labyrinth of the bureaucracy responsible for fulfilling the Calls to Action.

Ultimately, our rationale for not expanding on whether a Call to Action is in progress, underway, or even stalled is straightforward: “At what point, after all, is ‘making progress’ meaningful when so many Calls to Action remain unfulfilled?”

Since the inception of this project, we have maintained that we are interested in Indigenous communities experiencing the material change that the Calls to Action expect – not the so-called good intentions of what could be done in the future.

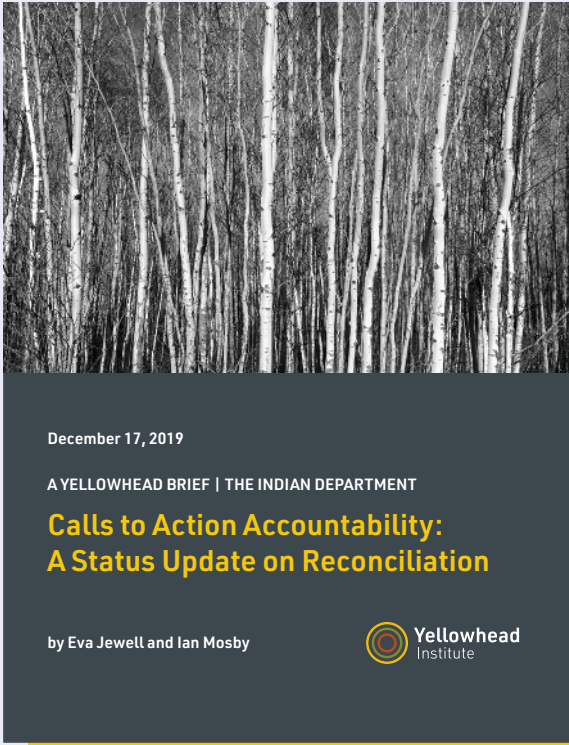
This methodology shapes our analysis. If material change and the end of structural discrimination are the goals of reconciliation, then certain Calls to Action aim to mobilize this change more than others. The Calls to Action are, after all, a road map toward equity among Indigenous peoples and Canadians. We [broadly define equity](#) in this context as “addressing structural shortfalls from decade upon decade of underfunding,” and consider it the bare minimum of creating the conditions for reconciliation to occur in this country.

There are two categories of Calls to Action and they differ in important ways.

Legacy Calls to Action (1-42) provide steps to redress the ongoing structural harms that Indigenous peoples face in the sectors of child welfare, education, health, culture and language, and justice. These Calls to Action directly call on Canada to end the legacy of colonial violence that continues to exist in the systems endured by Indigenous peoples. If completed, these Calls to Action would result in the beginnings of material change for Indigenous communities. These are also Calls to Action that, unsurprisingly, have seen the least movement.

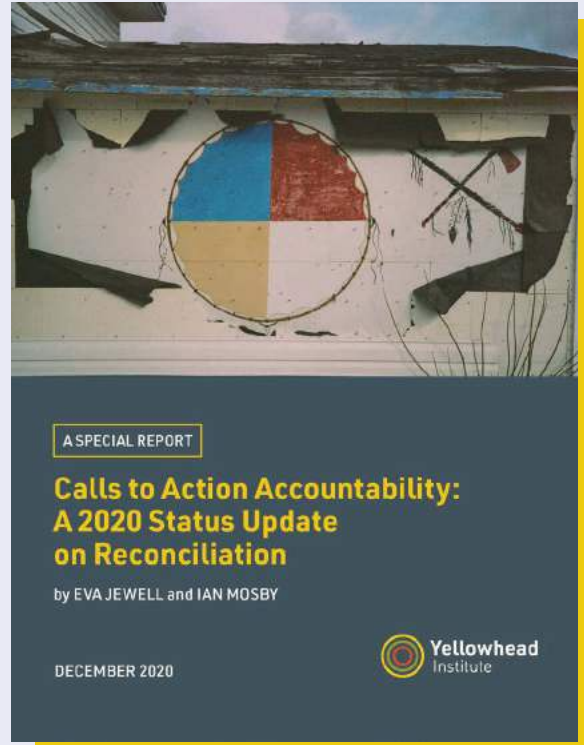
Reconciliation Calls to Action (43-94) outline 17 subcategories of various strategies to “advance the process of reconciliation in Canada.” These Calls to Action advance the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and their knowledges in various sectors of society, seek to educate Canadians about Indigenous peoples and Canada’s Indian Residential School System, and establish practices, policies, and actions that affirm Indigenous Rights. There is more progress here, often led by non-government organizations and focused on symbolic (but sometimes real) inclusion.

From our perspective, the Legacy Calls to Action are the most important because they promise to challenge the structural conditions that perpetuate the genocidal legacy of residential schools. Crucially, Canada’s failure to complete these Calls to Action brings into question its willingness to be a serious partner in any kind of meaningful reconciliation.



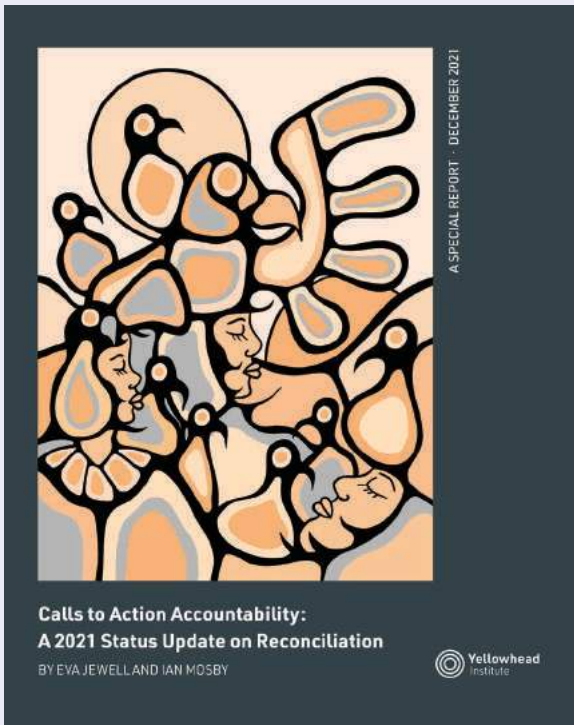
2019

Feature photograph by Stan Williams,
Mohawk & Anishinaabe



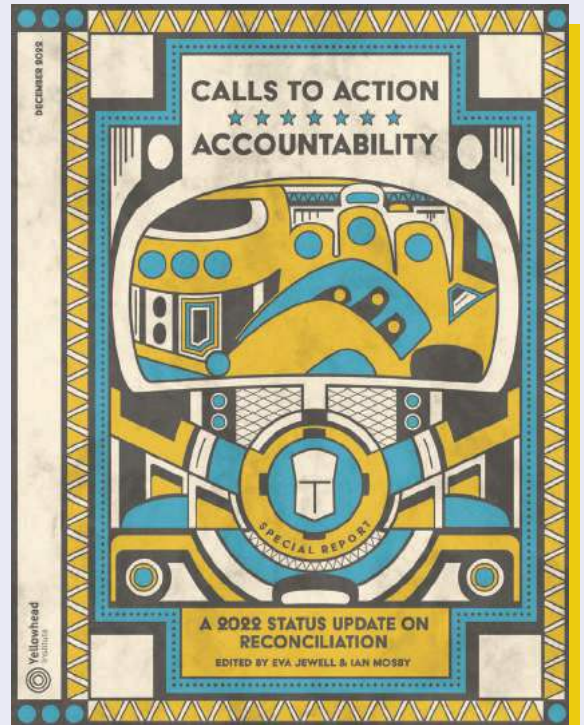
2020

Cover photograph by Seth Arcand,
Kipohkawk Cree Nation



2021

Cover artwork by Blake Angecneb
Anishinaabe, Lac Seul First Nation



2022

Cover artwork by Sonny Assu
Ligwida'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation

Timeline of Completed Calls to Action

Since our first brief in 2019, we have tracked the completion of seven Calls to Action:

2019 Two Calls to Action Completed

- 13 ...to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights.
- 72 ...allocate sufficient resources to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation to allow it to develop and maintain the National Residential School Student Death Register established by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

One Call to Action revoked: #84

2020 Zero Calls to Action Completed

2021 Three Calls to Action Completed

- 15 ...to appoint, in consultation with Aboriginal groups, an Aboriginal Languages Commissioner. The commissioner should help promote Aboriginal languages and report on the adequacy of federal funding of Aboriginal-languages initiatives.
- 80 ...in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, to establish, as a statutory holiday, a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation to honour Survivors, their families, and communities, and ensure that public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process.
- 94 ...to replace the Oath of Citizenship with the following: I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada including Treaties with Indigenous Peoples, and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen.

All Calls were completed within three weeks following the revelations of child graves outside Kamloops Indian Residential School – more action in three weeks than the prior three years combined

2022 Two Calls to Action Completed

- 67 ...to provide funding to the Canadian Museums Association to undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of museum policies and best practices to determine the level of compliance with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and to make recommendations.
- 70 ...to provide funding to the Canadian Association of Archivists to undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of archival policies and best practices to:
 - i. Determine the level of compliance with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the United Nations Joint-Orientlicher Principles, as related to Aboriginal peoples' inalienable right to know the truth about what happened and why, with regard to human rights violations committed against them in the residential schools.
 - ii. Produce a report with recommendations for full implementation of these international mechanisms as a reconciliation framework for Canadian archives.

Both professional association reports containing recommendations calling for more action.

2023 Zero Calls to Action Completed

In total, 13 of the 94 Calls to Action have been completed since 2015. That is a completion rate of 1.625 Calls to Action per year. If Canada continues at this pace, it will take another 58 years until the Calls to Action are completed, meaning that Indigenous peoples will have to wait until 2081 for reconciliation.

Learn More: yellowheadinstitute.org/trc

“I believe it’s important to think about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action as the Survivors’ work plan for the nation. The Calls to Action are really about justice and about learning from history.”

- CINDY BLACKSTOCK (GITXSAN NATION), EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE FIRST NATIONS CHILD AND FAMILY CARING SOCIETY

What We’ve Learned

Part of our approach to tracking accountability has been to seek the input and perspectives of Indigenous experts in various areas about the Calls to Action.

Over the years, we have been privileged to consult and collaborate with respected leaders and thinkers in the field like Cindy Blackstock, Jaris Swidrovich, Janet Smylie, Jennifer Brant, Kunuk Inutiq, Brent Debassige, Emily Riddle, Kris Statnyk, Scott Franks, Kelsi-Leigh Balaban, Douglas Sinclair, Ginger Gosnell-Myers, Kisha Supernant, Janice Forsyth, Raymond Frogner, Heather George, ‘Cúagilákv (Jess Háustí), and Camille Callison.

We spent many hours on Zoom calls, phone calls, and emails discussing the nuances of the Calls to Action and the barriers to their completion in their respective fields and communities. Their expertise guided our analyses, informed our understanding of the shape of each field the Calls to Action are nested within, and gave valuable insights that helped produce our findings of five broad barriers to reconciliation in Canada.



Five Challenges to Reconciliation

In the first two years of our annual reports, we identified five main challenges to Reconciliation in Canada, which endured each subsequent year we checked in on progress. Without fail, each year, we pondered the slow pace of government action, consulted with experts, and found the challenges remained relevant to our analysis. They are:

1. PATERNALISM

Deep-rooted, ongoing restrictive attitudes and behaviours of politicians, bureaucrats, and policy-makers, giving rise to a “Canada knows best” approach which prevents Indigenous peoples from leading on issues with their own solutions;

2. STRUCTURAL ANTI-INDIGENOUS DISCRIMINATION

Canada asserts legal myths to justify the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous lands and the subsequent impoverishment of Indigenous peoples;

3. “THE PUBLIC INTEREST”

Policy-makers and Canada’s legal teams use the economic interests and apathy of a non-Indigenous Canadian public to shore up justification for exploiting Indigenous lands;

4. INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES

While there is no shortage of promises, ongoing and chronic funding inequities mean that 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 as in the case of “economic reconciliation”; performative measures and actions serve as window dressing to manage Canada’s reputation.

The Year in Review: Figures Advancing Reconciliation in 2023

DESPITE ZERO Calls to Action being completed, 2023 was an eventful year when it came to resisting the status quo. There were two significant legal victories for First Nations. After more than 15 years of fierce advocacy at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal by the First Nations Family Caring Society (FNFCS) and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the Federal Court approved a historic \$23 billion compensation agreement for more than 300,000 First Nations children and their families who faced wrongful discrimination in Canada's Child Welfare system. Another \$20 billion will be spent on system reform. The class-action lawsuit is the largest settlement agreement in the history of Canada. And, as with all gains Indigenous peoples make in this country, this historic settlement did not pass without a fight by Canada every step of the way.

Despite the win, tensions continued between First Nations advocates and federal legal teams. Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director of the FNFCS, identified ongoing concerns with excessive fees charged by legal counsel surrounding the compensation: "I don't understand the system where the person who will have to have the most courage — those who are victimized — to bring forward the complaint [will] receive only a minutiae of what the lawyers receive who argued the complaint." First Nations children and their families await compensation, which will be distributed later in 2024 as the federal court is set to approve a protocol that will establish eligibility for compensation.

Another major victory took place in Ontario with the announcement that 21 First Nations signatories to the Robinson-Huron Treaty will share a \$10 billion settlement for unpaid annuities dating back 159 years. Since 1874, Anishinaabeg in northern Ontario have received an annuity of just \$4, despite the treaty requiring the annuity to grow relative to the economy in the region. Of course, immeasurable wealth has been extracted since then, but the annuity remained unchanged. Like the child welfare settlement, the negotiated settlement resulted from over a

decade of advocacy by the First Nations. On June 17, 2023, the governments of Ontario and Canada finally agreed to pay \$10 billion to the 21 First Nations.

In a sense, 2023 has been starkly similar to previous years. When there is concrete action, it does not come from Canada (which can't manage a single Call to Action in a year) but from Indigenous peoples, who fiercely advocate for themselves and resist the full weight of Canadian intransigence.

The child welfare and treaty annuity examples can be added to Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc's hard work to reveal child graves for the world to see, Phyllis Webstad's grassroots education advocacy that catalyzed the creation of Orange Shirt Day (later to be declared the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation), or the many everyday Indigenous peoples around the country standing up for justice and equity in their respective lives — crucial advances in reconciliation are overwhelmingly a result of Indigenous peoples' advocacy. While we celebrate their hard-fought wins to this day, we also lament that their victories occur in spite of Canada's reconciliatory roadblocks.

Douglas Sinclair, our colleague in tracking the Calls to Action and founder of Indigenous Watchdog, told us,

According to CBC News, 'The Canadian government likely owes Indigenous people almost \$76 billion for currently filed land claims and lawsuits, recent official reporting says — a sum that's nearly seven times greater today than when Justin Trudeau became prime minister.' This is the main problem with reconciliation. It takes the courts to impose long overdue financial remedies: \$23 Billion for Child Welfare, \$10 Billion for Robinson-Huron Treaty, \$1.5 Billion for Drinking Water Class Action etc. etc. One way to avoid litigation is to listen. It costs a lot less.

While this trend persists, so does the accountability work to challenge Canada and Canadians to implement the Calls to Action. Throughout writing these annual reports, we are often asked which specific Calls to Action are most important, or which could be relatively quick and easy to complete to advance reconciliation. We reiterate this year that treating reconciliation as a box-checking exercise is counter to its purpose. But in the spirit of identifying those Calls that would contribute to material changes, we have identified what we call the “measurement Calls to Action” in the Legacy section.

2 We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, to prepare and publish annual reports on the number of Aboriginal children (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) who are in care, compared with non-Aboriginal children, as well as the reasons for apprehension, the total spending on preventive and care services by child-welfare agencies, and the effectiveness of various interventions.

9 We call upon the federal government to prepare and publish annual reports comparing funding for the education of First Nations children on and off reserves, as well as educational and income attainments of Aboriginal peoples in Canada compared with non-Aboriginal people.

19 We call upon the federal government, in consultation with Aboriginal peoples, to establish measurable goals to identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and to publish annual progress reports and assess longterm trends. Such efforts would focus on indicators such as: infant mortality, maternal health, suicide, mental health, addictions, life expectancy, birth rates, infant and child health issues, chronic diseases, illness and injury incidence, and the availability of appropriate health services.

39 We call upon the federal government to develop a national plan to collect and publish data on the criminal victimization of Aboriginal people, including data related to homicide and family violence victimization.

These Calls to Action in child welfare, education, health, and justice, respectively, call upon various levels of government to cooperate in publishing reports comparing the experience and outcomes of Indigenous peoples in Canada and their non-Indigenous counterparts. The wisdom in these Calls to Action is that if completed, they will provide a baseline measurement for how historic and ongoing inequities impact Indigenous peoples and what is required to close those gaps.

While this data already exists to some degree and is published on a sporadic basis in disparate forms, these Calls to Action have proven unimplemented year after year. Why is that the case?

Given that discriminatory funding inequities in child welfare alone have resulted in a Canadian Human Rights Tribunal order to the federal government to pay out the largest settlement agreement in Canadian history, we wonder if the published reports of funding in education, health, and justice might reveal motivating disincentive. Could Canada be legally liable for funding discrimination in these areas as well? A more generous analysis might posit that their lack of completion could be because a body to publish these reports does not yet exist. This brings us to the topic of Bill C-29, *The National Council for Reconciliation Act*.



from Calls to Action Accountability:
A 2020 Status Update on Reconciliation by Eva Jewell & Ian Mosby

“The fifth anniversary of the Final Report of the TRC is a significant milestone. But as we have experienced time and again in the past (with thousands of recommendations over the past 30 years unfulfilled), it is unsurprising and decidedly on brand for Canada that the “most important relationship” with Indigenous peoples has been abandoned during the pandemic (and arguably, has never been tended to in a meaningful way).

Canada owes it to survivors of residential schools to do better. And we’ve had enough of the crocodile tears and empty promises of the past five years. What we need is meaningful action and we’ll continue trying to hold Canada to account for these failures.”



Bill C-29 and the National Council for Reconciliation

THE CLOSEST CANADA came to completing a Call to Action this year was the passage of an amended Bill C-29, *The National Council for Reconciliation Act*. While the Senate supported the Bill, the House of Commons failed to give it Royal Assent before it rose for the year. It will be among the first orders of Parliamentary business in 2024.

In our 2022 report, we expressed both hope and skepticism around the prospects for Bill C-29, which had been introduced by the House of Commons early that year. It required study in committee and to be passed by the Senate, so when we were called before the Standing Senate Committee on Indigenous Peoples nearly a year later in May 2023, we repeated and extended our critiques, specifying that “our support for a national council is very much conditional on whether or not it is properly funded; on whether it is truly representative of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities; and that it is provided with sufficient access to the data and information it will need to fulfill this important mandate.”

According to Kelsi-Leigh Balaban’s [Yellowhead Brief](#), “A National Council for Reconciliation: Challenges and Opportunities of Bill C-29,” it was clear that we were not alone in our criticism of the Bill in its original form.

Other Senate witnesses, for instance, criticized the limited funding, with former Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Commissioner Marie Wilson telling the Senate that, “without the money and the means, everything can become politicized and fragile where this needs to be permanent and stable... This cannot be another perceived destitute organization trying to work miracles on a shoestring.”

Concerning the capacity of the Council to access data, Métis National Council President Cassidy Caron told the Senate that fulfilling this part of its mandate would “require legislation that provides... the ability to administer subpoenas.”

The Standing Committee’s report on Bill C-29 echoed many of these concerns and made several proposed amendments to the Bill as well as a series of broad recommendations. We remain uncertain, however, whether these amendments will address our core concerns.

Take, for example, the most substantive of the proposed amendments regarding data and information sharing. As we noted above, this amendment is relevant to the measurement Calls to Action and the Committee recommended that “a complaint resolution mechanism... should be established at the same time as the information sharing and disclosure protocol described in section 16(1)” and, to that end, “If the Minister fails to comply with the obligations set out in subsections (1) and (2) [of the disclosure of information protocol], the Council may apply to a judge of the Federal Court for a declaration to that effect or for any other appropriate order.”

While this is an important change, Indigenous communities are well aware of the problems inherent in leaving essential and time-sensitive matters like this up to the courts. We are skeptical that this amendment will guarantee that the National Council will have consistent and timely access to the key data and information necessary to fulfill its mandate.

Other proposed amendments clarify the role of the National Council by stating that “nothing in this Act is to be construed as authorizing the Council to act on behalf of, or represent the interests of, an Indigenous governing

body” and clarifying that consulting or engaging with the Council does not constitute meeting Canada’s “duty to consult an Indigenous group, community or people that holds rights recognized and affirmed by section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.” While this is important to ensure that the National Council does not speak for rights holders, we wonder who they will speak for. After all, the legislation grants Canada an outsized role in determining its composition, selecting the majority of the 9-12 members of the National Council. Our concerns about the representation of the body still stand, and we think Marie Wilson’s point about the Council being politicized is also possible.

When it comes to the funding issue identified by the Bill’s critics, the Standing Committee reported that they were “persuaded by witness testimony arguing that the current amount of the endowment is insufficient to enable the Council to fulfill their mandate as set out in the bill” and therefore insisted that “the government must increase

the endowment funds to a more appropriate level, at least commensurate with the endowment provided to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, and ensure the Council has access to long-term, multi-year funding.” However, because the funding structure is not laid out in Bill C-29 itself, this matter remains outstanding. We are reminded of the Indigenous Languages Act passed in 2021 that did not include a funding mechanism, and years later, the Office of the Indigenous Languages Commissioner has still not opened. Notably, the Commissioner’s role was designed — much like the National Council’s — to hold Canada accountable.

We will learn more about the National Council’s effectiveness in the new year and whether it will have the resources, representation, and independence to fulfill the mandate set out by the TRC in Call to Action 55.

Rhetorical Shifts in Reconciliation

BEYOND CANADA'S APPALLING lack of progress on the Calls to Action, this year has also seen the consolidation of significant rhetorical shifts in the language around reconciliation, both by the Canadian government and Canadian institutions responsible for completing the Calls to Action. All of these shifts, we worry, point to efforts to undermine the work of the TRC and the structural changes demanded in the Calls to Action with something that looks a lot like the pre-TRC status quo in settler/Indigenous relations in Canada.

Economic Reconciliation

One of these concerning shifts in the rhetoric of reconciliation is the emergence of the concept of “economic reconciliation” in a growing number of discussions of the Calls to Action. As a [recent CBC investigation](#) shows, it is a term that has moved from the periphery to the mainstream in recent years. The Conservative Party of Canada included the term in its 2021 election platform followed by a 2023 Liberal budget promising \$65 million towards [“Advancing Economic Reconciliation by Unlocking the Potential of First Nations Lands.”](#) And, as our colleague Kelsi-Leigh Balaban showed in her [September 2023 analysis](#) of recent debates over Bill C-29, Conservative Senators have been “advocating for a reserved seat for an individual dedicated to ‘economic reconciliation’ on the [National] Council.”

What does economic reconciliation mean, though? While difficult to find a consensus definition, it is clear it *does not mean* [Land Back](#). Nor does it mean implementing the kinds of meaningful reparations called for in the [United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#) or, for that matter, in Yellowhead Institute’s [Cash Back](#) Red Paper. Instead, in the words of a recent editorial in the Calgary Herald: [“Economic reconciliation is natural resource development.”](#)

The concept is fast becoming a new tool for getting pipelines, strip mines, fracking wells, nuclear waste disposal sites, and tar sands tailing ponds approved through “partnerships” and “resource sharing agreements” with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.

It’s no wonder, then, that the [Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers \(CAPP\)](#) recently argued that, when it comes to Indigenous peoples, “the industry’s strongest role is through ‘economic reconciliation.’” Not compensating First Nations for the environmental, social, and economic damage caused historically by oil and gas development on Indigenous lands but, rather, “identifying feasible ways to share economic opportunities arising from resource development, while continuing to improve and grow relationships based on trust and respect.” Some of the “notable actions” CAPP highlights include, “implementing Indigenous relations policies, providing Indigenous training to employees and contractors, and partnering with Indigenous business and communities.”

At the 2022 annual meeting of the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association, Lawrence Schembri, Deputy Governor of the Bank of Canada, [argued](#) ‘economic reconciliation’ should build on ideas long rejected by most Indigenous communities. Schembri, for instance, lauded Manny Jules — the chief commissioner of the First Nations Tax Commission — and a leading figure calling for the conversion of reserve lands to fee-simple private property. As a result, Jules and his First Nations Tax Commission have long garnered significant support from right-wing think tanks like the Fraser Institute as well as Conservative strategists because it offers the illusion of an Indigenous-led vision for so-called economic reconciliation.

Despite identifying Call to Action 92 as representing “the objectives of economic reconciliation as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” none of the “financial innovations” Schembri describes in his remarks reflect its central premise, which clearly states that “the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as a reconciliation framework.” In fact, few of the calls for “economic reconciliation” from settler organizations like the Bank of Canada include the application of UNDRIP to the corporate sector. This is no surprise given UNDRIP’s explicit demand that Indigenous peoples have the “right to redress” for traditional territories that “have been confiscated, taken, occupied, used or damaged without their free, prior and informed consent.”

Economic reconciliation, then, resembles Reconciliation™ within Canada’s exploitative economic approach more than anything called for by residential school survivors or restitution-based concepts like Land Back. In fact, contrary to what many supporters of economic reconciliation claim, it’s a concept that the TRC itself barely mentioned. Not only is “economic reconciliation” absent from the Calls to Action, it only appears twice in the thousands of pages of the multivolume Final Report of the TRC — and both times in relation specifically to Call to Action 92. This heavy focus on economic reconciliation exploits reconciliation as a whole and steers it toward a version that primarily benefits corporate and state interests while promising fringe benefits for Indigenous groups.

We, therefore, view this growing focus on economic reconciliation by both Conservative and Liberal politicians — as well as by right-wing think tanks and major financial institutions — as a way of distracting from Canada’s ongoing failure to complete the 42 Legacy Calls to Action.

Decolonization, Indigenization, and Reconciliation

After the TRC’s Final Report was published in 2015, many institutions around the country publicly committed themselves to aspirational goals like reconciliation, Indigenization, and decolonization. Some public, private, and non-profit organizations hired Indigenous staff members for the first time and many more created positions designed specifically to respond to the TRC’s Calls to Action.

In past reports, we have been highly critical of how many settler organizations adopted the language of “reconciliation” to access post-TRC funding opportunities — often at the expense of grassroots Indigenous efforts. But many of these efforts really did create opportunities for Indigenous peoples that had not been available previously and, as the TRC Commissioners had hoped, forced many institutions to begin to reckon with their complicity in multigenerational harms done to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.

In recent years, though, we have seen growing evidence that many settler institutions have taken back their past commitments to principles like reconciliation, Indigenization, and decolonization.

In November 2022, the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) fired Kanien:keha’ka Senior Curator Greg Hill after 22 years working at the NGC because, Hill said, “I don’t agree with and am deeply disturbed by the colonial and anti-Indigenous ways the Department of Indigenous Ways and Decolonization is being run.”

Barely a year later, the newly hired NGC director told a podcast interviewer that the gallery “comes from a colonial past” and “we’re not going to change that.” He also explicitly questioned the NGC’s previous commitments: “What is decolonization?” he told the interviewer. “What would it entail? I’m not even sure I’m interested in thinking about it. I’m interested in building something, not de-building it.”

Given that one of the two Calls to Action completed in 2022 was number 67 following the publication of the Canadian Museums Association’s (CMA) landmark Moved to Action: Activating UNDRIP in Canadian Museums report, it is clear that the leadership of museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions in Canada are a long way from completing the ten recommendations laid out by the CMA.

This was made even more clear when, just this past fall, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) quietly and without any public announcement apparently dismissed its first-ever Indigenous curator — the Anishinaabe artist and curator Wanda Nanibush, whose co-authored book *Moving the Museum: Indigenous + Canadian Art* at the AGO was awarded the 2023 Toronto Book Award. While the AGO



from Calls to Action Accountability:
A 2021 Status Update on Reconciliation by Eva Jewell & Ian Mosby

“If morbid and traumatizing revelations of Indigenous children’s graves advanced completion on Calls to Action that are only symbolic, what will have to happen for Canada to complete Calls to Action that are substantive?”

...To our minds, the only way to breathe life back into the conversation on reconciliation would be for Canada to first accept the truth that there are too many systems still in place that actively harm Indigenous peoples, particularly the most vulnerable. Accepting this truth exposes any notion of simply ‘repairing’ the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canadians for what it is: pure fantasy. Real and meaningful transformative change to underlying systems of oppression – not just individual tinkering around the edges of a broken colonial machine – is, therefore, required.”



still has not explained why (or even whether) it fired Nanibush, the art magazine [Hyperallergic](#) reported that a “complaint sent by the organization Israel Museum and Arts, Canada (IMAAC) to the AGO on October 16 [2023] has spurred concerns that Nanibush’s public comments on the Israeli occupation and bombardment of Palestine may have played a role in the decision,” with the IMAAC letter alleged (and without specific examples) that Nanibush was “posting inflammatory, inaccurate rants against Israel.”

Following a major outcry and multiple letters of support for Nanibush — including a [letter](#) from over one hundred members of the international Indigenous arts community and [another](#) from 33 recipients of Governor General’s Awards in Visual and Media Arts, among others — the AGO Director and CEO, Stephen Jost, released a word-salad of a [statement](#) promising that the gallery is “taking the time to deeply review and reflect on our commitments to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report so we can continue our efforts.”

Arts and heritage institutions are not alone in walking back on their previous commitments to reconciliation and decolonization. After all, shortly after being first elected, Justin Trudeau himself [announced plans](#) to lead a review of federal policies with the goal of “decolonizing Canada.” Many [have argued](#) that Trudeau’s version of decolonization has always borne little resemblance to the radical promise that the word contains, and nothing makes this rhetorical sleight of hand more clear than Canada’s response to the oppression of other Indigenous peoples by Canada’s closest allies.

Take, for instance, Israel’s now more than two-month-long siege of Gaza. At the time of writing, [estimates show that](#) nearly 20,000 Palestinians have been killed — almost 8,000 of whom are children — over 7,000 people are missing either due to imprisonment or lost under rubble, over 50,000 people have been injured, [25,000 children](#) have lost one or both of their parents and, in all, [1.9 million people](#), [nearly 90 percent of Gaza’s population](#), have been displaced. A recent estimate by the [UN World Food Programme](#) suggests that roughly half the population of Gaza are quite literally starving and have “no idea where their next meal is coming from.”

Yet, in the face of this humanitarian catastrophe, Trudeau refused to call for a ceasefire for more than two months,

even as a [growing chorus of experts](#) — including from within the [UN Human Rights Council](#) — began warning that what is happening in Gaza “point[s] to a genocide in the making.”

Indigenous activists, scholars, and community members have long recognized the parallels between the experience of Palestinians living under Israeli settler colonial occupation and those of their own communities.

And this is why, on December 7, 2023, former TRC Co-Chair and residential school survivor Dr. Wilton Littlechild brought an Emergency Resolution before the [AFN Special Chiefs’ Assembly](#) calling for “a permanent ceasefire in the Israel-Gaza crisis,” as well as “the liberation of all hostages.” But Littlechild’s resolution went much further, also calling for “the unimpeded flow of immediate humanitarian access to all occupied Indigenous peoples’ territories” and “full respect for international human rights law to all occupied Indigenous peoples’ lands, including both Gaza and the Occupied West Bank,” as well as condemning “all forms of violence against Indigenous peoples” and advocating “an end to the violent, illegal occupation of all Indigenous peoples lands.”

In his comments on the resolution, Littlechild drew parallels between Palestine and Canada, noting, “Yes, the resolution is international in scope, but it touches on our home territories.” Furthermore, “When there is dispossession of life, dispossession of language, dispossession of territory contrary to our international treaties,” Littlechild told the Special Assembly, “then we must say something.” The resolution passed unanimously and found strong support from AFN representatives like Kitigan Zibi Chief Dylan Whiteduck, who similarly argued that what is happening in the West Bank and Gaza “is colonialism and the taking over of [Indigenous] lands and territories.”

This is a stark contrast with Canada, New Zealand, and Australia’s [joint statement on December 12](#) calling for a so-called “sustainable ceasefire.” While the very concept of a “sustainable ceasefire” is about as meaningful as Trudeau’s earlier commitments to “decolonization,” it still is shocking that it took the displacement of nearly 90 percent of the population of Gaza and the deaths of almost

20,000 civilians for Canada to gently state its support of “Palestinians’ right to self-determination” and proclaim that “settlements and settler violence are serious obstacles to a negotiated two-state solution.”

Canada’s flaccid response to Palestinian suffering — overwhelmingly experienced by children and, as the AFN resolution makes clear, itself hauntingly parallel to the history of this country — makes us question what Canada has learned from its own complicity in acts of genocide against Indigenous peoples.

Does every child *really* matter when the deaths of nearly 8,000 Palestinian children in just over 60 days were not enough to convince Canada to support a permanent ceasefire? What will compel Canada to act in good faith on the Calls to Action made by survivors of Canadian genocide or to wholly condemn what the UN has called “a genocide in the making” by its peer on the world stage?



from Calls to Action Accountability:
A 2022 Status Update on Reconciliation by Eva Jewell & Ian Mosby

“As certain reporting Calls to Action are completed, we are also reminded this year that there can be pathways for settler institutional leadership. Indigenous peoples have, time and again, been taking on the hard work of leading and steering reconciliation efforts. But what does it look like to share the obligations of reconciliation?”

...Perhaps, though, the ongoing failure of Canada to keep its promises when it comes to the Calls to Action highlights the limits of ‘reconciliation’ as a framework for meaningful and lasting change. And we have to wonder: should we just abandon ‘reconciliation’ altogether?”



Conclusion

IT IS AGAINST this global backdrop that our work comes into clearer focus. After another year of no completed Calls to Action, the co-option of reconciliation by corporate Canada, and the backsliding of non-governmental organizations — paired with Canada’s cheerleading for colonial violence elsewhere — our work on these annual reports is coming to an end. We have carried it for five years, identifying the progress where it occurs, the outstanding challenges as we see them, and an easy-to-follow roadmap for improvement. But we believe that the era of reconciliation in Canada is largely stagnant, and with it, so too is our annual reporting of the TRC’s Calls to Action.

To be clear, we are not giving up. We will continue to organize, analyze, and advocate for change in the many areas of community and academic life that continue to define our lives and work.

Indeed, Yellowhead Institute will continue to press for transformation in Indigenous law and policy generally, and we will support that work, too. But our energy will shift from authoring this annual report toward the campaigns and projects where we can see more meaningful types of material change. Right now, progress on the Calls for Action simply is not one of them.

It is possible that the National Council for Reconciliation will pick up where we left off. Perhaps Calls to Action accountability from this point forward means monitoring this new national body. Thankfully, Indigenous Watchdog will continue to shine a light on Canada’s failures with a level of detail that we have never been able to replicate. At the same time, Indigenous activists and leaders will resist and force Canada’s hand as they have always done. We support and endorse them all, and will continue our role in advocating for justice alongside them, just in different ways.

And so for us, it’s time to move on.

When we started doing this work in 2019, we never expected it to become such a significant part of our lives and work. And we’re both so grateful for everyone we met while writing these reports, all of the people who read them and used them to advocate for change in their communities, and most of all, for all the time we got to spend learning from so many of the most brilliant and dedicated Indigenous thinkers and activists working hard to hold Canada to account. But there are limits to how many times you can write a report about how Canada, once again, has failed to make any meaningful progress.





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