

# A Decade of Disappointment: Reconciliation & the System of a Crown

by Eva Jewell

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**CANADA IS** one year away from a decade of Truth and Reconciliation, and progress on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) 94 Calls to Action is underwhelming.

From 2019-2024, I co-authored an independent special report on the Calls to Action for Yellowhead Institute with my colleague Dr. Ian Mosby. Each year we examined movement on the TRC Calls, providing a status update with analysis of the progress (or lack thereof). Our method was simple: if all aspects of the Call to Action were fulfilled, we considered it complete. In our five years of reporting, we saw just five fully completed – despite the Liberal government's 2015 promise of their full implementation.

**This prompts a perpetual question that, nearly ten years later, still bedevils Canadians: "what can be done to advance reconciliation in Canada?"**

You have to stop the harm to reconcile it.

## Colonial Systems at Work

Canada's Indian Residential School system, which operated for over 150 years, aimed to dissolve Indigenous families and their land-based social structures.

But injustice did not end when Canada closed the Residential Schools. For Indigenous peoples, colonial violence didn't live solely in the schools, it lives on in the fabric of Canadian society.

Toward the goal of reconciliation, ending harm is difficult, if not impossible, in a system of colonial design. As theorist Stafford Beer surmised, "The purpose of a system is what it does"; describing that it is a system's outcomes—not its intentions or aspirations—that are a more honest measure of its objective.

Take for example, Canada's child welfare system, itself responsible for much of the misery reconciliation purports to fix. It contains mostly Indigenous kids. Being involved in child welfare is a known pipeline to the justice system, which, in 2020 reached historically high rates of Indigenous inmates. The most common reasons for involvement in the child welfare system is neglect due to poverty, poor housing, and substance use; all of which are directly related to decades of Canada's brutal policies of economic oppression followed by fiscal austerity over resources that rightfully belong to Indigenous peoples, not to mention genocide. As a result, Indigenous people experience the poorest health and educational outcomes, contributing to lower incomes; and we are more likely to experience discrimination and health challenges at work. Consequently, a known social determinant of health in Canada is Indigenous status.

**In other words, you're healthier if you're not Indigenous. The purpose of a system is what it does.**

In its years examining the impact of Canada's Residential Schools, the TRC learned of the continuing injustices against Indigenous peoples in the areas of Child Welfare, Education, Health, and Justice specifically. These institutions wreak so much havoc on Indigenous life and

wellbeing that the majority of the first 42 Calls to Action in the “Legacy” category call for redress to *end* systemic injustices, funding disparities, and rampant discrimination that Indigenous peoples disproportionately experience.

## **Reconciliation is not just about apologizing for past wrongs, at which Canada is quite adept; it’s about ending *current* wrongs that are happening today, and preventing future wrongs—both of which Canada fails to do.**

The Legacy Calls to Action also happen to be those with the least progress.

Over the years, Mosby and I consistently pointed to those four Legacy Calls to Action (#2, #9, #19, #30) where the TRC called for a) annual funding comparison metrics between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, and in some cases, between on and off-reserve populations, and b) annual reporting on progress toward equity in Child Welfare, Education, Health, and Justice.

The logic of these Calls is to clearly identify Canada’s unwillingness to adequately invest resources to support Indigenous communities, over whom it has exerted control for the last 160+ years. Resources which – according to research in the *Cash Back Red Paper* – are owed to Indigenous peoples for several reasons, not least of which is the outright theft of land that amounts to claims in excess of \$76 billion dollars.

Yet, amidst Canada’s discriminatory funding formulas, Indigenous peoples get by on less than the average Canadian and are subject to blame in the public perception for not doing more to address compounding issues with fewer resources.

In April of this year – 9 long years after the release of the Calls to Action – the federal government finally established the National Council for Reconciliation, which has the mandate to produce an annual report that is supposed to contain information about disparities caused by the Crown’s colonial systems, and hopefully, will fulfill these Legacy Calls to Action. We paused the annual Calls to Action Accountability report for Yellowhead Institute because reporting on the lack of progress, year after year, felt futile without meaningful effort by Canada. In two of the five years we authored the report, we reported no

completed Calls to Action. As we noted in our final report, there is a limit to how many times we can analyze nothing.

Instead, we look now to the National Council for Reconciliation and its mandate to report on the Calls to Action. Perhaps with the federal directive, increased public awareness, and a growing expectation of progress in reconciliation that actually means something for Indigenous people, this body can provoke more movement – particularly in the Legacy Calls to Action.

## **The Reconciliation Dial**

While there is much to critique about lack of progress thus far, it is not to say there hasn’t been some movement. After all, in 2021, three Calls to Action were completed in three weeks alone following the revelation of unmarked child graves outside of Kamloops Indian Residential School. The reconciliation dial was cranked in response to national and international outcry.

But since 2021, there has not been the same significant movement on the Calls to Action. How can we explain this? September 30th made sure that the word reconciliation is known to households around the country, yet the will to bring it to life appears mostly absent. Increasingly, I am asked, “What do you say to Canadians who will use this as another day off?” – the implication being the widespread knowledge that reconciliation is somebody else’s job and not to be taken seriously by the public.

## **And so the everydayness of colonialism, its mundane and ordinary presence in Canadian life, and its destructive impact on Indigenous life goes on.**

In the place of transformation – even incremental or modest change – we’ve seen the rise of consultants offering Indigenous 101 workshops, the symbolic raising of Indigenous flags, orange donuts, and even a class of Indigenous experts willing to translate familial trauma of genocide into something middle class Canadians can consume while being assured Canada remains a great country. Reconciliation, already an unthinkably generous gesture to offer a violently colonial state by the very survivors of its genocide, was always at risk of becoming purely spectacle.

In this way, popular notions of reconciliation are disconnected from the lived experiences of Indigenous communities, an abstract promise of change that doubles as reassurance for a Canadian public.

The reconciliation dial is stuck at 13 (now 14, perhaps, since I'm no longer closely tracking) out of 94 because Canada and its citizenry refuse to challenge violent systems or consider their role within them. Instead, a version of reconciliation that serves solely to manage the conscience of a settler public prevails; one that holds their hand and comforts, asking only for their tears, maybe a donation, and the commitment to try harder one day, maybe.

#### CITATION

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