

Reconciliation: Four Barriers to Paradigm Shifting

Reconciliation can only begin when the people of Canada collectively wish it. This proposed desire to live differently with the *other* has to be precisely that—a desire. Travelling about the country over the years and, in particular, over the last two months after publishing *A Fair Country*,¹ I have sensed that people are now ready for reconciliation. I sense this particularly from the eagerness with which many Canadians have embraced the idea that Canada is a country inspired more by Aboriginal world views than European world views. Many Aboriginal leaders have been saying this in one way or another for many years, but it has been as if non-Aboriginal people were not listening, did not know how to listen, or were intimidated by the message. Now, many are no longer intimidated by this way of thinking. How many? I sense that this is building into a new consensus; yet, a consensus can be nothing more than romanticism if people do not work out why they now feel this way and what went so wrong that it obscured our shared reality for a century and a half. I can think of four things that still stand in the way. Four barriers will have to be dealt with, and some of Canada's institutions will have to undergo paradigm shifts if any real reconciliation is to take place.

Barrier One: Lacking a Plan for Change

First, while non-Aboriginal people may now be ready for change, many of them still have no idea of how to go about it. This is no longer the result of ill will. They simply have little sense of what that change would look like realistically. Those who have been explaining the situation and laying out scenarios for decades—those involved with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, for example—must be amazed at how little of this debate has made its way into the public consciousness. Each breakthrough, which ought to have been initiated immediately, has broad implications for how our society could function. Supreme Court decisions such as *Guerin* and *Delgamuukw*,² for example, or the Haida and Taku decisions³ on the obligations to consult have been immediately shrunk into the narrowest possible definitions. These breakthroughs are still treated as if they are exceptions to the rules of Canadian society, which they are not.

Canadians in general now seem to be ready to assume guilt or responsibility for wrongs done when it comes to questions on Aboriginal issues. But guilt and responsibility are only preliminary steps. They may clear the way for change, but they do not represent change itself. If left on their own, they can

become an obstacle to change. For example, I can see a tendency in public representations of guilt and responsibility to tie both to an assumption that Aboriginal society is largely broken and irreparably dysfunctional. In other words, while the willingness to apologize is genuine, it is somehow tied to an assumption that things are really not going well among Indigenous peoples and that these problems are irresolvable.

This attitude is partly the outcome of an addiction among mainstream media to cover up what does not work in society in general. In the case of covering up stories on Aboriginal issues, this sort of tabloid populism, even in the best newspapers or on the best television programs, is not counterbalanced by any other view of Indigenous society. And so the persistent waves of dysfunctional stories represent, for most Canadians, the only stories they hear. And even the occasional positive stories—for example, that there were 27,000 Status First Nations people in post-secondary education in 1999, up from 200 in the mid-1960s⁴—are presented as an artificial lamentation that the numbers are below the national average.

In such an atmosphere, a myth—a false myth—is created, which is not so different from the myth of a century ago that Aboriginal people represented a dying civilization because they did not adapt to the modern world. Now, Aboriginal people are represented as a growing population that cannot function in contemporary society, unless of course they accept the concepts of that society, which is to say the concepts derived from Europe. In other words, the conscious intellectual concepts of many Canadians have not changed; yet other Canadians sense that these concepts do not really work for them or for Canadian society as a whole. And, of course, they do not work for Aboriginal people.

Reconciliation can only happen if these concepts are based on truth—a truth that works for all people—and clarity of understanding between people. Guilt and pity, on the other hand, destroy human relations. Of course, these very real social problems were produced by the residential schools, the lack of respect for treaties, and the long period of institutionalized racism. These cannot be solved in an atmosphere of guilt and pity. The most basic need is to obtain knowledge and therefore understanding. There is a remarkable and fast-growing new Aboriginal leadership, which has a very good understanding of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous civilizations, such as how they fit together in their historic and modern forms and how they are influenced by each other. These leaders are finding new ways to be heard by their own communities and, also, by Canadians in general. This is happening because they are novelists, playwrights, lawyers, academics, and political figures. Their influence is growing incrementally and their understanding is

key to breaking the old, intellectually lazy assumptions of most Canadians. The central need is not incremental; it is for a broad understanding of what change would look and feel like for everyone. I will come back to this under the subject of language.

Barrier Two: Not Hearing Truths

Now it is essential to look at the second barrier, which is how people listen to the most fundamental of truths; how they are able to hear them. The most basic of steps—moving towards reconciliation because we are able to listen to the truth—has only just begun. It will be a long process because people who have suffered have yet to be heard in any sustained way. They need to hear themselves being listened to. They need to hear others hearing them. Which others? Their families and communities, the population as a whole, the religious and civil organizations that had overseen the wrongdoing, and the governments that are ultimately responsible.

People are beginning to understand how painful this will be for both the speaker and the listener, but these truths must be spoken because healing is itself a painful process. Yet, it is meant to be a process of dignity and self-affirmation for those who suffered, not one in which guilt and pity pull everyone down. It is not meant to add to the dominant false myth of Aboriginal society being dysfunctional in the modern world. It is meant to be a humanizing process in which people who were not the victims learn to understand the dehumanizing nature of suffering. Suffering does not disappear simply because it has been evoked. That long experience of being heard and of hearing is meant to bring people through their suffering and their guilt to a new shared dignity.

Barrier Three: Needing a Common Language

The third barrier brings us back to language. Reconciliation is neither romantic nor easy. It can only happen if people share a language that they feel to be true. What I mean by *language* is a way to evoke and share an understanding. This is where the greatest difficulty lies. The language by which Canada most commonly functions remains passively derivative of nineteenth-century British and French concepts. As we have slipped closer to the United States, our dysfunctional language has been increasingly adapted to reflect the US version of the same European ideas.

This Euro-American way of expressing relationships and situations is tied to the old concepts of the monolithic, Westphalian nation-state, which assumes that there will be a centralized mythology, a natural majority of citizens, probably with some racial foundation, and a form of loyalty based

on the habits of that majority. Yet Canada is not monolithic, it is not at all Westphalian, and it does not have a centralized mythology or a natural majority in its citizenry. Loyalty cannot therefore be based on the habits of a majority. Loyalty here could perhaps be based upon shared ethics or a sense of place or of inclusion—something that resembles an Aboriginal world view of the circle. As for the possibility of racial loyalty, it does not even make pseudo-sense as a Canadian concept.

If a country persists in using a false language, it will not be able to function. In the case of reconciliation, each time an Aboriginal leader uses terms such as *self-government*, *sovereignty*, or *nation*, the non-Aboriginal listener hears these terms in the Euro-US sense—quite a different sense than how Aboriginal listeners perceive these terms. Georges Erasmus talked about this at length in his LaFontaine-Baldwin lecture: “even when we used the same words, Aboriginal people and government representatives were often talking about different things.”⁵ He was referring partly to the in-depth research by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples into language, meaning, and the possibility of understanding; but also to the legacy of misunderstanding that has stonewalled discourses between Aboriginal and Canadian people for the last three centuries and into the new millennium.

What I have argued in *A Fair Country* is that most Canadians are confused by what they actually mean when they write or speak. Why? It is because they remain chained to Euro-US meanings, as if Canada were a culture inspired by and derived from Britain, France, and the United States and from European ideas of philosophy, politics, and law in general. There is influence of course, but if this approach does not ease and strengthen in the way we deal with ourselves and with others, then that influence cannot be as profound as we think. It is a more meaningful interpretation to see ourselves as a civilization inspired by Aboriginal world views. The way we act at our best makes sense when it is traced to Aboriginal language, meaning, and concepts coming out of the shared experiences of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. Again, as Georges Erasmus puts it: “This is how Canada came to be a ‘peaceable kingdom,’ not one born of violence and conquest.”⁶ For me, this explains the instinctive, positive reaction I have continually heard when I evoke the concept of inspiration based on Aboriginal world views for the whole civilization, whether from old-stock immigrants or new arrivals.

If this idea of a more accurate inspiration is accepted, then it becomes quite easy to develop a language of meaning that works on all sides. It is a matter of education. This means rethinking the way in which we teach philosophy, law, literature, political science, and so on. Today, they are all taught as if there

was no reality here, as if everything important begins elsewhere. While it is good to have specializations and therefore good to concentrate on Aboriginal law or literature, this should not mean that Aboriginal world views are sidelined as a closed-shop specialty. These ideas also need to be built into the heart of how we all think about philosophy, politics, and literature. That is how you construct the language of understanding and reconciliation. To be precise, if the Aboriginal concept of the circle is the basis of the Canadian approach towards citizenship, immigration, and federalism, we make a terrible mistake in acting as if the sources for these things were mysteriously found in the Enlightenment, in the Westphalian nation-state model, or in early European democracy.

There are three obvious examples of how faulty this approach can be, and they lie in 1) the status of *Delgamuukw*, 2) the treatment of Aboriginal languages, and 3) the federal government's approach to Northern sovereignty.

Delgamuukw represented an important breakthrough in the formal indigenization of Canadian law, not simply in the treatment of indigenous oral memory. Of course, the legal recognition of oral memory was a revolution in the interpretation of this case and of other related cases. But Canada is, in general, a far more oral culture than any other Western democracy. This orality is constantly being enriched by the strengthening of Aboriginal society and its role in Canada and by the continuing arrival of immigrants—soon to be citizens—whose first language is neither English nor French. For the whole life of these new first-generation citizens, their relationship with Canada will be primarily oral. If this works in a way that is not so easily done in other countries, it is because there is a strong inheritance of Aboriginal orality, very much alive and powerful, upon which new Canadians can build. This Aboriginal-immigrant relationship should be one of the most important relationships in Canadian society. Yet the mainstream structures seem to stand in the way of what could be the single most important conversation inside our society—between Aboriginal people and new Canadians. This is a missing conversation central to any real reconciliation. Few efforts are being made to encourage it, yet there is no history of antagonism or betrayal between Aboriginal people and new Canadians. Without slipping into generalizations, many of the latter are simply confused by a debate from which they feel excluded.

The precise comment that can be made on *Delgamuukw* is that it could be used as a broad principle throughout governmental legal debates with Aboriginal people and throughout Canadian law in general. *Delgamuukw* represents a partial normalization of the indigenous roots of Canadian law. Perhaps this reality is being ignored by most of the legal community because

it threatens their Euro-US-derived state of mind. But that is their problem. It should not be ours. The concept of orality in Canadian civilization, with its inspiration and roots derived from Aboriginal world views, could be a valuable tool in altering the nature of our shared conversations, in indigenizing them and, therefore, in opening another path to a deeper sort of reconciliation. English and French aside, there are more than fifty surviving languages indigenous to this place. Each of them belongs to a particular people that are also part of the complex Canadian texture. The large majority of these languages are in danger of extinction.⁷ That is a tragedy for their particular nation, but it is also a tragic loss for all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada. A language lost represents the closing of a door on our ability to understand ourselves in this place. Not to understand this is to reveal a deep dependence on the colonial model of imported cultures as the root of Canadian civilization. How can we talk of reconciliation when the Government of Canada is still dragging its feet to support the teaching of these languages? They are an essential part of the shared collective unconscious.

The current anxiety over Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic echoes the colonial mindset. Our claims are based on a legal thread leading from unsuccessful British explorers—trying to get through the Arctic to somewhere else—to British ownership, and from there to Canadian ownership. You would have thought that a simpler and far stronger legal argument would have been that Canadians have been living in the Arctic for thousands of years. They are Inuit. We are attempting to make our shaky British-derived claim through the Law of the Sea arguments, but this law is based on a European legal idea of water—a few hundred years old—as something that separates land and is susceptible to penetration by enemies. The Inuit-based idea—thousands of years old—is that water and ice join land, and it is this idea that constitutes the principal means of communication for Inuit. We would do far better to advance this concept. That would mean describing Canada as a country indigenous to this place, and that would mean the development of a language of reconciliation.

What I am arguing here is that a mass of Aboriginal words and concepts exists that presents the world and our existence in a very different way than that of standard European concepts. There is an urgent need to bring those words and concepts into a broad public place. If we do so and talk among ourselves about their full meaning, I believe that we will discover both the roots of our shared civilizations and the fundamental language of reconciliation.

Barrier Four: Absence of Shared Public Mechanisms

The fourth barrier to this reconciliation is the absence of the practical, shared public mechanisms from which we can all work. Some of these are painfully obvious. As long as the treaty and other related negotiations are dragged out, it will remain impossible for everyone to move towards a constructive relationship. As long as most non-Aboriginal people in Canada do not understand the role and implications of the treaties, let alone understand that they too are treaty people, the negotiations will drag on in a modern facsimile of the old ways. The life of endless legal details does nothing for anyone except for those who are paid to drag out the process. Meanwhile, the lives of Aboriginal leaders are marginalized by their need to concentrate on treaty battles rather than on broader social construction and reconciliation. For years now, good people have tried to get this message of waste across to the population at large. Banal though it is to say, but as long as treaty-related negotiations are not finished, reconciliation will not happen. The mechanisms of delay, being as deeply anchored as they are in our governmental and legal systems, means that only pressure from the broad population can speed up government action.

Paradigm Shifting

Of course, the process of treaty negotiations will continue, yet I cannot help but think that a very precise strategy is needed to change education across the country. Some provinces have already begun building the Aboriginal pillar into their teaching of history to classes that are largely non-Aboriginal. The challenges are only partly about history and geography, they are also about ideas central to the way in which we all imagine ourselves. Our civics courses need to build ideas from Indigenous world views into the primary explanations of our democracy. Our literature courses, still structured as if we were colonial outcroppings of Britain and France, need to be radically changed. Philosophy and ethics are taught in our high schools as if Canada did not exist, let alone the Aboriginal civilizations that shaped Canada.

In other words, there is an urgent need to go to the provincial ministers of education in order to propose how curricula could be changed. Equally, there is a need to attack our university systems in a highly strategic way. Environmental studies need to be attacked for their artificially value-free approach and their avoidance of an Aboriginal concept of humanity's integrated *place* in the process. Philosophy departments have to be pushed to change their narrow and derivative European approach. Our whole concept of Northern studies illustrates the basic problem. We are the only circumpolar country without a university in the Arctic. We have three colleges. The southern universities have a monopoly on Northern studies.

EDUCATION

PARADIGM

Their professors and students come up in the summer to study and observe. They head back home for winter in the South. There is no buildup of wealth of Northern studies in the North, let alone investment in the communities. A three-campus Northern university with four research chairs at each would radically change the way everyone thinks about the Arctic, the Inuit, and the northern environment. There would be a long-term opportunity for Inuit and other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal professors to develop real northern study centres in the North, attracting young Inuit and other Canadians.

At the heart of all that I am describing lies the gradual slippage of Canadians moving away from the idea that citizens—Aboriginal or not—can be part of modernity if they live in smaller isolated communities. The truth is that Canada cannot exist if we think of it as merely a southern, urban reality. What then becomes of the physical country and the necessary balance between place and people? Over half of the 1.2 million Aboriginal people in Canada live at least part of the year in cities,⁸ but Canada only makes sense as a country if its whole physical reality works. This means seeing the non-urban country—that is, most of our non-Westphalian nation-state—as a positive force that must be strengthened. That means treating the non-urban country not as a costly appendage and realizing that these hundreds of communities need to be seen as filled with purpose—another sort of purpose—which makes the whole country make sense. The idea of Canada as a place tied to a deeply non-urban and non-rural civilization is key to understanding ourselves and therefore understanding what reconciliation might feel like.

All of this is part of the idea that people can only discover and live reconciliation if they understand what it would look like and feel like. It means to think of themselves in a different way—a way that is not European derived. If non-Aboriginal people in Canada begin to see themselves as being from here in the sense that they are inspired by ideas proper to this place and to the peoples of this place, then reconciliation will make sense to them.

Notes

- ¹ Saul, John Ralston (2008). *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*. Toronto, ON: Viking Canada.
- ² The *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* court case was launched by the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en peoples and was intended to reclaim their land through acknowledgement of ownership, jurisdiction, and self-government of their traditional territories by the provincial and federal governments. The decision of the Supreme Court of Canada, handed down on 11 December 1997, did not settle the original claim, but it did confirm the existence of Aboriginal title in British Columbia and has since had far-reaching effects on policies, positions, mandates, and laws that impact on First Nations, especially with the treaty negotiations process. The decision also ensured that, in future trials, oral evidence would be granted as much weight as written evidence. In *Guerin v. The Queen*, Musqueam First Nation sued the federal government for breach of trust in the lease for the Shaughnessy Heights Golf Course in south Vancouver, which was entered into by the federal government on behalf of Musqueam First Nation. When disclosed, the actual terms of the lease were much less favourable than the terms discussed with the Department of Indian Affairs when the First Nation agreed to surrender the land. The decision of the Supreme Court, handed down in 1984, recognized the Crown's fiduciary relationship with First Nations. It established that the Crown would be held to a rigorous standard of loyalty toward First Nations when dealing with First Nations' interests in land. Ten million dollars in damages were awarded in favour of Musqueam First Nation. *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* [1997] 3 S.C.R. 1010; and *Guerin v. The Queen* [1984] 2 S.C.R. 335.
- ³ *Haida Nation v. British Columbia (Minister of Forests)*, 2004 SCC 73; and *Taku River Tlingit First Nation v. British Columbia (Project Assessment Director)*, 2004 SCC 74. For a good review of these decisions, see: Olynyk, John (2005). *The Haida Nation and Taku River Tlingit Decisions: Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities for Aboriginal Consultation and Accommodation*. *The Negotiator* (April 2005):2-7.
- ⁴ Lumb, Lionel (2006). Closing the Gap in First Nations Education: Will 'Transformative Change' Really Happen? *The Teacher* (March 2006):5.
- ⁵ Cited in: Saul, John Ralston, Alain Dubuc, and Georges Erasmus (2002:101). *The LaFontaine-Baldwin Lectures: A Dialogue on Democracy in Canada*. Edited by Rudyard Griffiths. Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada.
- ⁶ Cited in: Saul, Dubuc, and Erasmus (2002:106).
- ⁷ See: Canadian Heritage (no date). *Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI) Evaluation*. Retrieved 2 December 2008 from: http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/em-cr/eval/2003/2003_01/tfm_e.cfm
- ⁸ Statistics Canada (2008). *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Métis and First Nations, 2006 Census*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry.