

# “Truth and Reconciliation: Start a Conversation”

Moderators: Bob Waldon, Q.Med and Bunny Macfarlane, C.Med

By Mary Korica

On June 24, 2015, the Public Conflict and Restorative Justice sections of the ADR Institute of Ontario (“ADRIO”) jointly held the live program and webinar “**Truth and Reconciliation: Start a Conversation.**” Hosted by the chairs of the two sections, respectively Bob Waldon and Bunny Macfarlane, the event was a discussion in Circle format<sup>1</sup> about the June 4, 2015 release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s (TRC) findings on the impact of residential schools on Aboriginal people. The findings are the result of six years of the TRC’s work across the country through events, meetings, town halls and statement gathering from some 7,000 individuals who shared their stories. The final report includes 94 specific recommendations to address the harms done, and poses important questions for all Canadians to consider.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Waldon began the session by explaining that the discussion was being hosted by both ADRIO sections because Canada’s relationship with aboriginal peoples involves both public conflict and restorative practices. The organizers’ motivation was to invite ADRIO members and interested non-members to discuss the TRC’s findings and contribute in some way to the commission’s effort.



R. D. (Bob) Waldon, Q.Med

R. D. (Bob) Waldon, Q.Med has more than 30 years’ experience across Canada in land acquisition, environment, dispute resolution and external relations as a consultant and in senior management for major projects, government and Aboriginal matters.



Bunny Macfarlane, C.Med

Bunny is a mediator, trainer and restorative justice practitioner. She teaches conflict management and dispute resolution at Brock University and mediates insurance claims at Financial Services Commission of Ontario (FSCO).

Ms. Macfarlane described to attendees how the Circle format would work, and Mr. Waldon took a moment to acknowledge that the meeting was being held on traditional territory of the Mississauga and Métis nations. Ms. Macfarlane posed the first TRC question to the group: “**How should people feel about the TRC’s work?**” A number of people conveyed strong negative emotions, like being sickened, ashamed, and angry about what the TRC had uncovered. People spoke of

“a blow to our identity as Canadians to discover such blackness in our past” and “a social justice inequity that had gone unaddressed for far too long” as well as, in some cases, personal shame at not having done something sooner and uncertainty about what they should do next.

Often the same people also expressed strong positive feeling about the TRC, especially gratitude for its work, for the courageous honesty of those who participated, and for the possibility that now exists for native and non-native cultures in Canada to build something new. People re-

ported feeling, “hopeful of positive change”, “curious to learn more”, “openness” to the TRC report, desire for “greater dialogue”, and “encouraged” and “eager” to act now. One person presented the model of a residential school survivor who turned shame into power by returning to her community to teach her language.

Ms. Macfarlane then put to the group the TRC questions: “What does reconciliation look like?”

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Does it matter to you?" All of the participants felt that reconciliation mattered to them, some because they felt burdened by a Canadian identity that included the harm of residential schools, others because of the opportunity to turn harm to good by developing a model of understanding in Canada that might benefit or inspire others.

Many attendees said that they did not know what reconciliation looks like, and sometimes commented with a note of despair at what they perceived as the complex and long-entrenched nature of the problem. But even so they offered ideas of reconciliation, including treating people equally and with equal respect, as well as developing a deep understanding of each other through education and a change of attitude.

Some people noted that reconciliation cannot be a single event or action—that it is a process. For example, one person suggested that reconciliation may look different depending on particular

circumstances, but in all cases there must be an ongoing polishing of the relationship. Another drew from a tenet of Restorative Justice which requires asking the question "what does the victim need?" She pointed out that no one can assume what the victims need after cultural genocide, and it would be good to have a nation-wide conversation where groups across the country ask: what are the native communities' needs and how can we help fulfill them? Drawing on her own experience with native people, another attendee said that reconciliation looks like "hard work—and wonderful work." She recalled the advice she had been given by the late Anishnawbe elder Joe Sylvester to remind the group that, as with anything, the way you learn to do it is one step at a time.

One person commented that reconciliation is about bridging a divide between two parties, which requires a number of things to happen. As a first step the victims

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must be empowered so that they can participate fully in reconciliation, and this should include restitution. Also, reconciliation must at some point involve forgiveness, which requires bringing the offender into a process that affords them some dignity and promotes their honest apology. He noted that if the churches and government institutions responsible for the legacy of residential schools are vilified entirely, it may trigger distancing and hardening rather than re-establishing connection. "If we allow our anger and disgust to dominate, we risk perpetuating the divide," he warned.

Commenting that forgiveness did



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If you are interested in being a Supervisor, or have any questions regarding this program, please contact Mena Sestito, 416-487-4447 ext. 101, [mena@adrontario.ca](mailto:mena@adrontario.ca).

not seem possible to him at this time, another person said the goal should be good practices based on good intentions, which may allow the next generation to move reconciliation further. Someone followed up by saying she did not believe it is anyone's right to ask for forgiveness, that forgiveness is a gift which can only be offered, not requested. She added that, given the enormity of the harm done, if the opportunity for forgiveness arises, it will have to be conveyed through actions, which are a stronger communication than words.

Another person expanded on the 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples statement that *"there can be no peace or harmony unless there is justice."* She said that *there can be no justice without a realization of our interdependence. What is true for Aboriginal people as one people of the medicine wheel<sup>3</sup> is true for all of them: when one group is weak, we all are. For this reason reconciliation should matter to everybody. It should also matter because native people have great knowledge to share with non-natives.* "I think we will realize that when they get

stronger, we all get stronger," she said.

The final TRC question that Ms. Macfarlane posed to attendees was: "Where do we go from here?" A number of those present saw a need to educate the broader public about the TRC, and promote a more accurate understanding of First Nations in Canada. One person commented that it would be unfortunate if the misguided, dismissive view of First Nations largely held by Canada's non-natives to this point was replaced by another simplistic view of First Nations as victims. They emphasized the wealth of First Nations practices and ideas that could be applied to present-day concerns like the environment, systems of political organization and decision-making, and approaches to justice.

Attendees supported the idea of promoting ongoing dialogue about the TRC report in the course of their personal and professional lives when talking with friends, neighbours, colleagues, other organizations or their local Members of Parliament. Suggestions also included promoting dialogue between native and non-native communities, contributing to holding governments accountable for implementing the 94 recommendations, and supporting school curriculum change on the topic of First Nations. Ms. Macfarlane committed to bringing the issues discussed during the meeting to the attention of ADRIO's Board of Directors and Mr. Waldon said that the topic would be addressed again at another meeting of ADRIO's Public Conflict Section. 🌱

1 "Circle" is a meeting format derived from North American First Nations practices. It is sometimes known as Talking Circle, Healing Circle, Peacemaking Circle, Listening Circle, or Restorative Justice Circle and involves a specially chosen object being passed to each person, assigning them the opportunity to speak. It can be a powerful tool to improve decision-making and strengthen community. (More information is available at: <http://www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org/circles.php>)

2 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's findings are available at: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>

3 The medicine wheel in North American First Nations worldview conveys multiple concepts, one of which is that its four quadrants, black, red, yellow and white, represent the four symbolic races making up the same human family. (Source: <http://www.tncdsb.on.ca/new/resources/ABOR%20Medicine%20Wheel.pdf>)

## ADRIO wishes to thank our writers for their contributions to our Newsletter.



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