

The significance of small change]



By Nate Smelle

Last Wednesday, I had a chance to speak with the CEO of the Native Women's Association of Canada, Lynne Groulx about the 2023 federal budget, and its shortcomings in terms of its potential to foster meaningful reconciliation and Indigenous prosperity.

During our discussion, Groulx described the vast majority of the government's investments in the Indigenous file as "band-aid solutions", "more of the same," and "a failure for the NWAC and native women in Canada." While she acknowledged that the tone of the Trudeau government was an improvement compared to the former Harper government's "not-on-our radar" approach; and, that the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was a step in the right direction, she said "It's time for the federal government to walk the reconciliation talk."

When asked how our current federal government could do a better job walking the reconciliation talk, Groulx stressed that they needed to do a better job implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the 231 Calls for Justice in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

I sat there in my mobile office outside of Tim Hortons after the interview, watching the freezing rain and ice pellets coat everything in sight; thinking about how Groulx had pointed out that the 231 Calls for Justice in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls are "legal imperatives" and not just frivolous suggestions. Although I had read the report when it was first released in 2019, I realized that it was definitely time to read it again and refresh my memory of its significance.

Getting home, I dug out my copy of the report and started reading through it again. In section 6.1 entitled, "Calls for Media and Social Influencers", the report calls "upon all media, news corporations and outlets, and, in particular, government-funded corporations and outlets; media unions, associations, and guilds; academic institutions teaching journalism or media courses; governments that fund such corporations, outlets, and academic institutions; and journalists, reporters, bloggers, film producers, writers, musicians, music producers, and, more generally, people working in the entertainment industry to take decolonizing approaches to their work and publications in order to educate all Canadians about Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people."

Questioning whether our newspapers are abiding by this legal imperative, I decided to refocus my attention on the tedious process of transcribing the recording of our conversation, word-for-word. Of course there are transcription services available that would deliver me a full transcript without having to listen and re-listen to the recording over and over and over again to get it right. However, considering the importance of the story, and that I have always found it to be far more enlightening to do it myself, I decided to honour this Call for Justice by putting my own ears and pen to work.

Listening to the conversation, what immediately stood out to me was how Groulx repeatedly made it abundantly clear that meaningful and significant reconciliation would only be possible by means of a "paradigm shift" and "transformational change." She also made it clear that the 2023 federal budget fell short of reaching these essential targets.

Since the transcript of this conversation is available in this week's edition of The Bancroft Times, I won't get into the details of the federal government's band-aid solutions in the 2023 budget here. Instead I would like to share with you a meaningful and relatively simple act of reconciliation that Groulx and her colleagues at the Native Women's Association of Canada are calling on the government to move forward with ... that being: the Change the Bill campaign.

Recognizing that an Indigenous woman has never been featured on a Canadian bank note during the 150 years Canada has been printing money, NWAC is calling on the government to "promote reconciliation through art, by commissioning Indigenous artists to re-imagine the \$20 bill with the Indigenous women who are their heroes."

Following Groulx's direction to visit their online petition at www.changethebill.ca, I discovered dozens of examples of well-deserving Indigenous women suggested to replace Queen Elizabeth II on the Canadian \$20 bill. Admittedly and shamefully unaware of many of the names on this list, I soon found myself researching names such as: Elsie Knott; Rita Joe; Sarah Burnstick; Glenna Simcoe; Margaret Pictou; Josephine Mandamin; Autumn Peltier; Shina Novalinga; and Cindy Blackstock. If like me, you also at first do not recognize all of these names, I suggest looking up each of them and their achievements yourself, and then signing the petition.

Despite the fact that this small change is only somewhat of a symbolic gesture, it has the potential to open the eyes of all Canadians to the true history of Canada since colonization. By increasing awareness of the transformational contributions of Indigenous women throughout our nations' shared history, we can begin to, as Groulx said, "walk the reconciliation talk"; and in turn, bring about the paradigm shift that is needed.