

LESSONS IN

RECONCILIATION

What We Heard in Fredericton

September 2019



Canadian
Chamber of
Commerce

Chambre de
Commerce
du Canada

The Voice of Canadian Business™

Le porte-parole des entreprises canadiennes^{MD}

A great deal has been said recently about reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Businesses and Indigenous peoples will not wait and do not need to be led by government in moving forward with reconciliation and the actions that make it meaningful. In many instances, they have long been living reconciliation day-to-day, providing lessons from which government—and all of us—can learn.

Despite repeated requests of the federal government to be part of the reconciliation discussion, business has been by-and-large excluded. This unfortunate reality is why the Canadian Chamber of Commerce seeks to demonstrate to the federal government that business and Indigenous peoples are often way ahead of it in reconciliation. Reconciliation is frequently accomplished by straightforward business decisions and respectful actions, not necessarily grandiose strategies that are perceived as tokenism.

Based on the perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous business and community leaders shared at three roundtables in Western, Central and Atlantic Canada, we are highlighting productive relationships between businesses and Indigenous peoples and the lessons in reconciliation they offer.

On June 25, 2019, we sat down with business and Indigenous leaders in Fredericton to hear what they had to say about reconciliation, what it means to them, their communities and their businesses.



Real progress in reconciliation is between business and Indigenous peoples

The dynamics in Indigenous-business relationships are shifting. The long-held view of Indigenous-business relationships being that of non-Indigenous businesses as employers of Indigenous peoples, either because they were mandated to do so or they were the most readily-available workforce, is, quite rightly, mostly a relic of the past. A seismic shift is underway in the current and potential heft of Indigenous peoples in our society and economy.

Indigenous peoples contribute billions of dollars to our economy annually¹ and they are creating new businesses at five times² the rate of non-Indigenous peoples. When combined with the fact that Indigenous peoples are the youngest, fastest growing demographic in Canada, ensuring they have the same opportunities to contribute to our economy is imperative. It is the only way Canada will be able to compete globally.

Today, relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and businesses can range from employers and suppliers to customers and investors. In fact, the first customer of one businessperson at this roundtable was the Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI), an Indigenous not-for-profit organization that works with businesses, governments and communities to support the participation of Indigenous peoples in New Brunswick's economy.

One businessperson acknowledged that he needs to learn more about the opportunities for engaging with Indigenous peoples and attended this roundtable for that reason. "It is clear to me that I need to look into hiring Indigenous employees, exploring what Indigenous businesses could be potential suppliers of mine and introduce awareness training in my business," he said.

An Indigenous leader elaborated on this point by adding, "Any real progress in reconciliation is going to be between business and Indigenous peoples. We cannot have reconciliation without the ability to generate our own revenue. Until we can, we will be dependent upon the government for funding."

¹ TD Economics, The Long and Winding Road Towards Aboriginal Economic Prosperity, June 2015, pg. 1

² The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, The Indigenous Economic Progress Report, Gatineau, 2019, pg. 59



There is only one economy

It can be tempting to take an “us” and “them” perspective regarding Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships and the economy. Roundtable participants agreed that if we are going to succeed in the global economy, we have to regard our economy as one in which everyone has the same opportunities to contribute.

The St. Mary's First Nation sits across the Saint John River from Fredericton and is the largest employer on the north shore of the river. There is an economic interdependency between the two communities. The First Nation's people need employment outside of the community and it needs clients from elsewhere for its businesses. It also employs people living outside the community. This is why the First Nation wants to foster stronger ties with the broader business milieu. “We cannot grow by working in silos,” said one Indigenous leader.

This goes both ways. The City of Fredericton recognizes the importance of leveraging its proximity to the St. Mary's First Nation and the integration of their workforces and infrastructure. The City and the First Nation submitted a joint bid for funding from Infrastructure Canada's Smart Cities Challenge. While they were not one of the winners, their submission was shortlisted and they were able to advance some key digital initiatives to create a safer, more inclusive environment for their most vulnerable citizens. “This experience has paved the way for more desire to work together to advance our communities,” said a City representative.

The Ulnooweg Development Group, which provides loans and businesses services to Indigenous entrepreneurs throughout Atlantic Canada, recognized the need to overcome the perception that its interests are only within the Indigenous entrepreneurship milieu and to engage with the non-Indigenous business ecosystem to move forward. Ulnooweg encourages its members to become involved in the broader business community, including introducing Indigenous communities' economic development officers to chambers of commerce. Ulnooweg has also been involved in [Canada's Ocean Supercluster](#), one of five groups named in 2018 by the federal government to receive funding to foster growth and create jobs in the technology sector.

The federal government's decision to grant regulatory authority over cannabis retailers to the provinces and territories—which do not have jurisdiction in many First Nations and other Indigenous communities—is an example of the government failing to recognize that there is only one economy. The result of this is that First Nations communities in New Brunswick and elsewhere in Canada have been left out of this economic development opportunity.

We cannot wait for history to stop repeating itself

“Reconciliation,” said one Indigenous leader, “is fostered by working day-to-day with Indigenous peoples.” Roundtable participants in Fredericton reflected the view we heard elsewhere that reconciliation is an individual experience. “Indigenous peoples need to be asked, ‘What do you feel reconciliation is?’,” said one Indigenous leader. “Indigenous peoples need to be able to speak from their hearts with those with whom they are seeking reconciliation and identify what went wrong so it can be made right.”

An Indigenous businessperson working for a non-Indigenous company said that when he first started working there “everything was a struggle” regarding Indigenous peoples, whether it be as employees, rights holders or suppliers, etc. The situation has improved, although there is more progress to be made, he said. “Business, like government, affects everyone,” he added. “Both have to look at what can be done differently. Reconciliation is a buzzword being thrown around to make everyone feel good. If you ask people what it means, they do not know. What business tends to do—and government needs to

do—is to look at reconciliation on a case-by-case basis and be prepared to take the often difficult actions to make it happen.”

One Fredericton businessperson’s firm was established to build Indigenous peoples’ software testing expertise and keep IT jobs in Canada that would have otherwise gone offshore. “Whatever reconciliation is, it is not cookie cutter and it takes time,” he said. Another participant added that, “Both sides need to focus on the potential for good to come of reconciliation. It requires trust and dealing with the entire relationship, warts and all.”

While reconciliation is a continuous journey, the twists and turns of which will vary depending upon who is involved, roundtable participants agreed there is a need for consistent frameworks within which to pursue it that will transcend changes in government. “Otherwise, we risk having to start all over again,” said one participant. One Indigenous leader said that reconciliation needs to be framed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The calls-to-action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, several of which are directed at government and one of which is directed at business³, should also be regarded as guideposts for government and business.

“I also feel the stress of the government believing there is a time limit on reconciliation,” said one Indigenous leader. “Reconciliation means meaningful dialogue with real results, without which we are doomed to doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. The vast majority of the recommendations of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples have never been acted upon, and progress on the calls-to-action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is not clear. The implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada remains in limbo. Indigenous peoples and business cannot wait for history to stop repeating itself. I do not think government gets that.”



However, the journey to reconciliation holds many benefits for all

The business people at this roundtable agree that while the road to reconciliation is long, winding and often bumpy, the journey itself holds the promise of many benefits including:

- More economic stimulus for Indigenous communities.
- Indigenous peoples speaking their truths and feeling empowered.
- Meaningful opportunities for Indigenous peoples to participate in the economy.
- Indigenous involvement in government.
- Non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples working together.
- More businesses wanting to engage with Indigenous peoples.
- Less government support required for Indigenous peoples and communities.
- Canada’s economy becoming stronger and our country becoming more competitive globally.

³ Call-to-Action 92 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Final Report calls on Canada’s businesses to: “... adopt the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as a reconciliation framework ... This would include, but not be limited to, the following: i. Commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships and obtaining the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects. ii. Ensure that Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training and education opportunities in the corporate sector and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects. iii. Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law and Aboriginal-Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights and anti-racism.”

We need to get together more often

There was a sense around the table that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples need to get together more often to get to know each other better and explore the benefits of working together as well as to create more opportunities for working together. There is clearly a role for chambers of commerce to take a lead in doing this.

Another Indigenous leader said that government and business need to reach out to Indigenous communities to establish relationships “before something happens.”

Lessons for government

- Recognize that Indigenous peoples and businesses have the capacity to set the social, economic and political agendas.
- Get the word out to Canadians about the economic and social heft of Indigenous peoples.
- Remove the barriers to productive relationships between Indigenous peoples and business and do not put up any new ones.
- Recognize that there is only one economy and include Indigenous communities/governments in the development of regulatory regimes for new economic development opportunities.
- Bring business to the reconciliation table. There is only one economy, and the day-to-day interactions between Indigenous peoples and business can be instructive to government.
- Acknowledge there is no one path to reconciliation and that the benefits of the journey have the potential to be as important as the destination.
- Reach out to and engage with Indigenous peoples more often, rather than only when you must.





Roundtable Participants

Ashley Nash	Indigenous Adult Learning and Literacy Coordinator	Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI)
Bryan Harn	Business Development Officer	Ulnooweg Development Group
Donna Augustine	Spiritual Leader, Elsipogtog First Nation	NWNO Council of Youth & Elders
Edward Genova	First Nations Specialist	NB Power
Karen Grant	President	Kiers Marketing
Ken Critchley	Sr. Consultant	Morneau Sheppel
Kim Nash-McKinley	Director of Economic Development	St Mary's First Nation
Krista Ross	Chief Executive Officer	Fredericton Chamber of Commerce
Laurie Guthrie	Smart Cities Manager	City of Fredericton
Mark MacKenzie	Vice-President, Business Development	Green Imaging Technologies
Morgan Peters	Policy and Research Manager	Fredericton Chamber of Commerce
Paul Langdon	Strategic Initiatives	Ulnooweg Development Group
Ryan Boyer	Managing Partner	Cain Boyer Benefits Group
Scott Kennedy	Chief Financial Officer	PQA / PLATO Testing
Shawnee Polchis	Professional Software Tester	PQA / PLATO Testing
Stanley Barnaby	Acting Chief Executive Officer	Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI)
Val Polchies	Communications Officer	Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI)

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