

# What do bicycles have to do with Reconciliation in so-called Canada?

Robin P.

“There were two friends, Peter and John. One day Peter steals John’s bicycle. Then, after a period of some months, he goes up to John with outstretched hand and says ‘Let’s talk about reconciliation.’

John says, ‘No, let’s talk about my bicycle.’

‘Forget about the bicycle for now,’ says Peter. ‘Let’s talk about reconciliation.’ ‘No,’ says John. ‘We cannot talk about reconciliation until you return my bicycle.’”

(Andrew Rigby & Reverend Mxolisi Mpambani)



“In the above example, ‘the victim is being asked to become reconciled to loss, and this is no basis for a sustainable settlement,’ which is one of the primary problems with the application of state-dominated reconciliation processes for Indigenous peoples.” (Corntassel & Holder)

## In 2008 the Canadian Government apologized for residential schools:

→ The apology did not mention colonialism and continues the government’s possessive narrative over the land. It did not recognize that the goal of residential schools was to remove children from the land and thus does not address that the land must be a part of the solution for a meaningful apology.

→ The apology framed residential schools as a “sad chapter” in Canadian history.

## Ongoing Injustices Since Apology:

→ Since 2008, the federal government is intensifying colonialism with the passage of Bill C-45 which changed water and environmental protections.

→ In September 2009 PM Harper’s address at G20 wrongly declared that “Canada has no history of colonialism”

→ Compensation for residential schools and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada relies on Indigenous peoples sharing their trauma at a national level.

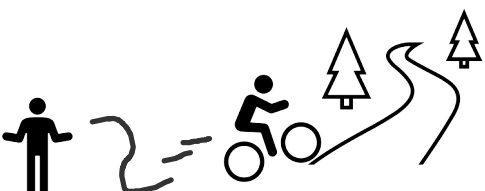
→ There are more Indigenous children in Canada’s foster care systems than there were in residential schools.

## How can we further relate the above bicycle example to reconciliation?

An apology from Peter without returning the bicycle to John does not mean anything. This is reminiscent of the apology the Canadian government has made towards Indigenous peoples with no intent for structural change. Canada is a colonial nation built on Indigenous land. In the above example, Peter represents the Canadian state, John represents Indigenous Nations, and the stolen bicycle is a metaphor for stolen Indigenous land.

These apology was a performative gesture backed by neither action nor accountability. They attempt to cleanse Canada’s image but do not address the colonial structures that continually try to harm Indigenous peoples to this day.

As the above example must address the return of the bicycle, reconciliation must address the return of the land and a redistribution of power. Without meaningful action, apologies are not about the well-being of Indigenous peoples and are more about relieving non-Indigenous Canadians from responsibility (Coulthard).

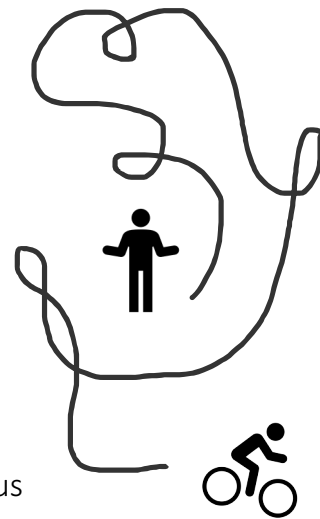


Nothing is going on beyond the level of words, the Canadian state continues going about practice as usual (Georgia Sitara). The goal to remove Indigenous peoples from the land continues to this day despite popular beliefs that colonialism is a legacy of the past. As Patrick Wolfe and Glen Sean Coulthard recognize “**Settler colonialism is a structure, not an event.**”

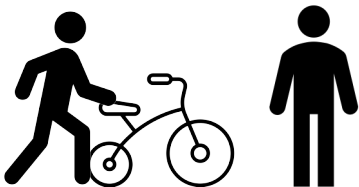
The Canadian state frames injustices as something that happened in the past, when in fact it is ongoing—this kind of reconciliation is injustice in itself ( Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T’lakwdzi )

So, what are some specific failures on the federal governments approach to reconciliation?

- The state’s vision of reconciliation seeks to legitimize the status quo rather than rectify injustice for Indigenous communities (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T’lakwdzi )
- Aboriginal rights continue to be subordinated to the assumed sovereignty of the crown and settler interests (Coulthard)
- The government of Canada is a colonial entity illegally occupying Indigenous homelands (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T’lakwdzi )
- The systems of violence and structures of dispossession remain intact (Coulthard)
- The Canadian state continues to assert authority over stolen Indigenous lands
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada treats land as a separate issue to reconciliation when in fact it “should be treated as the biggest part” (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is & T’lakwdzi )



To achieve reconciliation, Peter must give the bike back to John. If the bike is not in the same condition as when it was stolen, Peter must do everything in his power to repair the bike so that it is as good as when he first got it. Then, they can begin to discuss how their relationship can move forward after this breach of trust and injustice.



*“Decolonization and restitution are necessary elements of reconciliation because these are necessary to transform relations with indigenous communities in the way justice requires. Whether the mechanism attempting to address injustice to indigenous peoples and remedy wrongs is an apology or a truth and reconciliation commission, it must begin by acknowledging indigenous peoples’ inherent powers of self-determination.” (Corntassel & Holder)*

### How do we move forward with Reconciliation without making the mistakes the federal government has made?

- There is a need to transform the structures of violence and dispossession
- There is a need for massive restitution of land, financial transfers, compensation for past & present (Taiaiake Alfred & Coulthard)
- There is a need for the redistribution of land & resources, renewed treaty process (Coulthard)
- There is a need for the transfer of authority from the state to Indigenous nations (Taiaiake Alfred & Coulthard)
- There is a need for community-based approaches (Corntassel et al)
- There is a need for re-storying, or telling the story differently, should be practiced at family and community levels (Corntassel et al)
- There is a need for the Involvement of intergenerational survivors (Corntassel et al)
- There is a need for massive restitution and land (Corntassel et al)

**In the end, it is all about the land.**

### Works Cited

- Corntassel, Jeff, Chaw-win-is, and T’lakwadzi. “Indigenous Storytelling, Truth-Telling, and Community Approaches to Reconciliation.” *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 35, no. 1 (2009): 137–59.
- Corntassel, Jeff, and Cindy Holder. “Who’s Sorry Now? Government Apologies, Truth Commissions, and Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia, Canada, Guatemala, and Peru.” *Human Rights Review* 9, no. 4 (December 1, 2008).
- Coulthard, Glen Sean. “Seeing Red Reconciliation and Resentment.” In *Red Skin, White Masks*. Minneapolis, United States: Univ Of Minnesota Press., 2014.
- Sitara, Georgia. “Sorry Nation: The Age of Apology A Global Industry.” In class lecture, April 6<sup>th</sup> 2021.