

## Indigenous Perspectives on Allyship

Given these multiple visions of reconciliation, what roles can and should settler-Canadians play? More generally, what would it mean for settlers to be allies?

From a radical perspective, one might argue that it is impossible for settlers to be allies if they remain on occupied lands (however much they empathise with the colonised) (Memmi 1965). One important aspect of the Canadian context, however, is the existence of treaties (in some regions), which entail rights and responsibilities for both Indigenous and settler peoples.<sup>5</sup> The processual worldviews of many Indigenous peoples also encourage relationships of accountability rather than either/or thinking (see, for example, FitzMaurice 2010). Moreover, most Indigenous scholars and activists believe that settlers can make valuable contributions to Indigenous-led movements. Rather than demanding that they leave Turtle Island, for example, Alfred (2005: 153) says settlers must demonstrate ‘respect for what we share—the land and its resources—and mak[e] things right by offering us the dignity and freedom we are due and returning enough of our power and land for us to be self-sufficient.’

The TRC also sees a vital role for non-Indigenous Canadians. As Justice Sinclair has said, reconciliation is ‘a Canadian problem’ that involves ‘all of us’ (Fedio 2015: np). Thus, he and fellow Commissioners encouraged all Canadians to follow the TRC process, listen to and learn from residential school survivors, and read and reflect on their reports.

Consistent with settler scholar Paulette Regan’s (2010: 19) ‘unsettling pedagogy,’ TRC Commissioners emphasised the role of witnessing. It appointed prominent Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals from various regions and sectors as ‘honorary witnesses’ responsible for listening to and remembering survivors’ stories, being accountable to them, and sharing their significance with others.<sup>6</sup> The TRC also encouraged settlers—especially government and church officials, teachers, and others involved in operating or overseeing residential schools (and their descendants)—to give public statements or ‘expressions of reconciliation,’ which could potentially facilitate healing and serve as public commitments to behavioural change. Further, most of the ninety-four Calls to Action were directed at settler-Canadians and their governments and institutions. While the specific responsibilities depend on social position, there is indeed a role for everyone.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>There are, of course, significant differences between the more recent colonial-imposed treaties and the original peace and friendship treaties.

<sup>6</sup>For Regan (2010: 189–192), witnessing requires deep listening—‘engaging our whole being,’ sitting with the discomfort, and learning from it. Ultimately, she says, ‘settler identity can...be transformed from that of colonizer to ally’ only if we question Canada’s ‘benevolent peacemaker myth,’ respect Indigenous counter-narratives of diplomacy, law, and peacemaking, and engage in ‘positive action to confront the settler problem head-on’ (16).

<sup>7</sup>The TRC’s (2015: 126) final report outlines distinct roles for governments, churches, schools, businesses, and ‘Canadians from all walks of life,’ as well as Indigenous people themselves.

Beyond the context of the TRC, many Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) writers have offered advice on how to be an ally or act in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Algonquin scholar-activist Lynn Gehl (2012, 2014), for example, distinguishes colonised versus decolonised allies and proposes an 'Ally Bill of Responsibilities.' For her, a 'genuine ally' engages in ongoing (un)learning, listens and reflects, is aware of their privilege and complicity, acknowledges their mistakes and apologises for them, is willing to challenge oppressive power structures, values differences rather than seeking to erase them, respects boundaries, does not take up space or resources, acts with the consent of Indigenous communities, and does not make their support conditional on personal or ideological agendas (Gehl 2012).

During the Idle No More movement of 2012/13, Mi'kmaq scholar-activist Pam Palmater (2013: np) spoke positively of 'allies' and First Nations 'partnering for justice', adding that Canadians must realise—and many are realising—that they need Indigenous peoples' help in order to build a more just and sustainable society. Similarly, Métis-Cree lawyer and blogger Chelsea Vowel (2014: np) says the best way for would-be allies to 'help' is by recognising that 'Indigenous peoples have the power to find solutions for ourselves' and supporting Indigenous-led movements. Amadahy and Lawrence (2009) provide concrete examples of such allyship, including fundraising, providing food/supplies, working at camps during land struggles, and completing tasks as needed and requested. More generally, they call on settlers to reflect on their positions and 'shift their ideological frameworks, value systems and conceptual understandings of how humans relate to land and the resources within it' (Amadahy and Lawrence 2009: 129–130). Being an ally to Indigenous struggles means building respectful relationships with Indigenous people but also 'being an ally to the land' (Amadahy and Lawrence 2009: 129–130).<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, these authors agree that an ally is not self-defined; it is a term bestowed on the basis of ongoing action.<sup>9</sup>

## Data and Methods

To better understand how settlers become engaged in reconciliation activities, how they think about their roles and goals (including possibilities and limits), and what they do to make good on their commitments, we conducted in-depth interviews with forty non-Indigenous Canadians of various ages, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and racial/ethnic backgrounds who had attended at least one TRC event (as a minimal indicator of engagement). Compared to the general Canadian public, participants were somewhat older, whiter, and more often affiliated with Christian churches that

---

<sup>8</sup>Similarly, the TRC (2015: 123) states, 'Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, from an Aboriginal perspective, also requires reconciliation with the natural world.'

<sup>9</sup>Similar ideas have been discussed by non-Indigenous scholar-activists, including Barker (2010), Bishop (2002), Davis (2010), Fortier (2015), and Walia (2012).