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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1835)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): Seeing as we have quorum and a busy agenda, I'm going to call this meeting of the Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs to order. We always start by acknowledging that in Ottawa we meet on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin people. I am seated here in Hamilton East—Stoney Creek on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabe and Chonnonnton first nations.

I believe everyone here has been involved in a Zoom virtual meeting, so I think you are aware of all the situations, but I'd like to stress that it's important that we can't properly run the meeting without clear and effective translation, and that requires that you have the correct selection on the translation globe at the bottom centre of your screen, and that you select the floor, English or French. When you speak, please do so clearly and slowly. Please have your microphone on only when you are speaking, and that will help things along.

We're very pleased to have with us by video conference for the first hour Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, accompanied by the following department officials: Natasha Kim, associate assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; and Alec Attfield, director general, citizenship.

Welcome to all of you.

Minister, welcome to our committee. We invite you to make an opening statement of about six minutes, if you could, and then we will move on to questions. Please go ahead.

Hon. Marco Mendicino (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and colleagues. Thank you for inviting me to appear before you on this important piece of legislation.

Before moving forward, I would also like to acknowledge that I'm joining you today virtually from the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit. It's an honour to appear before this committee in support of our new government's bill to amend the oath of citizenship to ensure that new Canadians understand the role of indigenous peoples in this country's past and present and in our collective future.

[*Translation*]

As you know, Mr. Chair, our government is firmly committed to implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action.

Our government also strongly believes that it must acknowledge past wrongdoing in our country's relationship with first nations, Inuit and Métis people.

We aim to continue to build relationships with indigenous peoples based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation and partnership.

[*English*]

As members will recall, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to action number 94 puts forward a recommendation to amend the oath of citizenship to add a reference to “including Treaties with Indigenous Peoples”. Our government made a clear commitment to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action, and this bill is one of the many ways in which we are acting on it. This bill is especially important because the citizenship oath is much more than just words. It's an acknowledgment of newly gained rights and a commitment to fulfill one's responsibilities as a citizen. It's a commitment to Canada—past, present and future.

When considering the new language in the oath, we worked very closely with first nations, Inuit and Métis leaders. We've also engaged experts and the public across Canada. The wording put forth in this bill responds to call to action 94 and reflects the commitment to indigenous rights outlined in section 35 of the charter, which is shaped by the substance of what we heard during our extensive consultations. The language in the new oath reflects the spirit of the call to action and input from first nations, Inuit and Métis partners.

[*Translation*]

The bill that we've introduced reflects a revised proposal for an oath of citizenship that incorporates the principle of reconciliation with the hope of instilling it in new citizens.

[English]

To further enhance newcomers' understanding of the oath, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada is also working to revise the citizenship guide and knowledge test to include more information on the diverse indigenous peoples of Canada. This responds to TRC call to action 93. To that end, the department is continuing to consult with national indigenous organizations, indigenous leaders and advocacy groups. We will continue to do so and will work to reflect on, and include, all the feedback we receive.

We have also been working to increase indigenous representation at citizenship ceremonies. When I have personally attended these ceremonies where an elder has joined to offer remarks or an opening prayer or blessing, I have also found it to be an enriching experience that allows us to start the proceedings in the right way and ensure that everyone involved has a better appreciation of indigenous traditions and values.

The citizenship oath, the revised study guide and test, and the enhanced indigenous presence in citizenship ceremonies together support the important work of reconciliation.

[Translation]

I think that the committee members will agree that the principle of reconciliation with indigenous people must be introduced to newcomers and prospective citizens early in their citizenship process.

[English]

By taking the oath, new citizens inherit the legacy of those who have come before them and the values that have defined our—and now their—country. Our history becomes their history, and their story becomes part of ours.

Now, with this bill, that story includes affirming the rights of indigenous peoples while instilling in new Canadians the obligation that all citizens have to respect these rights and uphold the treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements.

● (1840)

[Translation]

These changes are an important and necessary step in advancing Canada's broad agenda of reconciliation and in strengthening our country's valuable relationship with indigenous peoples. The proposed amendment adds only a few words to the oath of citizenship, but the scope of this addition is immense.

[English]

Reconciliation is a national project, one that requires all of us. With this proposed change, the newest members of our Canadian family will now better understand their unique role in it.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, and thank you for your careful attention to selecting the right language. Those were the little pauses in between.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I think we've all had to learn that technique.

The Chair: It certainly facilitates the translation. Thank you for your comments.

Also, I should say that I suppose most of us have attended and spoken at citizenship ceremonies. Here, I always like to start off in looking at people who come from ancient civilizations—from China, Syria and different places—and note that our own local history begins at least 11,000 years ago. Some of them are quite surprised. I'm happy to relate that when I speak to first nations people locally—and this is of course the retreat of the glaciers and our activities beginning in this area—they say, “Oh no, we were here long before that.” We all have a lot to learn, I think, about our histories.

Having said that, it's time to go to our round of questioners. The first group of speakers includes Ms. Dancho, Mr. van Koeverden and Ms. Normandin. I also have Ms. Mathyssen on my list, but I assume that's going to be Ms. Kwan.

Right now, we'll go to our first questioner, Ms. Dancho, for six minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): I want to start by saying that I'm joining virtually from Treaty 1 territory and the homeland of the Métis nation here in Manitoba.

The Conservatives were very happy to finally be discussing this bill. It's been a long time coming. As we know, former prime minister Stephen Harper officially did the formal apology for residential schools in 2008 and really helped usher in the process and appointed Senator Murray Sinclair as the chair.

Here we are, about 12 or 13 years later, finally discussing number 94 to change our citizenship oath. As Conservatives, we take very seriously the institutions and traditions of Canada. This is a very big deal to us, and we're very happy to be supporting this change and to have the minister here. Thank you, Minister Mendicino, for being with us today.

Before I ask my first question, I want to give a shout-out to my constituent Senator Murray Sinclair, who, as we know, is retiring from the Senate. If you're listening, thank you very much, Senator, for all your work in really changing the course of history for the better for indigenous people.

Minister, I have a couple of questions about the priority level for this for your government. We know it's been about five years in the making. Minister John McCallum, I believe, first started the discussions with an advisory group for this back in 2016. Minister Hussen, following him, introduced the first iteration of this bill, which of course died on the Order Paper in the 2019 election.

Then you got the role. You introduced it, and then, upon the Prime Minister proroguing Parliament, of course, almost an entire year of legislative work got wiped clean. We had to start from scratch in September.

Now here we are, about five months later, finally discussing this at committee. It's been five years, three ministers, three versions of this bill. I would like a commitment from you or some acknowledgement of what the priority level is for you to get this done. I want to hear that you're going to be taking this quite seriously, before perhaps a spring election, to ensure it gets passed. What level of priority is this for you?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I'm happy to take the question, Ms. Dancho. Before I answer, would you please also extend my gratitude to your constituent, Senator Sinclair, who has been a great supporter and a really inspirational voice in this discussion.

Of course, as you know, our government, stretching back to 2015, made a commitment to implement all the calls to action. I am the third minister. My sincere hope is that the third time is the charm. This was the first piece of legislation I introduced, and I certainly have continued to advocate for the amendment to the oath of citizenship, which is directly responsive to call to action 94.

As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, this is not just about changing the language in the oath. It's about making a solemn promise when you enter the family of citizenship, which—as you know and you've heard me say on many occasions—is one of the unique functions of this office. More importantly, I think it will serve as a broad educational tool for all Canadians about the role—

• (1845)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I would agree.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: —of indigenous peoples in our history and our traditions. That's why I'm very grateful for your support.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate that.

I have the executive summary here and all 94 recommendations. I've flipped through them. My understanding is that this is one of the simpler ones to implement. A lot of good work needs to be done in here.

However, I do have concerns. It's been five years of this mandate, and I'm concerned that at this pace we may never quite get there, particularly because there are much more challenging ones we need to implement. This is a simpler one. I appreciate, though, that you're committed to doing everything you can.

You mentioned revamping the citizenship guide. How long has that been in the works? Minister McCallum was working on that five years ago, and it dropped off the mandate letter.

When are you planning to provide that to opposition parties? Also, can you commit to consulting indigenous leadership here in Manitoba?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Of course, I am committed to consulting with you and all parliamentarians, as well as with indigenous leaders right across the country, when it comes to updating our citizenship guide. Indeed, we are in the process of updating it. We want to be sure the new guide reflects indigenous history, traditions and principles. We also want to be sure the new guide reflects Canada's diversity and is inclusive of historically under-represented groups and the evolution of charter rights.

We're continuing to consult a wide range of experts so the new guide is a companion resource, not only for the purposes of acquir-

ing citizenship but as an educational piece that better informs everyone about the vital role of indigenous peoples and reconciliation in our past, present and future. We hope to finalize it as soon as we can.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: All right. I think I have about one minute and 20 seconds left.

I have asked you this question before. I know you're a lawyer. You have a good legal understanding. Why the word “aboriginal” in your proposed oath amendment, rather than “indigenous”?

I studied indigenous history under Senator Murray Sinclair's son, Professor Niigaan Sinclair. My understanding is that “aboriginal” is an outdated term, but there may be some constitutional circumstances attached to “aboriginal” that I'm not aware of.

If we're going to change it after 40 years of one oath, then we'd better get it right. I would like to know why the word “aboriginal” and not “indigenous”.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I could not agree with you more that we do want to get this right. That's why this exercise before the committee is very important.

You're also correct, Ms. Dancho, that there is a legal and historical context to the use of the term “aboriginal”. It stems from section 35 of the charter. I would also point out that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission itself, in its original drafting of the recommendation under 94, used the term.

We have consulted, as I said, with first nations, Inuit, Métis and indigenous leaders across the country. We are looking forward to this committee's study of the language as presented—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay, so it has some historical significance, but 94 in the book uses “indigenous”. It was your government that changed it to “aboriginal”. I'll take your word that it has legal significance.

I think that's my question, Chair.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It's in section 35 of the charter, yes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay, good.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Dancho.

Now, for six minutes, we go to Mr. van Koeverden.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would also like to start by acknowledging that I am joining from the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Attawandaron, Anishinabe, Huron-Wendat and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Thank you for joining us today, Minister Mendicino. It's very nice to see you and have a fresh face.

It's certainly nice to see you as well, MP Dancho. It's nice to have fresh people on here, especially people with such a thorough background on issues like this.

Minister Mendicino, this is an incredibly important piece of legislation. I'm going to keep my question very brief, because I'd like to hear from you, given that this is your piece of legislation.

Please provide your insight on why this is such an important piece of legislation and why important things like this take time. Perhaps also touch on how we are going a little more virtual with some of the ceremonies and testing, given the current context with COVID-19, and going forward with being able to do these from remote locations.

I pass the floor over to you for your personal insights. Give the committee a little bit of information. It's over to you.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you very much, Mr. van Koeverden.

Mr. Chair, in answer to my colleague's question, I do think it's important to reflect on the origin of this call to action, which began with the concluding report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It documented in painful and agonizing detail the historical injustices that were visited upon indigenous children and their families, where they were quite literally ripped apart from those who were there to take good care of them. Rights were ignored and treaties were terminated through assimilation and through the words of some of the government officials of that time. The government of the day would not rest until every last indigenous person was incorporated into the body corporate.

I believe that this is the source of the motivation to fulfill all of the calls to action that have been published by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as a meaningful step towards reconciliation.

This is one step. It does not reflect the entirety of our government's many efforts and initiatives on the journey of reconciliation, which we are taking in partnership with rights holders and indigenous leaders across this country. As I mentioned in my earlier answer to Ms. Dancho, I do think it is nonetheless a significant one.

Taking the solemn oath when one becomes a citizen is more than just a recitation. It is a commitment. It is also a responsibility. Part of that responsibility is learning about Canada's history, where we are today with regard to reconciliation, and where we would like to go in the future. It's one of the reasons why my sincere hope is that we will be able to amend this oath.

Of important note, I will say that we have been able to make some leaps and bounds with regard to the way in which we are undertaking our citizenship ceremonies. We're doing them more virtu-

ally. We've welcomed over 50,000 new citizens since the onset of the pandemic. We are also beginning to test individuals online.

With greater access and hopefully with an amended oath of citizenship, this will be an important contribution to reconciliation as we continue to enlarge the family of citizenship in Canada.

• (1850)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Minister Mendicino. It's good to hear your insights.

I would like to also acknowledge and thank Senator Sinclair on this day and go on record and perhaps ask for unanimous consent, if that's a thing on committee—I'm not sure it is—to wish Senator Sinclair a happy retirement and a happy birthday. He celebrated his 70th birthday this week. His work over the course of his career as a senator, as a judge and in so many other ways has improved Canada in ways that I don't think this committee will ever really be able to fully comprehend or appreciate.

Mr. Chair, if I could in some way, I'll go on record as wishing Senator Sinclair not just a happy birthday but a happy retirement and thank him for all of his incredible work.

I think I have about a minute left. As my final question, I would like to ask Minister Mendicino why the government decided to change the wording, as proposed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Why is that important? What practical implications does that have, if any, for new Canadians and for people who attend citizenship ceremonies? I'd just like to say that during my campaign I joined one and reaffirmed my citizenship. As a first-generation Canadian, it was very significant for me.

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for the question, Mr. van Koeverden.

The most practical implication is that if we amend the oath, it will certainly change the wording of that oath to better reflect reconciliation with the proposed language that has been put forward in Bill C-8.

This allows me to also reaffirm some of the earlier answers that I gave to your first question on why this is important. This is a reflection of our government's commitment to move forward in partnership with rights holders and indigenous leaders on the path to reconciliation. It is directly responsive to call to action 94 and, of course, we look forward to continuing to work with all parliamentarians to achieve that important step as we move forward together.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Minister Mendicino.

The Chair: Thanks.

With the unanimous consent of the committee, I would be delighted to forward a letter on behalf of the indigenous and northern affairs committee, as you suggest, Mr. van Koeverden.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: That would be wonderful.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and maybe a birthday card.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Next we have Ms. Normandin.

Please go ahead for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, Minister Mendicino. It's good to see you for the first time this year.

I gather that we'll have the opportunity to see each other many times, and perhaps even more often, since yesterday we passed a motion for Raïf Badawi, which I plan to keep a close eye on.

Regarding the topic at hand this evening, I'll steal your thunder since I'll be talking about the Constitution. The issue is a difference between the call to action number 94 and the wording of the bill. In the call to action, the word "Constitution" doesn't appear, whereas it appears in the bill.

I want to start by asking you who came up with the initiative to include the Constitution in the bill.

● (1855)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you for your question, Ms. Normandin.

I'm always happy to work with you and your caucus on the reconciliation project.

To answer your question, I can say that we started a consultation process with all national indigenous leaders and organizations.

During this process, we also received feedback on the specific language to use. We adhered to the meaning of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations. We even took lessons on the language of the charter.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'll clarify my question.

Did the first nations, Inuit and Métis people specifically request that the word "Constitution" be added?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The wording of the bill reflects all our consultations with indigenous leaders and with others who participated in the process.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'll repeat my question anyway. Did the government or the first nations want to include the word "Constitution"? Who made the request?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: It's the product of the process in general.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Minister Mendicino, I want to know whether you believe that it's important to reach a consensus, so that we can pass the bill as quickly as possible and send a clear message to the first nations. Would you like to see a consensus on the passage of the bill?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Yes, certainly. It's an honour for me to speak with you and with all the committee members.

I prefer an approach that involves a great deal of consultation in order to reach a consensus. We must continue this process with the leaders of indigenous communities.

Ms. Christine Normandin: I'm a Quebecker. There isn't necessarily a consensus on the Constitution in Quebec. Moreover, no Quebec premier, whether federalist or sovereignist, has adhered to the Constitution.

The Bloc Québécois will most likely move an amendment to remove the word "Constitution", while maintaining the recognition of indigenous rights, whether they be treaty rights or aboriginal rights.

Do you think that this approach would make it possible to unanimously pass the bill?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Ms. Normandin, I remain open to the committee's proposals. However, the wording of the bill is the product of consultations with several organizations that represent indigenous communities across Canada. I'll review the government's position after reading the committee's report.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Okay.

If the Bloc were to propose an amendment to remove the word "Constitution" but keep everything else, do you believe that this would achieve the goal of reconciliation with the first nations?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As I just said, I remain open to the committee's proposals. The Constitution and the charter have played a very significant role. However, I know that the committee will continue to hear all the evidence on this issue.

● (1900)

Ms. Christine Normandin: I have one last question for you.

Do the rights of indigenous peoples stem from the Constitution or are they inherent rights that pre-date the Constitution?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: The rights set out in the Constitution and the charter are inherent rights. The bill is based on these rights. The recognition of these rights is an important step towards reconciliation. You're correct in saying that these rights are very important.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Mr. Chair, I believe that my time is up.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, we have Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Just to clarify, I will be taking the first hour, and then MP Lindsay Mathyssen will be taking the second hour.

Thank you so much, Minister, for coming to the committee.

To also acknowledge the land, I'm Zooming in from the land of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples here in Vancouver.

Minister, in terms of the change in the language of the citizenship oath, could you advise whether or not either you or your officials consulted directly with the chief commissioner, Murray Sinclair, on the changed language? If so, what were his thoughts on that?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you, Ms. Kwan, and thank you for your participation tonight.

I certainly had some informal discussions with Senator Sinclair in the lead-up to the tabling of this legislation, and that was part of a rather broad and expensive set of consultations with the NIOs.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Was there specific consultation with respect to the language of the oath and the changed language—what he recommended in his recommendation 94 versus what is in this bill?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As you recall, Ms. Kwan, Senator Sinclair was the original sponsor and chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. As we know, there was an evolution between the specific wording of that original text and the text that is before you. Yes, I did have informal conversations with Senator Sinclair as part of an extensive consultation process conducted by my department.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: For clarity purposes, maybe we can have the officials from your department share with the committee specifically those comments from Senator Sinclair. I would be very interested in understanding his perspective on it. I think it would assist us in this work.

In terms of going forward, this is the third time we've been here. I really wish we could get through this and make this into law. Hopefully this will be done and will not be interrupted once again by an election that would delay and defer action in this regard.

Aside from changing the wording of the citizenship oath itself, the other component that, of course, would be essential would be the education that needs to take place. One tool would be the citizenship guide, which I have a question on for the minister. Apart from that, I actually think that ongoing education needs to take place.

Is the minister or this minister's ministry providing resources? Do you have a plan in place to ensure that educational work is being done for newcomers or, I would say, even for Canadians at large?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I agree that education will be a vitally important companion piece to amending this oath. As you heard me testify earlier, we are working in earnest to complete consultations and to update that guide so that it better reflects indigenous traditions, histories and values. That is something we wish to see done in conjunction with the amendment of the oath of citizenship because, as I've pointed out and as I think you've reaffirmed, this will not just be an important resource for citizenship ceremonies. Hopefully, this new citizenship guide will better promote and educate all Canadians and anyone who wishes to understand the Canadian experience, and that includes, essentially, reconciliation.

• (1905)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Aside from the guide, are there any plans within the ministry—either your department or some other department within government—that will embark on educational work with respect to the history around indigenous people for both newcomers and Canadians?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I've offered you my view of it from our department, but I think, without question, that my colleagues Minister Bennett and Minister Miller have continued to undertake work in better educating all Canadians with regard to reconciliation. If there are specific suggestions that you may have, Ms. Kwan, I remain open to them.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do you have a specific budget within your ministry that's allocated for educational work, beyond the citizenship guide, to advance this particular action?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: In addition to the guide, we have interwoven other elements of indigenous tradition at citizenship ceremonies. I certainly would like to see that continue and, if there are opportunities, to further scale that up so that as we conduct these ceremonies—in a COVID world and hopefully post-COVID, when we can get back to doing them in person—indigenous traditions form a vital part of this important step towards becoming a Canadian citizen.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would venture to say that it would be very important for the ministry—and maybe not just your ministry but across the government, a government of the whole—to take on initiatives in terms of the educational work that needs to be done to educate both newcomers and Canadians about the history of indigenous peoples. I think this is consistent with the TRC and the thrust of the recommendations that came forward with the calls to action.

I'm just going to leave it at that, but I do have a question with respect to the citizenship guide. This—

The Chair: We're at time now, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can I just ask quickly if the minister has a specific timeline on when that would be available?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: As soon as we can, Ms. Kwan. Again, I'm open to receiving input on that from you and from colleagues.

I'd just add, to the other part of your question, that every minister has been given a mandate to ensure that we are moving forward with reconciliation.

I'm happy to take further questions afterwards.

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. Kwan.

Next, we go to our five-minute round of questioning, with Mr. Melillo to start it off.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to offer the last minute of my time to Mr. Viersen. Could I ask you, Chair, to jump in and remind me of that when the time comes?

Minister, I appreciate your being here. I've spoken with many chiefs in my riding of Kenora, in northern Ontario, about this issue and others and have been getting their thoughts on this. Nobody would say that this is a bad thing to do. Everyone is supportive of this change.

I think that's reflected in the fact that Parliament is supportive of this change, but too often folks in my riding have seen the government over-promise and under-deliver when it comes to drinking water and when it comes to food security, transportation and infrastructure. Can you tell us, Minister, when the residents of first nations in my riding can expect to see some meaningful action and some meaningful results from this government?

Hon. Marco Mendicino: I appreciate that feedback, Mr. Melillo. I know that my colleagues, Minister Bennett and Minister Miller, have been working as hard as they can, particularly on the issue of reducing long-term drinking water advisories. I know that 99 have been lifted since November 2015, but there is still a long way to go.

With regard to what my department and I can contribute to reconciliation, we have invested our energy in Bill C-8. We recognize that it's one step, but it is a significant step, because as has already been articulated by a number of our colleagues, this is about educating new Canadians as they join our family—not just them, but equally everyone—on the role of reconciliation as part of the Canadian experience.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Minister, you did mention education there, which is something we've been talking about throughout the committee.

Another chief I was talking to mentioned that explicitly. He thinks there needs to be more education, not just for new Canadians but for all Canadians, and in this context, he's hoping to see more education put around this oath, not just the oath itself. Could you speak to any specific measures that you and your government are taking to ensure that this education is there?

● (1910)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Again, I can certainly highlight a number of initiatives with regard to education. I think you would see our government's commitment by the introduction of Bill C-92 to address child welfare and our commitment to implementing Jordan's principle with a concomitant investment of over \$1.2 billion over the next three years, as well as the legislation regarding the protection of the best interests of every indigenous child.

These are just three concrete examples in which our government is doing everything we can to ensure that every indigenous child is raised in a healthy and safe atmosphere in which they can pursue an education. From that, I think we can draw lessons whereby we can educate others who do not have the lived experiences of indigenous peoples, so that they understand how this work contributes to reconciliation. That is the commitment of our government.

The Chair: You have a minute and a half, if you'd like to send it over to Mr. Viersen.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I will send it over. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Viersen, please go ahead.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd just like to interrupt the witness here for a moment. I would like to put up a notice of motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study on the cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline and the potential loss of the Line 5 pipeline in northern and Indigenous communities, that the study take into account but not be limited to the impact on Indigenous businesses, jobs, economic prosperity, self-determination, and mutual benefit agreements as well as the efforts of the federal government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and that the committee report its findings to the House.

I just wanted to get that on the record for a notice of motion. I hope to be discussing that at a future committee meeting.

I know this is something very pertinent for the first nations communities in my area. Many of them work in the oil patch and are very much concerned about their jobs. They've been in tenuous employment situations for the last five years, and now, with news around the Keystone XL pipeline and also the potential around Line 5, they're looking forward to having this committee do a study on that as well. I look forward to having future discussions at this committee.

Thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Chair. I look forward to discussion at a future committee meeting.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, Mr. Battiste, it's your turn, for five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for joining us. Thank you for your hard work on this. Indeed, this is an important subject.

I think many of my colleagues have touched on the importance of education. What we have with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a blueprint. I hold this up, and for me, it's not a prop; it's the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action.

Before I was a member of Parliament, I was the treaty education lead for Nova Scotia. We all understand that education is provincial jurisdiction.

What the TRC calls to action have done is allow us to really understand a perspective that was hidden for many years. The cultural genocide that was referred to by the TRC commissioners is an important one to understand.

One of the great things about this country is our commitment to respect and inclusivity. One of the stories I often told—and I won't go into detail—was about 1603 and how the grand chief of the Mi'kmaq nation, Henri Membertou, welcomed the French settlers. He took them under his wing and showed them how to live in the harsh winters. There are many stories all across Canada where indigenous people showed the newcomers how to live on this land.

I think this is an important first step that we take. I'm really glad that, within these 94 calls to action, we see the importance of talking to new Canadians. One of the biggest things I heard from Canadians when I was doing my treaty education presentations was, "Why weren't we informed of that? Why didn't anyone talk to us about residential schools? Why didn't anyone talk about the history?" We all know it's an important step forward that you're taking with this.

As part of that, terminology is important too, understanding that section 35 talks about aboriginal rights—"aboriginal" as being defined by first nations, Métis and Inuit. It's about making sure that we respect the Constitution, the supreme law of Canada, which not only recognizes and affirms but brings notice of our inherent treaty rights.

I want to get to my question. How do you feel that this legislation helps create a more respectful and inclusive Canada?

● (1915)

Hon. Marco Mendicino: Thank you very much, Mr. Battiste. It's good to see you. If I haven't said it before, thank you for your contributions as a leader in the community prior to entering elected politics.

You're right. Education has been a recurring theme in some of the questions tonight.

I would like to add some further clarification to Ms. Kwan's question, if you'll indulge me. I have since been reminded that in addition to the study guide, there will be new study materials that will accompany that guide to support teachers and self-directed learners. These materials will include videos, practice tests, activities and materials for teachers and settlement organizations.

I want to clarify that, because I think it gets right to the heart of your experience as an educator: how the amended citizenship oath fits into the broader piece of how we educate Canadians and all who are interested in understanding what treaties are; what agreements were put in place; how they were disregarded, disrespected and eviscerated; how now, in Canada today, we have to go back and understand what it means to re-establish a relationship that is based on mutual respect, on the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determine and to choose their own way of living.

The revised oath does that. It isn't the beginning and end. It is not the chapter and verse of that educational component. However, it is certainly a window into a much broader world of understanding where indigenous people, first nations, Inuit, Métis peoples fit in Canada.

That is vitally important as we chart out the course of reconciliation together.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Members of the committee and guests, I've been advised that we need to suspend the meeting at this point, and it may take some time, so perhaps that will mean that we'll have to move on to the next part of the meeting following the suspension. I hope not, but in the meantime, on the advice of the clerks, I'm going to declare this meeting suspended temporarily.

● (1915)

(Pause)

● (1935)

The Chair: Apologies to everyone for that, but what can you do in this technical age?

Our meeting is now under way once again, with our second group of witnesses. Marie Wilson joins us, a former commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada; as well as Natan Obed, the president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami; and Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux.

Each of you will have an opportunity to speak to the committee for six minutes.

Ms. Wilson, you'll start. Please go ahead for six minutes.

● (1940)

Ms. Marie Wilson (Former Commissioner, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, As an Individual): Thank you.

Apart from our audio check, I do want to do a proper introduction of myself. Just to let you know, I'm coming to you from Yellowknife, which is part of the traditional territory of the Yellowknives Dene, the Wiiliideh Dene of the Dene Nation. It's part of the Treaty 8 territory in the Northwest Territories. Our home area, my family's northern home, is Treaty 11, farther north, on the Arctic Circle, but we live in and work out of Yellowknife, and that's where I'm speaking to you from today.

I want to thank you and acknowledge the meeting and my appreciation, if I may say so, of the non-partisan nature of standing committees of this sort. When we're talking about issues that are really grounded in reconciliation, it's always good to remind ourselves that we're talking about an issue that is meant to be non-partisan in nature. That was evidenced in the apologies given in the House of Commons in 2008, where all the national parties spoke to their ongoing commitment to reconciliation in Canada.

I want to say a few things by way of background. I know you have had a lot of background information on the commission and our work and the calls to action generally, and of course very specifically the one before you for consideration now, but there are a couple of things I would like to remind you of that I think provide an important context. Our Truth and Reconciliation Commission was just one part of the very big settlement agreement that came about to do with the massive court challenge with regard to residential schools and the unprecedented out-of-court settlement that was the result of that. Our TRC was just one part of it. I say that because I think it is easy to lose sight of the core purpose of our TRC, which really was at its heart three-purposed. One was to document and record and preserve for posterity the complete history and legacy of the residential schools; a second big piece, to speak very broadly, was to educate Canada; and a third part was to inspire ongoing reconciliation. Those three, as you already know, are interrelated and they're interdependent.

But to the question of education, which I know has been very much on your mind in this committee, if you look at the broad grouping of the 94 calls to action, you'll find that something like 70% of them—I don't have the exact number in my head anymore, but about 70% of them—have an educational component built into them, starting, first and foremost, with a need for education in our schools and teaching our children and all the calls for curriculum changes, but also educational imperatives for people working with, for and on behalf of indigenous people: the whole child welfare and social services sector, the health sector, the justice sector, the business sector, and of course education and culture. As well, it is very important that governance systems that govern governments, not just at a committee like this but in all sectors of departmental government, be well informed about all of these things we have learned thanks to the expertise of the residential school survivors.

The challenge we faced when we said that we wanted to educate the country was that it's not going to work if we just educate the children, because children learn not just at school but at home. How do we get to their parents? How do we get to the adults in our society, who have already been through the school system? There is such a compelling need for remedial education, if I can put it that way, in a time and in a country where we've all heard, "Gee, I didn't know anything about that. I had never heard that." As I heard you say earlier in this meeting, when I was listening in, "How come no one ever told us that?"

So there's catch-up educational work to be done. We've tried to think about all the ways we could meet the need for education in all the sectors, in professional organizations and even in athletic organizations. But what do you do about all the newcomers to Canada, who arrive and who've missed the whole story, in a way, unless we find ways to keep the story alive and make them realize they are a critical part of the story, because the story that has happened, the story that is the chapter of reconciliation, is in our midst and unfolding and they need to be prepared and equipped to play an active role in that? That means helping them understand, from the very beginning, that there is a context in Canada, that we are a huge, beautiful country, but that wherever you are in Canada, you are on someone's traditional homeland. We need to get better at equipping ourselves from an educational point of view and a societal point of view to know that context and to understand it as the basis for ongoing reconciliation.

- (1945)

That was the intent of this particular call to action. I want to say, because it was touched on in your earlier discussion, which I really appreciated, that the oath doesn't come out of the blue. People who are going to be taking the oath of citizenship have been given tools to work with. They have been given an opportunity to study a booklet and other materials that are offered. One of the things we also did as a commission is write and try to appeal for an opportunity for the materials—the newcomer's booklet—to be rewritten to capture some of this history as well.

To the extent to which that has been done—or not—I think that needs ongoing vigilance, but it is the way to do it, and I completely endorse and support the comment made by one of your members that there is a need for education broadly across all society. It's not just for newcomers. We're not trying to single out newcomers. On

the contrary, we're trying to make sure they're not left out. We are targeting all these other sectors, as I've already described, but we're also trying not to miss newcomers to Canada, as well.

Finally, I want to leave you with a quick story to signal the point. The latest statistic I saw was that, by 2036, about 35% of the population of Canada will be racialized, if I can use that terminology, and many of them will be first-generation newcomers. We're talking about very significant populations who are enriching but also transforming the demographics of Canada, and we need to make sure that people are well informed about where they have arrived, the historic place and role of indigenous peoples, some of the mistakes we've made as a country, and the courage our country is now showing in trying to redress that and to move the country forward in a new direction, I hope, always—and I say this often—as an example to the world.

That's what's behind it, and I really appreciate the work you're doing to consider it quickly.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Ms. Wilson.

Next, we have Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, chair of the circle of governance at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba.

Go ahead, please. You have six minutes.

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux (Chair, Governing Circle, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation): Thank you.

Ahneen. Good evening. My name is Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux. I am the chair of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation governing circle and an honorary witness for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I'm also a proud member and resident of the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation in Lake Simcoe, Ontario. Together with the Chippewas of Beausoleil and Rama and the Mississaugas of Alderville, Curve Lake, Hiawatha and Scugog Island, we are signatories to the pre-Confederation 1923 Williams Treaties, signed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, which covered lands in different parts of south central Ontario.

First, I would like to acknowledge that I am also speaking to you from the original lands of the Chippewa. I want to thank the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs for inviting the centre to appear in order to contribute to your study of Bill C-8, an act to amend the Citizenship Act. This is an important initiative, one that will breathe life into one of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada as set out in its call to action number 94.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation would like to thank the Honourable Ahmed Hussen for sponsoring Bill C-99 on this matter and the Honourable Marco Mendicino for sponsoring Bill C-8 and its predecessor, Bill C-6. We encourage all parliamentarians to ensure that Bill C-8 receives royal assent during this parliamentary session. We applaud the effort to be more inclusive as a society, as part of the very act of welcoming people to become citizens of our country. This addition to the citizenship oath, one which “recognizes and affirms the Aboriginal and treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples”, is in the true spirit of reconciliation.

At second reading of this bill, Minister Mendicino stated that at the time of the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, too few Canadians knew about the tragedy of residential schools. He also noted, “Our government firmly believes that we must acknowledge the injustices of the past and envision a new relationship based on the inherent rights of indigenous peoples.” We agree, and note that considerable progress has been made towards creating awareness, developing a new relationship, and recognizing the rights of first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples as contained in section 35 of the Canadian Constitution. Indeed, much progress has been made in recognizing and upholding the international human rights of indigenous peoples.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission called the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples the “framework for reconciliation”, as it supports the development of new relationships as described by Minister Mendicino, relationships based on co-operation and mutual understanding, as well as recognition and respect for the human rights of indigenous peoples.

In this regard, we would like to express to the federal government our support and appreciation for the introduction of Bill C-15, an act respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was co-developed with first nations, Inuit and the Métis nation. Bill C-15 is itself a symbol of reconciliation and a new approach to the relationship. It is complementary to the aim of Bill C-8, to recognize and affirm “the Aboriginal and treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples”.

There is so much that we hope new citizens and all Canadians will understand about the history and relationship with indigenous peoples. This is why the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommended that the information kit for newcomers and the citizenship test be amended to reflect a more inclusive history of the indigenous peoples of Canada, including information about aboriginal rights, treaties and the history of residential schools. Although Bill C-8 does not address needed changes to the information kit, we do hope this complementary policy action to support the intent of call to action number 94 will be undertaken by the Government of Canada. This type of education and awareness building is important work, as has already been stated.

It is important for newcomers to have an understanding of the laws of Canada, including the Constitution, which recognizes and affirms the aboriginal and treaty rights of first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We need to build societal understanding about the rich, diverse and vibrant cultures and histories of the indigenous peoples in Canada. I myself have dedicated my life to building bridges of understanding among individuals and peoples. I see end-

less merit in bringing people from diverse cultures, ages and backgrounds together to engage in practical dialogue. I remain deeply committed to public education and youth engagement from all cultures and backgrounds, and spend a considerable amount of time throughout the year delivering those kinds of educational processes to people across the country.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation was established because of a shared vision held by those affected by the residential school system in Canada to create a safe place of learning and dialogue where the truths of their experiences are honoured and kept safe for future generations. They wanted their families, communities and all of Canada to learn from these hard lessons so that they would not be repeated. They wanted to share the wisdom of the elders and traditional knowledge-keepers on how to create just and peaceful relationships amongst diverse peoples. They knew that reconciliation is not only about the past; it is also about the future that all Canadians will forge together.

● (1950)

Bill C-8 is an important part of this journey we take together to create a brighter future for all Canadians.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and its governing circle stand ready to support the government's reconciliation [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mr. Clerk, were we getting a brief interruption on that microphone?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Naaman Sugrue): Yes, we were. I believe it has to do with the device being used. It's not on our end.

We'll have to monitor it and do our best.

The Chair: Okay, good.

Mr. Obed, please go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Natan Obed (President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami): *Nakurmiik.* Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's good to see all of you via Zoom, as always. I'm the president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national representational organization for Canada's 65,000 Inuit.

I can remember first meeting with the minister responsible, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, in early 2016 to discuss the revisions to the citizenship oath and the revisions to the accompanying citizenship guide. We are now five years into this conversation. Really, we're only talking about a paragraph. I know there are other political considerations, but honestly, it's been a long time. There is no legislative requirement for amendments to the citizenship guide. We are here to say, “Please, can we get on with it?”

Implementing calls to action 93 and 94 seems like something that has been universally accepted. It doesn't appear that there is any sort of political push-back on the concept of explicitly stating "first nations, Inuit and Métis", and also revising the current guide to be more reflective of the respect that the Government of Canada has towards first nations, Inuit and Métis, and the way in which we present ourselves to new Canadians and all Canadians.

ITK did put forward its particular position and version of the citizenship oath. I'll read it. It's a paragraph:

I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada, including treaties, agreements and constructive arrangements with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen.

We took the established wording within the UN declaration when it comes to the ways in which nation-states interact with indigenous peoples, reflecting self-determination. We put it into the oath. That's, just simply, what we did.

It's been through a number of different computations. We at ITK don't have a negative opinion of the oath as it was reintroduced in October 2020, but what we have put forward was trying to help and trying to simplify what always is a tough process.

In regard to the citizenship guide, ITK and Inuit regions have provided considerable input into a revised version of the citizenship guide. Most likely it won't be made public until after the oath has changed, at least that's what we've been hearing. In the meantime, and over the last four years, new Canadians continue to study an outdated version of the guide. I know that isn't necessarily what this committee has been struck to consider, but the delays mean that thousands of people every year are getting introduced to Canada, and to first nations, Inuit and Métis, with outdated materials. That just doesn't seem consistent with the good intent that I know exists at the political level.

We'll continue to work with the Government of Canada to ensure that the citizenship guide reflects the way in which Inuit would like to be described to new Canadians. We look forward to seeing this particular bill pass into law so the oath can be amended to include first nations, Inuit and Métis in the new law.

Nakurmiik.

• (1955)

The Chair: Thanks very much, Mr. Obed.

We'll go now to a six-minute round of questioning, starting with Ms. Dancho, and then Mr. Powlowski, Madame Bérubé and Ms. Mathysen, in that order.

Ms. Dancho, please go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the expert witnesses for the feedback. It was wonderful to hear your remarks, and I really appreciate your frank feedback.

I'm located on Treaty 1 territory in the homeland of the Métis nation here in Winnipeg.

I want to ask Ms. Wesley-Esquimaux about the centre. I have not had the opportunity to go there. I would assume that there is probably limited visitor capacity with COVID. Could you update the committee on the progress being made with the centre and what that experience is like for newcomers to Canada coming to see that, or MPs? Those on this panel who would be interested I think would love a tour. Could you give a little bit of information on what that experience is like at the centre?

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: I think it's a great experience. There's a lot of educational opportunity there. There's usually a whole team of people who are present. There's a bit of an archive right in the centre so that people can come. It is a small centre, though—you're right—in terms of how many people they can actually squeeze into the facility.

We have elders who are present on a regular basis. There are a lot of conversations that are ongoing and have been ongoing. We're now in the process of actually hiring a new executive director, so there are some changes happening there.

Otherwise, the doors are open. Generally speaking, when there is no pandemic, the doors are open for people to come in at any time. There are a lot of conversations that are available to them and materials and small gifts that they can take away with them.

Usually I'm there for business. I'm not actually there as a guest learning from the educational processes, but I have sat in on some of them, and I think they're very engaging. Also, there's dance. Actually, as I said [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

There's a lot of opportunity for Canadians to pop in and actually learn something about the history of the residential school experience. There's an archive that's being constantly built on. Those materials are increasingly accessible to people across the country, whether at educational institutes or organizations.

• (2000)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Wonderful. It's located right at the University of Manitoba campus, I believe.

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: You're right. It's at the University of Manitoba.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: That really complements the University of Manitoba's native studies faculty, which is, I believe, the largest in the country. It's really quite a hub of indigenous history. We're very fortunate in Winnipeg.

Thank you for that. I appreciate those remarks.

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: You're welcome.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I have a quick question for Ms. Wilson and Mr. Obed.

When the minister was here, we were talking a little bit about—and Mr. Obed, you highlighted this—the length of time it has taken for us to get here. This is the third iteration of the bill and the third minister. We've been talking about it for five years. We're finally at the committee stage. Hopefully, we can get this all the way to the end before any sort of election or what have you.

I just want to see if you could comment on your thoughts on the progress being made on this bill particularly, but also in general with regard to the 94 in here. My understanding is that, if this passes, it will still be only seven that have been officially implemented at the provincial and federal levels. Could you comment just generally on your thoughts on this bill and the general progress on the 94 calls to action?

Who would like to go first?

Mr. Natan Obed: I can start. This bill is, I guess, indicative of where we are on a number of the different calls to action. It has been hit-and-miss with regard to the way in which the federal government has chosen to respond to many calls to action. The Government of Canada and the ministers responsible will quote metrics and cite percentages in relation to the implementation of calls to action. I can't believe in those figures. The tangible outcomes versus having part of your department considering a particular call to action or calls for justice from MMIWG are two very different things.

Would the minister say that calls 93 and 94 are complete because the government is working on them—as the government has been working on them for the last five years? The world hasn't changed yet. We haven't even changed the citizenship guide yet.

I wish we were able to work together in a more honest way on the implementation of not only the TRC but also the MMIWG, and figure out how we can work together to outcomes rather than work together ad nauseam in infinity.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate that, and I think you make a really good point about statistics versus the outcome and working together. The real point of this is far beyond statistics. The point is taken on that, Mr. Obed. I appreciate that.

Ms. Wilson, we have about 45 seconds left.

Ms. Marie Wilson: Well, I would draw your attention to calls to action 53 to 56. They talk very specifically about the creation of a national council for reconciliation. One of its core purposes is to keep an oversight eye on progress and implementation of the other calls to action, but also to create a mechanism for regular tracking and reporting on improvements and consequences—which is what President Obed is talking about—whether it's shifts for the better, or whether we are actually doing worse in some areas. As long as we don't have a mechanism to help us all collectively keep an eye on things, how things are going, we're busily doing things but not necessarily achieving things.

December 15 was the five-year anniversary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For the first time since that closed, I and my commissioner colleagues Sinclair and Littlechild issued a joint statement in which we basically said that progress is too slow and that there is a need for urgency. Among other things, we have too many survivors who worked for this who are not going to see the results of their labour and their courage.

• (2005)

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt, but we're over time on that.

Mr. Powlowski, you have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The oath makes reference to the Constitution. Now, I'm a bit curious about why that is. It looks to me like a fairly elegant way of putting a reference to the indigenous population and the rights of the indigenous population into the oath.

We've already heard suggestions from the Bloc—I don't know if all of you were on the previous call—that they want removal of the reference to the Constitution. I wonder what the people from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission think about the reference to the Constitution. Mr. Obed's proposed wording would not have a reference to the Constitution. Is there a need for a reference to the Constitution? Is that desirable?

Ms. Wesley-Esquimaux, I think you mentioned the reference to the Constitution—I thought in a fairly approving way—but maybe you could tell me what you think about that reference.

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: Well, just as Natan and Marie said, it's taken so long to get the kinds of recognition and conversations going that are actually going to make a difference for indigenous peoples across Canada. The Constitution [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] upholding those rights and obligations on behalf of the country.

I don't think it's a bad thing to include the Constitution. I think it reminds people that in fact there is recognition there for indigenous peoples and their rights and their treaties. Anything we can do to continuously draw [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Sorry, Mr. Chair, but there's this beeping. I'm not sure if Ms. Wesley-Esquimaux is swearing there or why she's getting beeped out, but....

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] rather not have to do the same thing and run around to try to find a [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: I'm sorry. It's interrupting and we're not able to communicate.

Ms. Marie Wilson: May I jump in and respond to the question?

Cynthia, do you mind...with your forgiveness?

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Ms. Marie Wilson: I think this ties into Natan's point, but he'll certainly speak for himself further. I just want to say that in the wording we had in the original call to action, the deficiency of it was that when you speak about treaties, including modern-day treaties, there's a risk that people who don't have something that's actually called a “treaty” would feel excluded, in that negotiations are still ongoing.

The Constitution makes provision for existing and modern-day treaties, so it is very inclusive in that way. One of the things that I think.... They're not different, but it is clearer, I think. It's also clear that the recognition of indigenous rights in the Constitution has been acknowledged by the Canadian courts and by the Supreme Court of Canada in many examples over the past decades. It's an established correlation.

I think one of the valuable things about it is that.... People in their everyday lives in Canada don't register and don't realize that indigenous peoples are rights holders. Their rights are different from, distinct from—not more than or better than, but distinct from—the rights of other Canadians, and that's why it's particularly articulated in the Constitution. We don't see that for all of the other groups or subgroups of people in Canada, so I think it is a good connection in that way.

The last thing I would say is that.... I'm not going to speak to the comment from the member of the Bloc, but there was a reason why I mentioned in my opening remarks that all of the parties, including the Bloc Québécois, spoke to and committed to ongoing reconciliation. If this is an example of where it can be done in action, I would sincerely hope that there would be non-partisan political goodwill to proceed—and quickly.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Let me just clarify. You feel that the reference to the Constitution gives a broader interpretation of who is included within the definition than if the reference to the Constitution weren't there.

Ms. Marie Wilson: I wouldn't say that—and it's quite a technical legal question, so I don't presume to be equipped to drill down into the legal elements of it—but I do know that people understand that countries have constitutions. People don't necessarily understand that countries have treaties with indigenous peoples, because not everybody does, so I think in a way it's more familiar. It's easier access for people to wrap their heads around what it is they're committing to. I think there's value in that.

• (2010)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Do I have more time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Maybe I'll ask Mr. Obed if he wants to say something or add anything to that.

Mr. Natan Obed: Yes. ITK does not object to the term “Constitution” being in the oath. The only reason why ITK put.... Its position in its amendment there was to ensure that each group in this country—first nations, Inuit and Métis—was included within the citizenship oath text. That's why “constructive arrangements” was the term that we put in.

The Chair: That brings us to time. Thanks, Mr. Powlowski.

Madame Bérubé, please go ahead for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm on the traditional territory of the Anishinabe and Cree people of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou.

Good evening, everyone. I'm happy that you're here as witnesses. The discussions taking place in the committee right now are very worthwhile.

Ms. Wilson, can you give us some background on the development of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's call to action number 94?

[*English*]

Ms. Marie Wilson: Am I to talk about 94 and why it's important? Is that what she said?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Yes. I'm talking about the context for the development of call to action number 94.

Ms. Marie Wilson: I think that I touched on it in my presentation. However, I can tell you where it comes from, if you want.

A number of calls to action focus on education and training, both for the general public and for children in our schools. However, newcomers are missing out on all this. They won't go to school once they arrive here, of course. I'm talking mostly about the adults who take the oath of citizenship. We wanted them to be included in the great work of the country, the work of relearning our history. We wanted them to understand that the indigenous peoples in Canada also founded this country, and that these peoples have special treaties and rights included in the legislation and the Constitution of Canada.

We didn't want them to be forgotten, so to speak. We wanted them to be included.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Earlier, when my colleague also raised this issue, you spoke about the Canadian Constitution.

Do you think that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to action number 94 refers to the Canadian Constitution?

Ms. Marie Wilson: No. We didn't refer to the Constitution in call to action number 94, but I wouldn't object to it. I know that this complicates things for Quebec. However, the spirit of the call to action is in keeping with the spirit of the Constitution. There are fundamental agreements with a number of indigenous peoples in the country. We want newcomers to be well informed on the matter and to swear that they'll respect all this. We don't want them to start rejecting this without understanding that these agreements have a historical and legal basis.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: As you said earlier, we also mustn't forget that Quebec has never adhered to the Constitution. This raises an issue for the Quebec communities.

What do you think about omitting the word “Constitution”?

Ms. Marie Wilson: These are political issues. For me, the essence of what we're trying to accomplish is what matters. We need to find the right words for this, whether it involves treaties, the wording proposed by Mr. Obed or something else. The only thing that we're stressing today is that we mustn't start from scratch each time. We must agree on the intent behind this and find the right words to express it.

• (2015)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Ms. Wilson.

I have a question for everyone.

In your opinion, do aboriginal rights or treaty rights stem from the Constitution or are they inherent?

[*English*]

The Chair: Are you going to try that, Mr. Obed?

Mr. Natan Obed: I'd rather not get into that here. We're here to talk about the citizenship oath and the guide. I don't think there's any productivity in getting into that at this moment.

The Chair: Thank you.

Do you have anything to add, Ms. Wesley-Esquimaux?

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: Hopefully you can hear me. I'm having difficulty with my microphone.

I would agree with Mr. Obed. That's a big conversation that needs to be had, and I don't think it has anything directly to do with putting this together.

The Chair: You have one minute, Madame Bérubé.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Do you think that the bill should elicit broader support, or are you fine with it the way it is?

Ms. Wilson, do you want to respond?

[*English*]

Ms. Marie Wilson: I'm fine with it the way it is, but I'm not the one passing laws here. The spirit of it captures the spirit of what we were trying to say—that there are legally binding commitments that exist in Canada historically and that are captured in various ways in modern-day treaties and in the Constitution itself. They are not all in one place. You have plenty of examples in Quebec, as well, that are binding and that people need to respect. That's what we're trying to get at. They need to know that they exist and respect them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We go on now for six minutes to Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As Parliament has come back, I'm actually in Ottawa, so I come to you from the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people. I certainly think of all the incredible first nations in my home area.

I wanted to get back to the conversation that Ms. Dancho began in terms of the timelines. We are concerned about the length of time that a fairly simple bill has taken. We've covered that, but I would also like to talk about, before there's another potential election... We've already seen an incredible bill introduced by MP Romeo Saganash fall under the timelines of elections, unfortunately, and be held up in the Senate. Luckily and thankfully, it has been reintroduced, but I would like to hear about your hopes for that quick passage.

In addition, when we talk about timelines—I sit as the NDP critic for the status of women—there are many references to the missing and murdered indigenous women inquiry and the fact that the re-

port has been out for over a year now. We haven't seen any action from this government. There are a lot of delays and many excuses.

How does that play into how you feel overall about all these delays? What do you think that means in terms of these processes and how we can improve them? Do you have advice for the government, going forward?

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: You say you haven't seen anything, but I've actually been sitting in on a lot of the conversations on the missing and murdered across Canada. I've heard that a lot of organizations and women across Canada are actually actively engaged in looking at that and trying to put those pieces into place. It feels to me like there's a lot of activity going on, so I don't really see that as being an issue.

Is it happening at the government level? Maybe that's where there are difficulties. I know at the community level and in consultation with the federal government, they're telling the federal government there are a lot of things that are actually happening, a lot more that need to happen and a lot of funding needed as well to ensure that they can keep happening.

• (2020)

Ms. Marie Wilson: I would say something about it as well.

As you probably know if you've read them both, there's actually a significant amount of relationship between the calls for justice in the report on the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and the TRC calls to action.

As I started to say before we ran out of time, the other job of the national council for reconciliation is to help us assess whether things are getting better or worse on things like protection of indigenous women and girls, violence against indigenous women and girls, incarceration, rehabilitation of offenders and alternative justice. There are a whole lot of things around all of that, and they go together.

We know, and Cynthia just talked about it too, that there is a tremendous amount of good work happening all over the country. But not a single one of us—not me as a commissioner or Cynthia working at the centre, at the governors' council level, or the president of our national Inuit organization—has a complete picture, because there's no mechanism for tracking the whole story and telling us as a whole country that we're getting better or worse, or that we're getting better in these ways and worse in these ways. This what we need to zero in on.

We really need that. I don't want to understate it, because it's so vital. People literally gave blood, sweat and tears to do this work to educate our country and to wake us up to ourselves. They are dying. It is not a sign of respect or dignity for us as a country to not have them see the fruit of their efforts in the fulfillment of some of these calls to action.

We were very intentional directing our calls across all sectors of society, and it would be wrong not to register that there are many sectors of society that are doing great things. We just need to encourage each other to move faster on the things that can be done where we're at—in this case, in government.

Mr. Natan Obed: I'll jump in quickly on this as well.

In regard to UNDRIP legislation, Inuit would be very disappointed if this work was not completed and the bill wasn't passed before the next election. That would be very disappointing, considering the priority the current government has put on the legislation. Quite simply, this is about human rights, about the acknowledgment and then the implementation of indigenous peoples' human rights in Canada. I don't think I've met a Canadian yet who explicitly states that they're against human rights implementation in this country. There are all sorts of debates about indigenous peoples. It would be wonderful if Romeo Saganash's bill and the iteration that we see now, which is in keeping with the spirit of his bill, finally makes it into law.

In regard to MMIWG, we need an action plan. There is ongoing work to create an action plan, and there have been point-in-time commitments—most recently on shelters for Inuit women, which was announced last week—so we are seeing fits and starts of progress, but we certainly would like to have an action plan finalized and the full force of the federal government's fiscal capacity and human resource capacity towards implementing the calls for justice.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Mr. Obed.

I'm going to ask the clerk if we have a particular restriction on extending the meeting past 8:30 this evening.

The Clerk: Not to my immediate knowledge, but I will get back to you.

The Chair: What I propose, as we move into the second round of five-minute questioning, is that I'm going to allow Madame Normandin and Ms. Mathysen to begin the questions with their two-and-a-half-minute rounds, followed by Mr. Melillo and then Mr. Anandasangaree.

• (2025)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Mr. Chair, Mr. Weiler will be taking my round.

The Chair: Okay, that's fine.

With that said, Madame Normandin, please go ahead now for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll try to be as succinct as possible.

I'll also talk about the Constitution because, as Ms. Wilson said, it's an important issue for the people of Quebec.

The Bloc Québécois will likely move an amendment that doesn't refer to the Constitution, but that includes the terms used in the Constitution, such as the recognition of indigenous rights, whether they be aboriginal rights or treaty rights. If this amendment is

agreed to, it will then be easy for us to vote in favour of the bill, and perhaps even to speed up its passage.

Would you prefer an amendment that will speed up the process and ensure that the bill is passed unanimously, or would you rather include the word “Constitution” and risk having the Bloc refuse to support the bill? I want to hear your thoughts on this.

[*English*]

The Chair: Anyone, please.

I think we've heard the question answered before, but one of our panellists.... Ms. Wilson, do you have anything further on this?

Mr. Natan Obed: If I could say very briefly, in the last government, there was a bill passed in regard to indigenous children in care. Unfortunately, the Government of Quebec has brought this particular piece of legislation to court, challenging the legislation in the jurisdiction of Quebec. It certainly seems like the same thing is happening here, where there is a primacy for things other than indigenous people's rights at play, and it hurts my heart.

The Chair: Is there anything further from the other panellists on this matter?

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: If you have a recommendation that you'd like to put forward, would you please put it forward so that people can take it into consideration and we can move forward more quickly? That's what I would say.

The Chair: Okay. Thanks very much. That brings us to time on that.

Ms. Mathysen, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Thank you. I wasn't really able to wrap up after my last round, so I appreciate this.

In terms of the points you were making, that the communities are doing a great deal of work but they're looking for a bit of federal leadership, I agree with you entirely. Certainly, our support is with the quick passage of this bill. It's far and long overdue.

There is one thing I am concerned about, and I hear the frustration and disappointment. I recently listened to an interview on *The Current* with justice and senator Murray Sinclair about the length of time that it takes for change. He was very gracious, as he always is, in terms of giving the benefit of the doubt. He talked about how these things happened over a long period of time and how it will take a long time to change them.

However, I've heard from communities in my area—the Chipewas of the Thames First Nation, the Oneida Nation of the Thames, who are under a water advisory, and the Munsee-Delaware First Nation. They are concerned. One leader in particular said, “We are at a breaking point, and if we don't see action, if we don't see movement, I don't know what will happen.”

Could you comment a bit on that? Again, it's back to that process, but also movement from the federal government, leadership from the federal government on bills such as this, bigger things within the TRC recommendations other than the 19 words that need to change in this bill, specifically. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Cynthia, go ahead.

● (2030)

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquiaux: I want to express my frustration. It's not just this government; it's been virtually every government that I've had to work with for the last 40 years to try to move things forward and to try to get the jurisdictional authority for child welfare back into the hands of indigenous peoples, and to get the treaties recognized and the land claims resolved, and the housing and the food insecurity addressed. It's not just this government; it's really every government that has to be held accountable for this.

I don't know what the fear is, and why you think that if you actually make these things happen for indigenous peoples, something bad is going to happen. I think something very good is going to happen, and that's going to be indigenous people entering into the economy on their own terms and in a good way, and actually being able to care for their people in a proper way.

I just think that everybody has to be held to account for this, not just this government.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We go now to Mr. Vidal for five minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say thank you to all the witnesses tonight. Your testimony is very valuable for us as we understand some of these very important issues that we are dealing with as a committee.

I've appreciated much of the testimony and many of the questions tonight. One thing I've consistently heard in my conversations with people is the idea of how slow this is, how long it's taken. We've heard that expressed by the witnesses tonight. The second thing we've talked lots about is the education component of all this and how important that is to the success of these measures.

I want to share a quick story. I had an opportunity late this fall to meet with Vice-Chief Derocher of one of my tribal councils. He stopped in to see me. We were talking, actually, in the context of Orange Shirt Day. It was shortly after Orange Shirt Day. We come from very small communities in northern Saskatchewan. He was in the big city of Saskatoon, which is still pretty small relative to a lot of your cities. He talked about being in Saskatoon on September 30, on Orange Shirt Day. He talked about all the evidence of the orange shirts he saw in that city on that day. As Vice-Chief Derocher shared the story, you could see the tears welling up in his eyes as he shared that experience and the importance of recognizing some of those things. He also talked a whole bunch about how education was the solution to many of these issues, not only the newcomers booklet but the education in our schools, the education of adults in our society.

My question is in the context of the TRC calls to action. There are two calls to action in the section called "Newcomers to Canada", 93 and 94. The minister talked about both today. Some of you have alluded to those. It seems to me that the order of these, maybe, is a bit of a problem from a process perspective, where we have the call to action on the citizenship oath before we have the education component. My thought is that maybe these things should be combined and the education component should be further down the journey as we do this.

I'd be curious to hear all of the witnesses comment on that, starting with Ms. Wilson.

Ms. Marie Wilson: Thank you. You're absolutely right in seizing on education as the heart of the matter, as I tried to underscore in my opening remarks.

I would say, in the short answer, "Ideally, yes", but if there is a reason why the newcomers booklet is not yet ready, I don't think one should hold up the other. There are people giving their oaths, and the sooner you draw people's attention to what it is they're committing to, the sooner that in itself becomes a contribution. I think that ideally the two should go together, but I don't think you wring your hands forever on "Have we got the one and have we got the other?" If one is not ready or not agreed to, then you should do what you can do now.

I honestly have to say that of all the calls to action, 94 would seem to me to be one of the very simplest ones that would be in the category of low-hanging fruit in terms of the complexity of doing it and implementing it. That's how I would see it. There are some really hard systemic ones in other parts of the calls to action, and that's what Senator Sinclair is talking about when he says that these things take time. But if we take this long on the easy things, how long will it take on the really hard things?

If the answer is that the newcomers booklet, as Natan was alluding to, is in fact ready to go and we're withholding it, then that I don't agree with at all, and I don't understand the justification for that. If there's a political rationale, then I don't think it should be dealt with as a political issue. It should be dealt with as an issue of reconciliation, with priority and urgency.

● (2035)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

You literally took some of the words out of my mouth in the context of how on this one it took us five years to get here. If that's the "low-hanging fruit", in your words, or one of the simplest ones, how long might it take us to get to the harder ones, one of which is maybe the education one?

President Obed, I think I only have about 30 seconds, so I'm going to ask you for a quick response as well, if you don't mind.

Mr. Natan Obed: We did the work in 2017 to provide, as faithfully as we possibly could, amendments to the guide. We didn't anticipate that it would not lead to amendment of the guide. It is quite disappointing.

We're engaged, we do the work, we abide by the timelines that are provided to us—often very rushed timelines—and we do our work as faithfully as we possibly can, and then, for whatever reason, there is just inertia. I just hope that the guide can be revised and released tomorrow. There's nothing holding it back. The other part is legislation.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Patrick, I believe you're coming up next. Please go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for joining the committee meeting today and for the very meaningful testimony already.

I'd like to begin by mentioning that I'm streaming from the traditional unceded territory of the Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh nations.

I want to get to a question about education. I apologize for belabouring this initial point that we've been talking about, but there is a big difference between recommendation 94 from the TRC and Bill C-8. That's really with reference to aboriginal rights and having that constitutionally protected.

I know there has been some umbrage taken with the change of wording, including "Constitution". From someone who's part of my legal practice who has worked for first nations throughout British Columbia on various matters, including rights and title cases.... In B.C., of course, there are almost no treaties. Most nations have given up on the treaty process, but of course the province is covered many times over with claimed but not yet proven rights and title cases, and with very strong claims, of course. I believe the reference to "aboriginal rights", and indicating that it's constitutionally protected, is a very crucial one to give it relevance in B.C. Saying that it's constitutionally protected elevates this protection to the highest law in the land, which in my opinion is quite meaningful.

With that in mind, I guess this is my question for Ms. Wilson. I was hoping that you could speak to why this wasn't in the original recommendation 94. What type of feedback from consultation with first nations in B.C. was related to that particular recommendation?

Ms. Marie Wilson: There wasn't specific consultation on this specific issue with any specific indigenous group. All of our calls to action came from the body of resource we had to draw upon, which was research that was available that we had brought together, research we had commissioned on various topics, and the themes that emerged from the almost 7,000 statements we received, mostly from residential school survivors, but some from other members of the public, as well, who chose to give statements to the TRC. We drew from all of that wealth of information.

This one...and I have to tell you, if you look at all of the calls to action, it's really the only one that is presented in such a prescriptive way. I remember at the time being a little bit uncomfortable with it. All of the others talked about areas that need work, but they

didn't pretend to be exclusive—there could be other things added to them—and they also didn't intend to be prescriptive. This one, because it has specific wording in it, I think you could easily draw perhaps the wrong conclusion that we were trying to have it be just about treaties. It was rather trying to capture...and I think we may have done a clumsy job on this, if I may be honest about it. We were certainly not perfect in everything we did, for sure.

However, by the time we were done, and pushing for time and everything, we tried as best we could to capture the spirit of what we were trying to say. What we were trying to capture here was the spirit and intent of treaties. Those exist, and there are others that are in negotiation or not yet confirmed. It was not meant to be restrictive; I'll just put it that way.

To your specific question on whether we had specific direct deliberations with indigenous leadership in B.C. on this issue, no, we did not.

● (2040)

Mr. Patrick Weiler: Please go ahead.

Ms. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux: I just want to add something.

As I was listening to you speak.... We talk about time, and I was thinking, as you did your land acknowledgement, that it didn't take any time at all for people to start putting land acknowledgements in place, because it really didn't cost anything.

When you said that this is going to go to the highest court of the land, the highest law of the land, and then you talked about the treaties and giving up on the treaties and that some of those other pieces have to be proven, I immediately thought yes, quite often it's the indigenous people who have to prove that they have the right to claim those lands and who have to do that work. There's a long delay, in some instances as much as 20 or 30 years, before a land claim even gets talked about or addressed. I had children grow up during the time I started one and had it actually completed, so I know that for a fact.

That, I think, is part of the problem we're having here. The delay is often about what you think it's going to cost you, and I don't think that's any reason for us not to move ahead.

The Chair: That's our time for that. Thanks, Patrick.

We're past our time. Protocol calls for me to ask for unanimous consent to continue, but at this point, we've heard from all of the parties present.

Mr. Viersen, would you be content if we adjourned the meeting in a moment? Okay. I apologize for the delays. They seem to be ubiquitous with our committee meetings, with languages and so on, and I apologize for that.

To our witnesses, thank you for your wonderful presentations and for your honest and straightforward responses today.

Thank you to our committee. With that, I call this meeting adjourned.

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