History, the law, and what's inside each of us: Douglas Sanderson and Andrew Stobo Sniderman talk reconciliation

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On Sept. 17, BLG hosted authors Douglas Sanderson (Amo Binashii) and Andrew Stobo Sniderman for a virtual discussion of their acclaimed book, *Valley of the Birdtail: An Indian Reserve, a White Town, and the Road to Reconciliation*. The book explores how the town of Rossburn and the Waywayseecappo Indian reserve, two Manitoba communities divided by a river and 150 years of racism, exemplify the unequal resources and differing treatment by the federal government. This article recaps several of the main points made by the authors during the discussion, including ways that the law has perpetuated inequalities and affected the ability of Indigenous people to thrive, and the role we all play in the journey to reconciliation.

Reckoning with the truth

Reconciliation begins with uncovering the truth, and Sanderson says many Canadians are less informed about Canada's true history than they believe themselves to be. What we've learned about Canadian history has been oversimplified, particularly regarding the centuries of injustices faced by Indigenous communities. Telling such a broad story in a way that resonates with readers can be a daunting task, but by focusing on the intimate stories of individuals and families in Rossburn and the Waywayseecappo, Sanderson and Stobo Sniderman hope to provide a personalized understanding of a broader narrative.

For example, the authors chose to tell the story of Linda, a young Ojibwayirl whose hearing was permanently damaged after she was struck by a nun as punishment while attending a residential school. There are countless stories of the horrors experienced by Indigenous children at residential schools, but by focusing on this one incident and the lifelong impact it has had on Linda, her story carries the weight of the residential school experience.

The *Indian Act*: Not ancient history

Many Canadians have gaps in their knowledge of the legal systems responsible for the inequalities experienced by Indigenous peoples. To speak directly to the legislation, Sanderson pulled out his copy of the *Indian Act*, which is a federal law that governs matters pertaining to Indian status, bands and Indian reserves.

Canadians are becoming increasingly aware of certain parts of the Act that have been abolished, such as Section 114, which pertains to residential schools. While we may think these practices existed far in Canada's past, Sanderson explained that some of this legislation was still on the books as recently as 2014.

He provided a handful of startling examples of recently abolished legislation, such as Section 119, which allowed Indigenous children to be taken into custody by truant officers for missing school, and Section 118, which allowed a truant officer to enter the home of an Indigenous person, to emphasize that until a decade ago the government was still authorized to force Indigenous children to go to school. Recognizing that these legal injustices are not ancient history is a necessary part of reconciliation.

Ideas to change legislation

Reconciliation is a complex issue, and the authors — who are both lawyers — shared their ideas for structural changes that would give Indigenous governments greater jurisdiction and authority to tax and increase opportunity for economic growth.

Under the *Indian Act,* Indigenous governments don't operate the same way as other governments with taxation powers. For example, if funds are required to fix something on reserve, under the Indian Act Band councils are largely at the mercy of the federal government to acquire the necessary funds. While some have called to abolish the Act*,* this alone won't solve the problem, Sanderson explained, because Indigenous governments will still need to have a special relationship with the Crown and it will be necessary to set out the details of that relationship.

The answers are inside ourselves

Sanderson and Stobo Sniderman's message is one of hope: that truth, exploration and mutual understanding can start us on the path to reconciliation. By using the tools that we already have, we can create a better Canada where, like the neighbours in their book, citizens are working together towards more equitable communities.

The journey to reconciliation requires that each of us look inward to deepen our understanding.

We hope that you take the opportunity to pick up a copy of *Valley of the Birdtail* from an Indigenous-owned bookstore to start that journey for yourself.

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