

November 19, 2020

Her Worship  
June Caul  
Mayor of Fort Frances  
320 Portage Ave,  
Fort Frances, ON P9A 3P9

Her Worship Mayor June Caul and Council,

***Re: Support for the Resolution to Rename Colonization Road***

When I was in business school, we were presented with a case study. A business owner on a faraway island could not understand why workers would not build a road. A very diverse group of students offered many suggestions, but the answer surprised us, as we were all settlers: the workers' experience had taught them that roads bring government tanks and soldiers. Sabotaging the road led the way to freedom.

**The Road Taken**

In the opening line of the film [\*Colonization Road\*](#), Ryan McMahon, an Anishinaabe journalist and comedian from Couchiching First Nation, cuts to the heart of the matter: "As long as Colonization Road exists, metaphorically or literally, [...] that's a real roadblock for me." Ryan grew up in Fort Frances and he describes the childhood memories he has on that road in Michelle St. John's award-winning documentary on the history of the colonization roads that litter Ontario and Manitoba. The clincher: "[t]he road starts at the base of our traditional ceremonial grounds on my reserve..."

The Fort Frances Museum says Colonization Road began in 1885 as a way to connect settlers to resources in lieu of the more dangerous ice. Roads, boats and trains moved people to places and products to people. But while foreign settlers roamed free and used the land, the Confederation more and more narrowly confined Indigenous Peoples until they were forcibly locked onto reserves. Indian agents used curfews, pass systems, starvation, guns and jail to control people and create dependency. Today, northern reserves still only have ice to access many resources, if the warming climate allows.

According to *Oxford Languages*, "colonization" means "the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area; the action of appropriating a place or domain for one's own use." For those who study history, the colonization of Turtle Island evokes a more visceral visual of dispossession, robbery, kidnapping, rape, trafficking, imprisonment, murder, and destruction of land and nature. From an Indigenous perspective, a road named for this genocide might more appropriately bear a name like the Trail of Tears.

Ontario's Northwest housed 9 of the 16 segregated Indian residential schools in Ontario, approximately 8% of Canada's schools, 6 of them within a 4-hour drive. It also hosted one of the

segregated Indian hospitals, known for medical experimentation. The Catholic Church ran the residential school in Fort Frances for 68 years, and the Canadian entities have nationally paid out nearly [\\$60 million in abuse settlements](#), not enough per the [original agreement](#). That is not even 2% of the [\\$3.18 billion paid to survivors](#) (an average of \$39,750 for the estimated 80,000 left alive). Other injustices of colonization included widescale fraud, home and property damage, disrespect for human remains, mass killing of animals like sled dogs, toxic contamination, policing abuses, day schools, and child welfare scoops (many of these claims are still being litigated).

Later, on *Colonization Road*, McMahon interviews Jeff Denis, an Associate Professor of Sociology, who says colonization is “not just something that happened in the past. One of the things that Patrick Wolfe says, who is a theorist of settler colonialism, is that it is a structure and not an event. It is an ongoing process; something that we reproduce everyday through our actions.”

In a further discussion with Leanne Betasamusake Simpson, an Anishinaabe scholar and author, she says, “Colonization Road is a really powerful metaphor and it’s a really powerful physical process that was very, very deliberate and very, very strategic. They wanted the land; we were on the land. And so dispossession and erasure became the primary way over and over and over again...through every mechanism possible[.]”

## The Law

Of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s [Calls to Action](#), five implicate municipalities explicitly: Calls 43, 47, 57, 75, and 77. These calls ask governments to: fully adopt and implement the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP); repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty and reform laws and policies; provide public servants education on the history of Indigenous Peoples, including residential schools, treaties, UNDRIP, and Indigenous law; and protect important historical sites and records.

[UNDRIP](#) contains a rich variety of rights, but most applicable are Articles 2, 7, 8, 15, 38, and 43. These articles call on governments to stop discrimination; offer rights to physical and mental integrity and security of person; uphold rights against forced assimilation or destruction of culture, as well as prevent and provide redress for negative propaganda; ensure public education and information reflect Indigenous Peoples and combat prejudice and promote tolerance; implant UNDRIP into local legal systems; and recognize that these are *minimum* standards.

Despite Canada’s ratification of UNDRIP, only British Columbia has moved to implement it, with rumblings at the Federal level. While Ontario has stalled MPP Sol Mamakwa’s [Bill to implement UNDRIP](#), these principles are making international inroads in Europe and South America and are winding their way into local courts.

Domestically, governments are also subject to human rights legislation and the Constitutional promise not to discriminate, embedded in s. 15 of the *Charter*. That document also recognizes the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples and reinforces the primacy of the Treaties.

Given that the definition of colonization necessitates the domination of Indigenous Peoples, one could easily maintain that the term carries a weight of prejudice. In the book *Mindset*, Carol

Dweck highlights how even demographic questions at the beginning of examinations can correlate to poorer performance, subtly reminding racialized and/or female students of their marginalized status. Heavy is the pain of daily reminders of one's "status" etched on signs and the land and a government-issued piece of plastic.

In the movie *Selma*, based on the struggle of Martin Luther King Jr. and the African American community for the right to vote in the South, King asks President Johnson if he wants history to remember that when they asked for their rights, his response was "'wait' or 'I can't'". **In a country full of barriers for Indigenous Peoples, how can we keep debating whether or not this one needs to come down now?**

Call Me Something Else

In the Indigenous Peoples' Court in Thunder Bay, one can listen to the wisdom of Indigenous Elders explaining that names identify them not just to others but to Creator and the land. "Imposing foreign...names on to Indigenous people was...not merely for administrative convenience, it was a deliberate aspect of a systematic attempt to erase our cultures and identities," [wrote Chelsea Vowel, for CBC](#).

In 2011, [Elisabeth Pearson Waugamon shared research](#) on Indigenous Naming Traditions. "Brooke (Wompsi'kuk Skeesucks) a Mohegan, notes that in the Native American naming tradition, names should change. Children receive names that are descriptive, they may be given new names at adolescence, and again as they go through life according to what their life experiences and accomplishments are. Society bestows a new name—a new name is earned. W.S. Brooke explains, 'Some people are like lakes. They change very little as they age. (...) Some people are like rivers. When you trace the Mississippi, or any other river at its source, it can be very small. Later on it can be wide and strong. When it meets the ocean, it spreads out.' In other words, names should change as the individual changes.

...

Phil Konstantine notes that many of the tribal names mean 'people,' 'us,' 'human being,' which reach even beyond a tribe to include all of mankind. ...[O]ur names should remind us first of 'us', not 'me.'"

For those who share my faith, in the Old Testament, when God's people ask why their prayers remain unanswered, the prophet Isaiah tells them it is because they exploit their workers and perpetuate division and violence. The Creator's rhetorical question reveals the stark contrast in values: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?" God goes on to promise that, "[i]f you do away with the yoke of oppression, ...you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets..." (Isaiah 58:3,4,6,9,12 NIV). Other Biblical stories support God's belief in the power of new names to mark radical transformations.

That the road benefitted many settlers does not mean it benefitted Indigenous Peoples. And even if the road benefitted some Indigenous Peoples in limited ways, they still paid with the deaths of

90-99% of their population. One cannot acknowledge the wealth brought to settlers by the road at the expense of Indigenous Peoples' lives and then posit that the cost of change cutting into that wealth presents more of a burden to us than the cost of the *status quo* cutting into their humanity. And there is no neutral impact on settlers either as these signs normalize the unnamed insidious philosophies underpinning them.

Given there are so many colonization roads, that also suggests the name's perfunctory nature and lack of distinctiveness. Renaming the road isn't a rejection of a unique history. On the contrary, it acknowledges an honest appreciation of the ugly track marks left by betrayal and broken promises and the desire to journey beyond revisionism and damaging ideologies toward something inspiring and meaningful for the whole community, a return to two canoes moving in harmony.

"Of course renaming these streets is the right thing to do, but [it's also right] to honour treaties, fulfill fiduciary obligations under treaty, and create equitable nation-to-nation agreements that liberate people from the colonial systems that keep us poor, dying, and on the fringes of society," says Ryan McMahon, in an [article by Jon Thompson](#) during the last round of debate.

But that requires turning around. At least 3 out of 11 towns in Ontario and at least 1 in Manitoba have renamed or are in the process of renaming colonization roads. In at least one case, that has also led to further relationship-building efforts between the municipality and Indigenous Peoples. A broader look at society displays a shifting across the globe from terms to [teams](#) to [towns](#). Cities ignoring the curdling tension from longstanding inequity are finding themselves with beheaded or bleeding busts.

With that, I commend to Council the resolution to rename Colonization Road and the building of a dialogue with Indigenous Peoples toward reconciliation. Fort Frances has an opportunity to change course: to restore a road; to repair the broken walls in the nation-to-nation relationship; and to pay homage to the rule of law – the Guswenta or the two-row Wampum, an edict of peace, friendship, and respect. Do not let it be the road not taken – it will make all the difference.

Sincerely and with thanks for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Joy Wakefield".

Joy Wakefield  
iBBA, JD, BCL

p.s. Please note that I write this in my own capacity and not for any other person or entity.