

Indigenous Land Acknowledgements: The Critical Key To Reconciliation

By Jonathen Jagan

“Good morning Chinguacousy. Please rise for the land acknowledgement. We would like to acknowledge that we are on the Treaty lands and Territories that the Mississaugas of the Credit, Haudenosaunee, Attiwonderonk, Ojibwe, Chippewa and Métis have called home for thousands of years and continue to walk on today. We are grateful to have the opportunity to be on this land, and by doing so, give our respects to its first inhabitants.” As a young Tamil immigrant from Singapore who was raised in a vividly dissimilar environment, I was plagued by doubt about the meaning of these words. However, years of hearing this proclamation in the mornings at school piqued my interest in Indigenous issues, and after undertaking several projects as well as gathering and even conducting a multitude of research, I believe that Indigenous land acknowledgements serve three crucial purposes of paramount importance in today’s world. I think that land acknowledgements serve to create a more culturally aware society, serve as a means of allying with the myriad of First Nations communities and exist to reform unjust practices that were introduced into legislature in the past so that we, as a collective society, may move forward with the long but absolutely vital process of reconciliation.

First and foremost, I believe that Indigenous land acknowledgements serve the essential and unforgettable purpose of creating a society that is more culturally and socially aware, while simultaneously respecting and recognizing Indigenous claims to traditional lands which were declared in signed treaties, and which we now occupy in the forms of residences, institutions, offices and a plethora of other elements which comprise modern infrastructure. After gathering a vast horde of research to satiate my keen interest in Indigenous affairs, I was appalled to realize that a vast proportion of Canadians today are not aware or have not been made so by the government regarding the history and significance of Indigenous issues in Canada, with some people being completely unaware as to the purpose of these Indigenous land acknowledgements. In fact, as an immigrant from Singapore, a city-country located in an entirely different region and hemisphere of the world, I would have greatly appreciated any newcomer programs which aim to educate newcomers on the basic elements and the importance of Canadian and Indigenous history. Putting that aside, I think that one of the most significant benefits with Indigenous land acknowledgements is the undeniable fact that they strive to make us, as a collective society, more aware of the very real struggles various Indigenous communities continue to face today such as the availability of clean drinking water in certain reserves or the destruction of their ancestral land through unfair government and corporate practices, such as the recent Trans-Mountain Oil Pipeline spillage in a reserve located in Alberta. Extending my personal reflection even further, I feel that Indigenous land acknowledgements create a more empathetic community of Canadians that embrace the cultural diversity that Indigenous Peoples bring to Canada, also known by the First Nations as Turtle Island.

Secondly, I believe that Indigenous land acknowledgements serve a purpose of encouraging society as a whole to be an ally to the diverse Indigenous communities spanning the entirety of Canada. The University of Toronto defines land acknowledgements as “a formal statement recognizing the unique and enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories” (University of Toronto | Indigenous U of T, n.d.). However, I strongly believe that Indigenous land acknowledgements, in addition to recognizing our inhabitation of various parts of Treaty-recognized lands

belonging to the Indigenous population and paying respects to the lands and the people, serve a double purpose of stimulating allyship between the Non-Indigenous and the Indigenous Peoples, so that we may support and ally ourselves with marginalized Indigenous communities and hopefully, bring justice to the existing crises they face today. Relating this to my personal experiences, as a Tamil boy who is of a traditionally “lower-caste” background, I understand the importance of allyship. I smile whenever, in the streets of Chennai and even Little India in Singapore, I come across a billboard or poster advertising community enrichment programs for underserved communities and marginalized children who are in need of education, learning materials and study support. Relating this to Indigenous land acknowledgements, I believe that, on a deeper level, these land acknowledgements generate support for the culturally, racially and linguistically diverse groups and communities of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples by showing them that they are and will be supported by the rest of us Canadians, and that more importantly, we stand behind them in the pressing struggles they are facing, whether it be lack of funding for Indigenous language-preservation programs or even the scarcity of wild animals in the reserves due to pollution. The land acknowledgements show the oppressors, whoever they may be, that Indigenous concerns are real and cannot be ignored, and above all, need a solution.

Furthermore, I believe that Indigenous land acknowledgements serve a third, fundamental purpose of contributing to key policy changes in legislation which are pertaining to Indigenous issues in modern Canada. For example, since the process of Indigenous land acknowledgements commenced, a great deal of public awareness has been created and plenty of light has been shed on the brutal and devastating cultural genocide caused by the forced schooling of Indigenous youth in numerous residential schools spanning the entire country. This awareness and public outrage at the despicable treatment of First Nations children in filthy and atrocious living conditions sparked a revolutionary movement about the present-day implications of the horrific residential school abuse endured by Indigenous youths, documenting the very real struggles of survivors to this day. This in turn resulted in the federal government pledging a whopping \$333.7 million dollars in the year of 2019 to go towards language revitalization programs and reconciliation efforts, whether they may be after school programs for underrepresented Indigenous students or even financial aid support for struggling First Nations families. The key idea is that land acknowledgements can truly pave the way for key changes in Canadian legislation and law to make amends for the cultural and social loss caused by numerous unfair practices targeted at various Indigenous communities over the full course of colonization, with some issues existing even today. Land acknowledgements can educate the masses and by doing so, use the voice of the people to create various benefits for the Indigenous population in Canada, through funding for run programs and grants for Indigenous businesses, so that we, as a society and a country, can finally attempt to reconcile. Although it is regrettably impossible to undo the harm caused, land acknowledgements can provide the tools to, at the least, make amends and move forward peacefully and harmoniously.

To conclude, I believe that the Indigenous land acknowledgements can ally society with Indigenous Peoples, create a more culturally and socially aware country, and above all, pave the way for new and better government policies regarding the welfare and betterment of Indigenous Peoples all across Turtle Island.