

UNDRIP campaign finally paying off

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OTTAWA -- There have been false starts and bitter disappointments before, but Catholic and other faith organizations now see a light at the end of the tunnel in achieving a key aspect of reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous peoples.

They expect the Senate will join with the House of Commons in the coming days and approve Bill C-15 that will give legal standing to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in Canada.

"It is past time to turn this sad story of prevarication around, moving towards right relationships with Indigenous peoples of this land," said a June 4 letter from faith organizations to the government Leader in the Senate as it started final debate on Bill C-15. The bill passed in the House of Commons in May.

"Bill C-15 is a critical step toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Call to Action #48 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission counseled all faith groups in Canada to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms and standards of the declaration as a framework for reconciliation," the letter to Senator Marc Gold said. "In this spirit, our support for Bill C-15 is an expression of our commitment to reconciliation with humility. It is part of wider efforts by faith communities to decolonize our minds and hearts, work against racism and develop just relationships."

The UNDRIP is an international instrument adopted by the United Nations in 2007 to enshrine and safeguard Indigenous rights. It establishes a universal framework for the survival, dignity and well-being of Indigenous peoples. Canada adopted the declaration in 2016 and promised to implement the declaration fully.

One of the signatories of the letter is Joe Gunn, executive director of Centre Oblat – A Voice For Justice that has an office at Saint Paul University in Ottawa. Gunn said the fact that it now appears that the declaration will be part of Canadian law shows that faith groups' lobbying efforts can have an impact.

"It is evidence that religious groups can be part of the solution and can play an important role in getting governments to act," Gunn said.

"This has been a very important issue for faith organizations across the country. It is a win."

As the letter to the senators explains, the road to the Canadian government officially entrenching the declaration into Canadian law has not been a smooth campaign as the failure of a previous bill that tried to do that indicates.

“As you are aware, Bill C-262 died in the Senate before the 2019 federal election,” the letter said, urging senators to approve Bill C-15 before Parliament rises for the summer recess June 23.

“We were extremely disappointed when this took place, so ironically, on National Indigenous Peoples Day,” the letter from the faith organizations that included Canada’s Jesuits and other lay Catholic and Church organizations.

“Implementation of the declaration will require the federal government to undertake substantial consultations with Indigenous rights holders and organizations towards the development of an Action Plan. Faith communities commit to monitoring this process with care,” the letter said.

Third reading of Bill C-15 was continuing in the Senate, but debate up until this point makes it clear that unless there is some unforeseen circumstance, Bill C-15 will be approved by senators.