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Subject: submission to Saskatoon Civic Naming Committee
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Ms. Hudson,
Could you please circulate the following letter to members of the Saskatoon Civic Naming Committee and place the letter on file for the next committee meeting.
Thank you
Bill

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Civic Naming Committee, City of Saskatoon:

I am writing regarding the call for the renaming of Saskatoon's McPherson Avenue.

I've thought deeply about reconciliation and commemoration—through the lens of my 30+ years of university teaching, my writing on the history Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations (including my recent book, [In Search of Almighty Voice: Resistance and Reconciliation](#)), and especially my work with several Saskatchewan Indigenous communities. I've also consulted the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, paying particular attention to the Calls to Action. Our community needs to bring about meaningful reconciliation. But I question whether the renaming of McPherson Avenue is the best way forward?

There is no call in the TRC report for the removing of statues or the renaming of schools and other buildings. Nor is the changing of street names identified as

necessary to reconciliation. In fact, in an interview with the Canadian Press (reported in the Globe and Mail, August 29, 2017), Senator Murray Sinclair, the chair of the TRC, said that these kinds of actions “take up time that could be better spent” on more important, pressing issues. Reconciliation, he observed, “is not about taking names off buildings, it is about whether we can find a way to put Indigenous names on buildings.” He continued, “The problem I have with the overall approach to tearing down statues and buildings is that it is counterproductive to...reconciliation because it almost smacks of revenge or smacks of acts of anger, but in reality, what we are trying to do, is we are trying to create more balance in the relationship.”

Creating more balance in the relationship does not mean looking at the past through the lens of today—in other words, taking modern attitudes and simply applying them to another period. That’s called presentism and leads to blinkered, if not distorted, history. Indeed, I suspect that people living today would not want their lives and actions judged by the values and attitudes 100 years from now. It would not be fair to them—nor to our understanding of the past. History is about examining individuals and events in the context of their time. That requires looking at past attitudes, concepts, and values. This historical analysis is not about justifying past actions. Rather, it’s about explaining past actions—why things happened a particular way.

History, when mishandled, can lead to erroneous conclusions. During the 1965 debate over the adoption

of the red maple leaf flag, for example, former Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker was a vociferous critic. An editorial cartoon even had Diefenbaker waving the proposed new flag with the Canadian Red Ensign stitched over it. Someone looking at his opposition from the vantage point of today could easily conclude that he was anti-nationalist, if not anti-Canadian. But Diefenbaker deeply valued the Red Ensign's connection to Canada's past and the British crown. After all, it is called the Diefenbaker Canada Center on the University of Saskatchewan campus.

Then, there's the story of Sylvia Fedoruk, Saskatchewan's first female lieutenant governor and first female University of Saskatchewan chancellor. One might simply conclude, again from the vantage point of today, that the province has always embraced multiculturalism and that it was only natural for a person of Ukrainian heritage rise to these positions. But Saskatchewan adopted its motto, "From Many Peoples, Strength," not until 1971. Up until the Second World War, Saskatchewan stubbornly resisted multiculturalism and worried about the place of continental European immigrants in provincial society. Fedoruk's success underscores the distance that the province has travelled in accommodating diversity—something that would not be understood, let alone appreciated, through the lens of presentism.

So, what's the way forward? Here, Murray Sinclair, chair of the TRC, provides direction. When the statue of John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, was toppled

in Montreal, Sinclair didn't applaud. Instead, he said was "more interested in asking why there are not more statues of Indigenous people who have contributed to Canada" (Globe and Mail, August 31, 2020). It's a message that Murray has consistently repeated since the 2015 release of the TRC Calls to Action—that "the contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canada's history" must be recognized. Saskatoon took that first initial step when it named the new north bridge after Chief Mistawasis. But much more can and should be done. Take, for example, the new subdivisions of Stonebridge and Rosewood. Neither name has any resonance with Saskatoon's history. Why can't subdivisions be given Indigenous names? Or streets, parks, trails, recreational areas...the list is endless. Taking such action would be a direct and meaningful response to the Truth and Reconciliation report and its recommendations.

Thank you,

Bill Waiser, CM, SOM, FRSC, DLitt
Distinguished Professor Emeritus

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