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# Sustainable Food Systems & Policy Reform

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## BC Food Systems Network

a project on Tides Canada's shared platform

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# Introduction

Most British Columbians procure their food from multiple food systems, even if they are able to supply the majority of their needs from their own efforts. Protein and produce can be obtained through gardening, farming, fishing or hunting. However, salt and oils are examples of items common in daily diets that may not be readily sourced from the same foodshed as our other dietary goods, necessitating a combination of short and long supply chains to supply a balanced diet. Many source their food primarily from large chain grocers and the corporations supplying them. Food systems are complex, as are the communities they are based in and nourish.

The policy and regulatory realms that govern food systems are equally complex. This is in part because food touches so many aspects of our lives and ecosystems. The Constitution of Canada delegates oversight of food systems across three levels of government: federal, provincial and local.<sup>1</sup>



**Diagram A:** Federal & Provincial Acts that may apply to a food enterprise. Each Act has associated regulation and policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The diagram above was created by the author, who owes much to Lawyer Deborah Curran's 2009 legal and policy scan.

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In British Columbia, Health Authorities are involved in ensuring that food at Farmers Markets, grocery stores and restaurants is safe to eat. Water involved in food production is inspected in facilities by the Health Authorities and in waterways by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and the Ministry of the Environment. The land on which food is produced is subject to surveillance by the BC Assessment Authority, the Agriculture Land Commission, and local government. Wild harvested foods from the oceans is subject to various Acts under the oversight of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, while food from the forests and fields falls under the Minister of the Environment and the *Wild Animal and Plant Protection Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act*. And when food is sold its weight is assured by Industry Canada under the *Weights and Measures Act*.

Consequently, the food on any one plate may have passed under the eyes of dozens of inspectors. Each aspect of oversight is tied to public legislation and policy, created by government and thus accountable to the public. As people and citizens we have the right and frequently the opportunity to engage in the creation and revisions of legislation and the policies and programs that fall under it.

## Engagement strategies: the target

As diagram A clearly demonstrates, untangling the web of food oversight is no small task but an important one for efficacious policy advocacy. The first step is to determine which of the multitude of government departments or ministries holds a key to more sustainable food systems. A second and vital step is to understand the mandate of the government department or ministry in question, which constrains what each agency can do and how they can do it. As Rod MacRae and Elisabeth Abergel state, “CSOs [Civil Society Organizations] have not often linked well with state actors who legitimately are trying to change things within their institutional context. This failure is partly a product of insufficient appreciation of the decision makers’ realities, mandates, and jurisdictions.”<sup>2</sup> Because food touches so many aspects of our wellbeing and how we live together in community, a broad spectrum of civil society organizations are implicated, including community and advocacy organizations on issues such as hunger and access, child welfare, religious groups, Indigenous organizations, health authorities, health professionals, academics and others. And to achieve change in sustainable food systems policy, we need to do more than identify the problem and the ultimate solution – we also need to assist government in determining a transition plan on the way to our solution.

Assisting government is facilitated when there are established relationships with civil servants. “Although the formal political level is often still significant...[t]he Canadian approach allows policy making to stay out of view because legislation is broadly enabling, and regulations, regulatory protocols, and policy directives are used to drive the implementation and often carried out at the bureaucratic level.”<sup>3</sup> This is important whatever the political complexion of the government of the day because it is civil servants provide that continuity through election cycles. Understanding this fact,

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<sup>2</sup> Rod MacRae & Elisabeth Abergel, eds. *Health and Sustainability in the Canadian Food Systems: Advocacy and Opportunity for Civil Society*. (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press 2012), 274.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

Vancouver Farmers Markets has collaborated with civil servants employed by Vancouver Coastal Health Authority to overcome barriers to the sale of fresh seafood and freshly cut cheese at farmers markets in the city. Together they determined what protocols, equipment and safety measures need to be in place in order to offer high risk but high demand products.<sup>4</sup>

The food movement often speaks of the need for “scale appropriate regulations” when in fact the regulations are not scale-specific. It is the implementation and interpretation by the regulators in the field that may better suit a larger scale enterprise than a small one. The question then becomes, how can we in civil society affect the attitudes of regulators to make them more friendly to small-scale enterprise?

## Engagement strategies: the methodology

Understanding democracy as a practice rather than a noun can help individuals to perceive their respective roles in shifting policy, from influencing decision makers to creating a groundswell of citizen engagement and demand. Diagram B (below and on next page) presents a summary of six theories of how policy change occurs and suggests when and how to engage other non-government allies in shifting policy.

	Theory (Key Authors)	Discipline	How Change Happens	This theory may be useful when:
Global Theories	1. <b>“Large Leaps” or Punctuated Equilibrium Theory</b> (Baumgartner, Jones)	Political Science	Like seismic evolutionary shifts, significant changes in policy and institutions can occur when the right conditions are in place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large-scale policy change is the primary goal</li> <li>• Strong capacity for media advocacy exists</li> </ul>
	2. <b>“Coalition” Theory or Advocacy Coalition Framework</b> (Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith)	Political Science	Policy change happens through coordinated activity among a range of individuals with the same core policy beliefs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sympathetic administration is in office</li> <li>• A strong group of allies with a common goal is in place or can be formed</li> </ul>
	3. <b>“Policy Windows” or Agenda Setting</b> (Kingdon)	Political Science	Policy can be changed during a window of opportunity when advocates successfully connect two or more components of the policy process: the way a problem is defined, the policy solution to the problem or the political climate surrounding their issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple policy streams can be addressed simultaneously (problem definition, policy solutions and/or political climate)</li> <li>• Internal capacity exists to create, identify, and act on policy windows</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> Private communication, Tara Stark, Executive Director of the Vancouver Farmers Markets.

Theories related to Strategies or Tactics	4. "Messaging and Frameworks" or Prospect Theory (Tversky & Kahneman)	Psychology	Individuals' policy preferences or willingness to accept them will vary depending on how options are framed or presented.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The issue needs to be redefined as part of a larger campaign or effort</li> <li>• A key focus of the work is on increasing awareness, agreement on problem definition, or an issue's salience</li> </ul>
	5. "Power Politics" or Power Elites Theory (C. Wright Mills, Domhoff)	Sociology	Policy change is made by working directly with those with power to make decisions or influence decision making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One or more key allies is in place</li> <li>• The focus is on incremental policy change (e.g., administrative or rule changes)</li> </ul>
	6. "Grassroots" or Community Organizing Theory (Alinsky, Biklen)	Social Psychology	Policy change is made through collective action by members of the community who work on changing problems affecting their lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A distinct group of individuals is directly affected by an issue</li> <li>• The advocacy organization can and is willing to play a "convener" or "capacity-builder" role rather than the "driver" role</li> </ul>

**Diagram B: Summary of 6 Theories for Policy Change<sup>5</sup>**

None of the practices embedded in these theories need be mutually exclusive. The BC Food Systems Network has a history of engaging in a multiplicity of approaches to influencing policy on food systems. Our foundational approach is best captured in the "Community Organizing Theory". But while we generally seek to build capacity and convene food systems actors across the province, we have frequently assumed the role of "driver". Indeed, the founding of the Network in 1999 resulted from a decision to create coherent, community-based submissions to the public consultation on agri-food policy for the new millennium being undertaken by the Select Standing Committee on Agriculture and Fisheries.

One of the Network's strengths is our ability to build informal and formal coalitions. Such coalitions strengthen our ability to shift food systems, in and outside of the policy realm. Our coalitions are formed from our broad membership base and strengthened through representation on our Steering Committee and Working Groups and through participation at events such as our Annual Gatherings. The long involvement of personnel from health authorities, academia, food banks, Indigenous communities, the food industry and government, among others, has helped hone our praxis, and enabled us to identify opportunities, leverage relationships and mobilize networks.

It is often difficult to draw a direct line between grassroots organizing and policy or food systems change. However, a review of the materials produced in the early days of the Network demonstrates how much has changed in the public's perceptions and understanding of sustainable and just food systems. An early Network pamphlet from the year 2000 offered a vision of city with food security, which would include, for example, "a farmers market in a central location, fruit trees and edible plants

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Stachowiak, *Pathways for Change: 6 Theories about How Policy Change Happens*, (Seattle, WA: Organizational Research Services), 3.

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in the parks, locally produced food in the stores and in the hospitals and schools”. Now such practices and initiatives are more and more commonplace across BC and elsewhere. The Network cannot, of course, claim to be the sole cause of these shifts. However, BC is an acknowledged leader in Canada on sustainable food systems, in which the Network is undoubtedly a factor.

Building coalitions, formal or otherwise, is founded on shared language and vision. Problem identification is often the most easily done, followed by what is the desired outcome. In practice it is more fruitful to agree on desired outcomes or visions before focusing on the barriers to be overcome. The work of joining the two necessitates that civil society “parse their agenda to create a plan for progressive transition. Such transition planning is an area with tremendous opportunities for influence, since it appears that many state units have diminished capacity to understand the files for which they are responsible and may willingly accept new proposals from external actors if properly constructed.”<sup>6</sup>

The transition to sustainable food systems will be based on a multitude of policy interventions, community and individual education and actions. Many of them have been identified in the Regional Dialogues Reports [[hyperlink](#)], local government agricultural area plans [[link to list on the Min of Ag website](#)], and reports from the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty [[link](#)], among others. Recommendations such as “develop provincial, regional and local policy to reduce food waste throughout the food system from farm to plate” and “revise food safety regulations to reflect the needs of small scale producers and processors” both imply many actors, steps and generally a significant commitment of time and effort. Civil society organizations adequately resourced to undertake such work over the long haul have a better chance of influencing such policy shifts.

To achieve the high level recommendations found in so many marine and agriculture planning documents and food systems reports, MacRae and Abergel suggest that “CSOs need to shift their attention to the minutiae of policy making rather than just the larger and more structural policy themes. They will have to diversify their knowledge base if the debate is technical, and link with researchers... CSO’s proximity to the issues (schools, communities, farmers and so on) grants them particular access to knowledge that can be useful to policy makers. They can often identify policy voids more quickly, and propose tangible strategies to fill them.”<sup>7</sup>

One such void that has been raised by community groups and to which policy makers are responding is the tension between food safety and food security activities. Across BC, food entrepreneurs, be they farmers, fishers or processors, have established or shifted existing food enterprises in order to respond to the demand for local food. Such initiatives have often been supported by Health Authority programs aimed at enhancing local food security. Tensions have arisen when food safety programs within the same Health Authorities have curtailed or restricted such food enterprises.

In 2015, Environmental Health Services at the BC Centre for Disease Control commissioned a study to explore the enablers and barriers to collaborations between food security and food safety in BC. The study authors understood that examining how the food safety and food security sectors “have or

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<sup>6</sup> Rod MacRae & Elisabeth Abergel, eds. *Health and Sustainability in the Canadian Food Systems: Advocacy and Opportunity for Civil Society*. (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press 2012), 274.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 274-5.



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have not collaborated is a key step in being able to support future collaborations.”<sup>8</sup> The BC Food Systems Network participated in the study as a key informant non-governmental / community organization engaged in food security work. This report is an example of the “minutiae of policy making” where community-based organizations were able to demonstrate that how policies are understood and applied can have widely disparate impacts on food systems. It also helps to explain the historical circumstances that contribute to the tension between food safety and food security.

Whereas food safety has grown within a health protection paradigm, with a historical emphasis on enforcement, food security has grown within a health promotion paradigm, with a historical emphasis on community engagement and development. Interestingly, both sectors approach their issues with a systemic lens... In addition to having emerged from different histories and paradigms, the two sectors are also often separated organizationally, with food safety and food security functions silo-ed into different divisions within public health departments. However, despite the historical and organizational segmentation between the sectors, both have the same ultimate goal of improving the health of the population as it relates to food and diet.<sup>9</sup>

Effectively tackling policy requires strategic thinking, relationships, and an understanding of its impact on the ground. It also benefits from knowledge of the broader context and changes over time. For instance, the reduction or removal of information on cooking, farming, fishing and food production from school curricula has resulted in the deskilling of North Americans<sup>10</sup>, which has, in turn, contributed to poor food and lifestyle choices. This trend is slowly changing as more and more schools are finding ways to integrate gardens and healthy foods into their school environments and classes. However, government mandated curricula that include robust and age-appropriate information about food systems would ensure that such programs could become universal in the province.

Rod MacRae and Elisabeth Abergel succinctly outline the focus and actors involved if civil society is to engage effectively in the policy work of creating more sustainable food systems:

Ultimately, our work suggests that a very sophisticated symphony approach to governance and instrument choices will be required to create a sustainable and health-promoting food system. No actors yet have the skills to make this work. The state will, however, need to play a central role in this orchestra. Multiple jurisdictions, enormous complexity, hundreds of thousands of food systems actors, and global forces all mean that minimizing state functions is not an option, nor is letting market forces decide the best course of action. Changing the roles, instruments, and loci of state decision making could all be ways of advancing health and sustainability. CSOs will need to turn their attention more to the details of creating solutions,

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<sup>8</sup> Karen Rideout et al. *Exploring Food Safety and Food Security: Healthy Eating Collaborations in British Columbia*. (Vancouver BC: BC Centre for Disease Control, July 2015), 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, work by Anne C Bellows, JoAnn Jaffe, and Michael Gertler, among others.

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and devise new ways to collaborate with unusual partners. They will also have to continue playing their role of initiating action, identifying key issue areas and potential ways of managing problems, and providing knowledge and basic research, as well as remaining what Tocqueville called the “eye of the democracy.” We need implementation plans that take a systematic approach to policy and structural change.<sup>11</sup>

## Indigenous food sovereignty

Any discussion of sustainable food systems and policy reform in BC must recognize that this policy regime was and still is imposed over nations whose governance systems pre-existed it. This is much easier said than done, if only because of the multiplicity, complexity, and scope of these systems. The vast majority of the land base in the region called British Columbia by settlers, is the un-ceded territory of Indigenous Nations whose land and food systems have persisted since time immemorial.

As Indigenous scholar Taiaiake Alfred has pointed out,

It is the use and occupation of lands within traditional territories, economic uses, re-establishing residences, seasonal / cyclical ceremonial use, and occupancy by families and larger clan groups that will allow First Nations to rebuild their communities and reorient their cultures... People must reconnect with the terrain and geography of their Indigenous heritage if they are to comprehend the teachings and values of their ancestors, if they are to draw strength and sustenance that is independent of colonial power and which is regenerative of an authentic, autonomous, indigenous existence.<sup>12</sup>

The Supreme Court of Canada decision on *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. BC* recognized that there are “hundreds of indigenous groups in B.C with unresolved land claims.”<sup>13</sup> And the Court determined that the “nature of Aboriginal title is that it confers on the group that holds it the exclusive right to decide how the land is used and the right to benefit from those uses...”<sup>14</sup> The ruling also made clear that, as Jay Nelson, General Counsel to the *Tsilhqot'in Nation*, explained, “embedded in this right is the constitutional space for: Indigenous laws and legal traditions; Indigenous systems of governance; Indigenous land and resource management (e.g. permits, authorizations, regulations).”<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, this makes clear that there are parallel systems of policy and oversight in BC: Indigenous and settler.

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<sup>11</sup> Rod MacRae & Elisabeth Abergel, eds. *Health and Sustainability in the Canadian Food Systems: Advocacy and Opportunity for Civil Society*, (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press 2012), 278.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, “Colonialism and State Dependency” in *Journal of Aboriginal Health* (Nov 2009), 54-55.

<sup>13</sup> Supreme Court of Canada, *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia*, ([2014] 2 R.C.S.), 259.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>15</sup> Jay Nelson. “Aboriginal Title and Provincial Regulation: The Impact of the *Tsilhqot'in Nation v BC*” recording of the 30 September 2014 Continuing Legal Education course presented by, UVic Law Centre for Global Studies and the POLIS Project on Ecological Governance.



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Not only are the laws and legal systems parallel, the Indigenous systems have chronological precedence. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples explains that Canada's constitution "recognizes that Aboriginal rights are older than Canada itself and that their continuity was part of the bargain between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that made Canada possible. Aboriginal nations have accepted the need for power sharing with Canada. In return, they ask Canadians to accept that Aboriginal self-government is not, and can never be, a 'gift' from an 'enlightened' Canada. The right is *inherent* in Aboriginal people and their nationhood and was exercised for centuries before the arrival of European explorers and settlers. It is a right they never surrendered and now want to exercise once more."<sup>16</sup>

As a Network we are committed to decolonizing our practice and to supporting Indigenous food sovereignty. We must, therefore, recognize and honour the Indigenous peoples of this region, not as subordinates but as Nations with authority over the land and water. Food policy reform that is in keeping with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, of which Canada is a signatory, requires that settlers educate ourselves and learn how 'productivist' food policies help keep Indigenous peoples off their lands. Dawn Morrison elaborates the fundamental differences of world view captured in this word and perpetuated through agri-food policies: "Indigenous land ethic does not view the land and food system, or any part thereof, as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market economy, nor do we view it as a 'resource' or 'product' to be exploited by external means."<sup>17</sup>

There is much to learn and in light of the recent final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we must acknowledge that the "complete ignorance of Canadian Society about the facts of their relationship with Indigenous peoples and the willful denial of historical reality by Canadians detracts from the possibility of any meaningful discussion on true reconciliation."<sup>18</sup>

There is no shortage of opportunities for Canadians who are so motivated to learn about the realities and impacts of historical and ongoing colonial policies, from Commission reports to the work of many Indigenous scholars and activists. And we must abandon the tacit but false assumptions of *terra nullius* — no people were here so it was okay to steal the land — and superiority — so assimilation of Indigenous people is in their own best interest. These two concepts underpin the continued occupation of un-ceded territory by non-Indigenous people and are perpetuated by a host of policy and regulation. We are called upon to explore how to redesign the institutional frameworks so as to make visible the Indigenous voice and vision that was and continues to be dispossessed through the tools of colonialism, which includes our agri-food system.

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<sup>16</sup> Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. *People to people, nation to nation: Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, (1996), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Dawn Morrison, *Indigenous Food, Land and Heritage Primer*, (Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, October 2015), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, "Restitution is the real pathway to justice for Indigenous Peoples" in *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey*, (Ottawa, Ontario: Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series, 2009), 181.

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We must also learn what is necessary in order to enter into “a heartfelt commitment among peoples to live together in peace, harmony and mutual support.”<sup>19</sup> The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples proposed four principles as the basis for a renewed relationship between Indigenous Nations and Canadians that is much more than merely political or institutional:

**1. Recognition**

The principle of mutual recognition calls on non-Aboriginal Canadians to recognize that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants and caretakers of this land and have distinctive rights and responsibilities flowing from that status. It calls on Aboriginal people to accept that non-Aboriginal people are also of this land now, by birth and by adoption, with strong ties of love and loyalty. It requires both sides to acknowledge and relate to one another as partners, respecting each other's laws and institutions and co-operating for mutual benefit.

**2. Respect**

The principle of respect calls on all Canadians to create a climate of positive mutual regard between and among peoples. Respect provides a bulwark against attempts by one partner to dominate or rule over another. Respect for the unique rights and status of First Peoples, and for each Aboriginal person as an individual with a valuable culture and heritage, needs to become part of Canada's national character.

**3. Sharing** The principle of sharing calls for the giving and receiving of benefits in fair measure. It is the basis on which Canada was founded, for if Aboriginal peoples had been unwilling to share what they had and what they knew about the land, many of the newcomers would not have lived to prosper. The principle of sharing is central to the treaties and central to the possibility of real equality among the peoples of Canada in the future.

**4. Responsibility**

Responsibility is the hallmark of a mature relationship. Partners in such a relationship must be accountable for the promises they have made, accountable for behaving honourably, and accountable for the impact of their actions on the well-being of the other. Because we do and always will share the land, the best interests of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people will be served if we act with the highest standards of responsibility, honesty and good faith toward one another.<sup>20</sup>

Taiiaki Alfred points out that, ““If the goals of decolonization are justice and peace, then the process to achieve these goals must reflect a basic covenant on the part of both Indigenous peoples and settlers to honour each other’s existence. This honouring cannot happen when one partner in the relationship is asked to sacrifice their heritage and identity in exchange for peace. This is why the only possibility of a just relationship between Indigenous peoples and the settler society is the conception of a nation-to-nation partnership between peoples, the kind of relationship reflected in the original

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<sup>19</sup> Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. *People to people, nation to nation: Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, (1996), 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

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treaties of peace and friendship consecrated between Indigenous peoples and the newcomers who started arriving in our territories.”<sup>21</sup>

It is not up to settler communities to engage in reform of policies and governance within Indigenous nations. But we must ask what changes do we need to make in policy, in practice, in our world views and language, in how we inhabit this space and in our work to achieve sustainable food systems and food sovereignty for both settler and Indigenous people in British Columbia?

Canadians have been invited and are called upon to recognize the existence of diverse Indigenous governing systems, cultures and practice and be willing to truly acknowledge Aboriginal title on the land and in practice in order to enable both settlers and Indigenous peoples to thrive. As Arthur Manual has made clear, “The recognition of Aboriginal title on the ground is a fundamental decolonizing action.”<sup>22</sup> There are no simple solutions nor answers but they will only be arrived at once we begin to examine how policy is being made and how it can be transformed to address Aboriginal rights and title.

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<sup>21</sup> Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, “Restitution is the real pathway to justice for Indigenous Peoples” in *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Journey*, (Ottawa, Ontario: Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series, 2009), 169.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Manual, *Unsettling Canada: A National Wake-up Call*, (Toronto, ON: Between the Lines, 2015), 224.

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