

## *From Isolation to Inclusion: How the Charter Changed our Perceptions of Being and Belonging*

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### **I. Introduction**

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is an indispensable catalyst in shaping Canadian identity, forming a rich and diverse mainstream that integrates and intermingles many streams of human experience. The idea of Canada and what it means to be Canadian is dynamic and evolving, empowered by a *Charter* that arguably for the first time recognized and affirmed Indigenous peoples as the founding nations of Canada, and nurtured a sense of inclusion that promoted unity in diversity. Just as emergence from the Covid-19 pandemic has been a journey from isolation to inclusion, so has the forging of Canadian identity since the adoption of the *Constitution Act, 1982*. Drawing from stories shared in a circle aux batons-rampus, and from observations from a four-decade career as a public intellectual, I argue that Canadians' evolving sense of being and belonging, brought into even sharper relief by the Covid-19 pandemic, is shaped by a *Charter* which embraced both individual and collective rights. In this historical and narrative-driven analysis, I argue that the '82 *Constitution Act* is both an evolutionary and revolutionary founding law, a law that acknowledges at long last the necessity of overcoming a racist colonial history by defining equality rights; opens the door to reconciliation between and among First Nations and colonial settlers; and offers ample room for each generation to use the Constitution to impel accommodation and consensus, particularly in

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advancing societal development which affirms pluralism as a virtue. In framing this argument, I also invite the reader to consider their own place in Canada and the world.

## II. Context

Edmonton convened a singular gathering in November 2021: one that united civil society, the academy, and the creative community in finding common ground and common purpose. Titled *The Charter at Forty: From Isolation to Inclusion: Navigating the Post-Covid World* (“*Charter at Forty*”), the gathering explored Canada’s experiences in societal development over the past four decades, flowing from the 1982 *Canada Act* and its axial legislation, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. In a spirit of collaboration, the gathering was jointly convened by Canadians for a Civil Society, the University of Alberta’s Department of Political Science (Faculty of Arts), and the Canada Research Chair in the Politics of Citizenship and Human Rights. It began with the premise that the Canadian experience might offer lessons for other countries, and indeed for collective multilateral action on the world stage, in finding a viable future for humankind in the aftermath of the Covid-19 plague, and its consequences. It also sought to assess the role played by the *Charter* in contributing to Canadian citizenship through the entrenchment of individual and collective rights, and to better understand the Canadian contribution to answering Nelson Mandela’s call for a new political culture — a culture that makes human rights its way of life.

This paper is one of the outcomes of the community engagement that became an integral part of the *Charter at Forty* conference. Through this engagement, I was able to provoke reflection and examination of the key elements of a civil society — including but not limited to human rights, literacy, the rule of law, meaningful economic opportunity, and mutual respect — that encouraged collaboration, co-operation, and co-existence.

A central theme of the conference arose from an emerging Canadian understanding that we all are people of treaty, able to share this land because of the 19th century agreements between First Nations and the Crown. Indeed, this central theme of reconciliation permeates our explorations in community and forms a central focus throughout this paper. It is through this lens of reconciliation that I invite the reader to embark on a journey of reflection and self-awareness as it relates to being and belonging, and our ever-evolving Canadian identity.

## III. Canadian Identity before the *Charter*

In 1959, when Indigenous children in Canada were being stripped of their identity, dignity, and heritage within the toxic detention centres known as “residential schools,” Chief Apitchitchiw travelled from Treaty Six territory to Ottawa to meet with the colonial government led by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker. At this point, Apitchitchiw had recently become Chief of the Ermineskin Nation.<sup>1</sup> A direct descendant of the wise and visionary Cree leader Mistahimaskwa, Apitchitchiw concurred with his illustrious ancestor who had argued against signing treaties with the Crown in the 1870s because he feared they would inflict profound harm on

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1 See “Chief Robert Small Boy” (August 10, 2016), online (blog): *Treaties* <<http://treaties.blogspot.com/2016/08/chief-robert-small-boy.html>>.

his people.<sup>2</sup> By 1959, it had become clear that, far from securing the well-being, dignity, and mutual co-existence promised for “as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the rivers flow,”<sup>3</sup> the treaties had in fact removed agency and autonomy from the Indigenous peoples who had agreed to share and nurture the land created by Kisemanito with the colonial government and its settlers.

As a reflection of this, the Ottawa that received Apitchitchiw in 1959 did not recognize that it was located on the unceded sovereign territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation. Indeed, when Chief Apitchitchiw travelled to demand inclusion and social equity for his people, the Crown still pursued policies meant to extinguish Indigenous identity. The Anishinaabe Algonquin, like the Ermineskin Cree, were regarded by the colonial government as “savages,” subject to a policy of official deracination which aimed to remove every vestige of the “savage” from abducted and forcibly-detained children. This policy was enacted and pursued with full vigour from the time of the first colonial Prime Minister, John A Macdonald. It led to the confinement of Indigenous Canadians on reserves controlled by Crown-appointed agents, who used starvation and coercion as instruments of state power to perpetuate subjugation and domination, enacting Macdonald’s view. A few egregious statements on MacDonald’s part reflect this view: “[T]hat we could not always hope to maintain peace with the Indians; that the savage was still a savage, and that until he ceased to be savage, we were always in danger of a collision, in danger of war, in danger of an outbreak.”<sup>4</sup>

Far from affirming the reality that Indigenous Canadians were the founding peoples of the land called Canada, the government of the day was attempting to define the nation’s identity in terms of the settler culture represented by the colonial government. This culture was dominated by migrants with ancestry from the British Isles, who continued to resist pressures for shared governance with migrants whose ancestors came from France. Indeed, four years after Apitchitchiw met with the colonial government, a royal commission was created to define Canadian identity based on the idea of two founding nations: English and French. One of the early acts of Diefenbaker’s successor, Lester B Pearson, was the establishment of a commission led by Le Devoir publisher Andre Laurendeau and Carleton University President Davidson Dunton, which sought to:

... inquire into and report upon the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution.<sup>5</sup>

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2 *Ibid.*

3 See “As Long as The Sun Shines, The Grass Grows and The River Flows” (January 9, 2018), online (blog): *UAlberta Law* <<https://ualbertalaw.typepad.com/faculty/2018/01/as-long-as-the-sun-shines-the-grass-grows-and-the-river-flows.html#:~:text=To%20further%20strengthen%20the%20nature,the%20%E2%80%9Cspiritual%20aspects%20of%20the%20>>.

4 See “10 quotes John A Macdonald Made About First Nations” (June 28, 2016), online (blog): *Indigenous Corporate Training Inc* <<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/10-quotes-john-a.-macdonald-made-about-first-nations>>.

5 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, online: *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* <<https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pco-bcp/commissions-ef/dunton1967-1970-eng/dunton1967-70-eng.html>>.

The talk of “two founding races” and “ethnic groups” very much embodied the official definition of Canadian identity that existed until the *Charter* was signed into law on April 17, 1982. Pearson, awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1957 for opposing colonial intervention in Egyptian self-determination, was totally oblivious to the irony of being so awarded when the government he led neither accepted nor acknowledged that it committed grievous public sins in subjugating the Indigenous Canadians whose land it occupied in an official policy of brutality, deceit, and forced detention.

Apitchitchiw, colonially known as Chief Robert Smallboy and/or Chief Johnny Bob Smallboy of the Ermineskin Cree, finally decided he must separate his people from the colonial state: an option that had led to the imprisonment of his ancestor Chief Mistahi-maskwa, colonially known as *le Grand Ours*, or Big Bear.<sup>6</sup> This decision, long in the making, arose from the continued inaction by the Crown on following through with the spirit and intent of the treaties, and the complete failure by the Crown to respond to the calls for equity and justice by the Ermineskin and other First Nations in the decade following the 1959 delegation.

In 1967, Apitchitchiw, accompanied by 275 of his compatriots, left the community of Maskwacis, then known as Hobbema (colonially named after the Dutch landscape artist Meindert Hobbema, a favourite of railway promoter William Cornelius van Horne) to set up a remote camp in the Kootenai plains, near what is today the Alberta community of Nordegg.<sup>7</sup> This was unceded land (although the Crown claimed it should be included in Treaty Eight), a place to escape the degradation, violence, alcoholism, and societal fragmentation abetted by the experience of confinement and deracination in residential schools. The “Smallboy camp” or Mountain Cree Camp, as the settlement came to be known, drew opposition from the Crown, and had its own issues with fragmentation and division. Yet it survived, along with the school Apitchitchiw established, Kisiko Awasis Kiskinhamawin, now formally recognised by the Government of Alberta Ministry of Education, and, since 2009, supported by formal agreement with the Edmonton Catholic School Board.<sup>8</sup> In a final irony, a little more than two years after the new Canadian Constitution formally promised the legal protection of equality rights and Indigenous rights, Apitchitchiw was denied hotel accommodation in Banff, developed frostbite from sleeping outdoors, and died from the resulting gangrene the following summer.<sup>9</sup>

Apitchitchiw’s quest to revive the dignity, agency, and autonomy of his people encapsulated the isolation of Canadians politically excluded from the “bilingual and bicultural” country of “two founding races.” Yet today, this quest stands as a milestone in the journey to inclusion: the evolution of the dynamic and accommodating Canadian identity enabled by the 1982 *Constitution Act*, and its central instrument, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

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6 Frits Pannekoek, “Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear)” (December 19, 2006), online: *The Canadian Encyclopedia* <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/big-bear>>.

7 “The Mountain Cree Camp School Kisiko Awasis Kiskinhamawin”, online: *Edmonton Catholic Schools* <<https://www.ecsd.net/page/1347/the-mountain-cree-camp-school-kisiko-awasis-kiskinhamawin>>.

8 *Ibid.*

9 See Lindsey V Sharman, *The Writing on the Wall: The Work of Joane Cardinal-Schubert* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2017).

## IV. The Birth of Pluralistic Canadian Identity

In 1974, an immigrant to Canada named Horst A Schmid felt as though he had been handed a great opportunity to build a better world. Having left a desolated and devastated Bavaria while still in his adolescence, Schmid arrived in Yellowknife to work in the gold mines in 1952 (an experience that corrupted his lungs), and moved to Edmonton in 1956. By 1971 he was the Minister of Culture in the Government of Alberta (“When I told my mother, she asked me if I had been drinking,” he would later recall — “she could not believe that I had been elected to office, let alone made a minister!”). In this new role, Schmid was tasked by Premier Peter Lougheed with ensuring that all Albertans were included in societal development.<sup>10</sup>

In 1971, the Government of Canada adopted a multiculturalism policy, recognizing that although the British and French represented two “founding nations,” other ethnic groups were present and should be acknowledged. Handed an ample mandate by Premier Lougheed (“if the premier wanted to meet you, it meant you were in trouble,” Schmid recalled in a conversation with this author — “otherwise, he would check in a couple of times a year for an update”), the new minister started to fund and encourage ethnocultural groups to showcase their origins to incorporate them into the life of Albertan society. Under Schmid’s explicit direction, the ministry set up funding programs for communities of diverse ethnic streams to take their pride of place within an immigrant-shaped province, despite the official federal policy of Canada as a “bilingual and bicultural” country.

Alberta’s decision to shine a spotlight on cultural heritage won broad public support, and Schmid quickly established the Foundation for the Performing Arts, the Cultural Heritage Foundation, and the Historical Resources Foundation. This meshed well with Alberta’s evolving sense of pluralism, arising from Prairie populism in politics, which contrasted with the hierarchical view perpetuated by the federal government’s recognition of only two “founding nations.”

One key initiative that was a direct consequence of Alberta’s official pursuit of cultural diversity as a strength was the Edmonton Heritage Festival. One of Schmid’s first activities as Minister of Culture, Youth and Recreation was to convene a meeting of all the presidents of the various ethno-cultural organizations of Alberta. At that time, a consensus emerged that unless we take pride in our ancestry and heritage, we could not expect our children to be proud of their parents. Two of the most important suggestions were that each city, town, or village should be encouraged to ask all the ethno-cultural organizations within their jurisdiction to celebrate their cultural heritage on a specific day of the year. Schmid was thus able to introduce the *Cultural Heritage Day Act* in the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, which declared on June 6, 1974 that the first Monday in August would be an annual holiday to celebrate, recognize, and share the various ethno-cultural heritages of all Albertans. Edmonton Heritage Festival — which includes a pavilion showcasing First Nations — eventually grew out of that legislation.

Far removed from Ottawa, the Lougheed government oversaw a new world taking shape as immigration changed the makeup of the province, particularly after the Canadian welcome afforded in the 1970s and early 1980s to Asians expelled from Uganda, and Vietnamese fleeing

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10 All the references and quotations here are drawn from personal conversations that I had with Schmid — who was a mentor to me throughout my public life — from 1975 to 2021.



the civil war in their home land: two remarkably resilient and entrepreneurial communities who would make a significant impact in their new home, within one generation. This new reality, which was as far removed as could be from the Anglo-French binary of Laurentian Canada, was shaped in cities that from their very foundation were created by a meeting of cultures. That multicultural collective identity became a counterpoint to the notion of Canada as a nation of two solitudes. Moreover, in rejecting the dominance of Protestant Anglo-Scottish culture in Ontario and Catholic French culture in Quebec, with their hierarchies and rigid power structures, the Alberta that evolved during Schmid's tenure was distinctly pluralistic in character.

Unbound by long tradition and created by a culture of settlement and mingling, the Lougheed government itself became a clear expression of a pluralistic political structure dominated by none, where character and accomplishment counted for more than breeding and inheritance. Against this backdrop, Professor Manoly Lupul of the University of Alberta's Canadian Centre for Ukrainian Studies was among the first to develop multiculturalism as an intellectual framework in the Canadian West, beginning in the 1960s. He persuasively argued that the description of the French-English binary did not capture Alberta's cultural diversity, which comprised a non-Indigenous population that arrived directly from massive immigrant settlement over a relatively short period.<sup>11</sup>

Significantly, Lupul's advocacy of multiculturalism within the dominant dualistic vision of Canada gave an intellectual and scholarly foundation to Alberta's multicultural policies. Alberta's metro cities of Edmonton and Calgary, unlike the older cities of Ontario and Quebec, were young and recent conurbations that more than anything else provided a civic space for cultural mingling, and in so doing became a template for progress and prosperity. This would change with breathtaking speed, however, in the years after the *Charter*, with the once staid and Scottish Toronto of the 1950s and 1960s becoming the world's most cosmopolitan city, accommodating nearly every stream of human experience and building an entirely new sense of being and belonging.

In Alberta, though, even in Lougheed's time, Schmid and others had begun to question the notion of two "founding nations." The Lougheed government was the first in Alberta to recognize that the injustices done to First Nations must be part of the evolution of our collective identity. In this regard, Schmid, who would be honoured by the Cree nation as "Chief Flying Eagle" for his efforts to recognize and affirm the province's Indigenous heritage, wondered: if Canada is a country of two founding peoples, where does that leave Indigenous Canadians and the rest of us? The majority of the population of Alberta is of neither French nor British descent, and Edmonton has the largest urban population of Indigenous Canadians in the country.

Indeed, John Diefenbaker, from Saskatchewan, was the first Canadian Prime Minister of neither French nor British origin, and Schmid himself was the first post-Second World War immigrant to be elected to a legislative assembly in Canada (he was also the first Alberta cabinet minister whose origins were in the "defeated" countries of the Second World War). Indeed, by the time Schmid was appointed with his eagle-feather headdress by the Four Nations of

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11 See Manoly R Lupul, "The Political Implementation of Multiculturalism" (1982) 17:1 *Journal of Canadian Studies* 93.

Maskwacis, the Alberta idea of founding nations included the Cree, Dene, Lakota, Saulteaux, Siksika, Pikani, and Metis: everyone else was an immigrant.

This emerging consciousness would gather momentum and force as it defined the emerging pluralism of Alberta, where the Loughheed policies led to interculturalism becoming the normative framework of Albertan life by the turn of the millennium, rather than newcomer communities remaining isolated in cultural ghettos, insulating themselves from the richness and diversity of broader Canadian life. This intercultural sense of being and belonging together permeated the reflections on identity that emerged from our community engagement for the *Charter at Forty* gathering.

## V. From Isolation to Inclusion: Reflections on Identity from Learning and Sharing Circles

The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* was proclaimed in the early years of the digital age, and it is interesting to observe the differences in perception of Canadians who came of age after the *Charter*, and those whose sense of being and belonging was shaped before it.

As the digital age brought a great democratization of information, opportunity, and knowledge-sharing, the *Charter* vision of a big-tent “us” — where people would have to make a conscious effort to remain a cloistered “them” outside the *Charter*-enabled evolution of Canadian identity — led the generations that came of age after 1982 to embrace pluralism and diversity as a normative framework of Canadian life. This is a key finding that emerged from our circle discussions on being and belonging, convened by Canadians for a Civil Society and the Edmonton Heritage Council as part of the community contribution to the *Charter at Forty* conference.

The idea of circles on being and belonging as an integral part of the *Charter at Forty* conference emerged from my volunteer leadership of the Edmonton Heritage Council. At that time, the final reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission<sup>12</sup> were beginning to give more meaning to the Aboriginal Rights section of the *Constitution Act, 1982*; and, given the history of oppressive brutality and abuse in residential schools and the era in which reserves were essentially detention centres, to the unresolved definition of “treaty rights.”<sup>13</sup>

We followed the Indigenous tradition of the circle, a safe place to listen, share, and learn from each other, as we embarked on open community engagement for the *Charter at Forty* initiative. Through these experiences, the power and validity of such engagement was made abundantly clear.

In 2016, I convened the Council and invited a selection of guests, including one of the Truth and Reconciliation (“TRC”) commissioners. The centre of the circle was a pile of books,

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12 These reports are available at “Reports”, online: *National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation* <<https://nctr.ca/records/reports/#trc-reports>>. See, for instance, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Public Domain, 2015).

13 *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, s 25, Part I of the Constitution Act, 1982, being Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982 (UK), 1982, c 11.

a catalogue of pain, dripping with the unhealed wounds of those of our brothers and sisters who were plucked up by their roots, sent to state detention, and forced to abandon everything that defined their being and belonging: names, languages, family, culture, heritage, spirit, and the absolute freedom to roam these lands. This stack of books represented the final reports of the TRC, which travelled the country called Canada for six years. The TRC report finally brought all to understand the pain of the First Peoples so brutally wrenched from all they had and were, and encouraged us to find a path towards mutual healing. Beginning with the recognition of the wrongs committed in the never-ending sin, we were mindful that this is the circle in which we the people have met in Amiskwaciy-wâskahikan for more than 10,000 years.

Our circle brought together newcomers and descendants of the first people to live along this river and these hills, the people of Treaty Six.<sup>14</sup> We wanted to come to grips with the great wrong the colonizers wrought, the terror they visited on those who had shared Amiskwaciy-wâskahikan — Beaver Hills House, in the language in which the colonists govern — and what can be done to reconcile the future with the never-ending sin of what was done in the past. This is land once shared by the Cree and the Dene, by the Lacotah and the Métis, the Siksika and the Pikani. After the Treaty, it was overwhelmed by settlers. The colonizers who divided up “ownership” of this land named the territory after a princess from a faraway land across the sea. They called it Alberta, and their first leader, a Hudson’s Bay Company factor, gave Amiskwaciy-wâskahikan the name of the place one of their governors came from: Edmonton.<sup>15</sup>

We listened to one of the Commissioners, Wilton Littlechild, as our circle evoked the paths to reconciliation the Edmonton Heritage Council can pursue. I knew Chief Littlechild during the many years he represented Maskwacis and surrounding colonizer communities; as a Progressive Conservative Member of Parliament in the House of Commons of Canada; and as a regional Chief of Alberta, representing the people of Treaties Six, Seven, and Eight in the Assembly of First Nations. He agreed to come to this circle to help we keepers of shared heritage navigate a new way of being and belonging together.

Chief Littlechild’s voice in our 2016 circle was even, his tone restrained, as he described the indescribable, beginning with his name being replaced by a number in residential school, a human being reduced to a numbered commodity. His calmness was overwhelming, and for those of us who had read the TRC report, the dignified timbre of his voice was unbearable. A shouted reproach would have been easier to understand; his demeanour merely emphasized the enormity of the sin unredeemed.

That experience instilled in me a quest for more such meaningful conversations, so that we could, in the full spirit of our dynamic and evolving Canadian identity empowered by the *Charter*, find a mutual understanding to break the walls of Otherness. And yet, there persists an enormous gulf between pre-*Charter* and post-*Charter* Canadians. As gleaned from half a dozen circles held during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, pre-*Charter* Canadians found their stories in the struggle to belong, to fit their multifaceted identities into a “two founding races” binary that never included them. In a session with members of the Jewish Seniors Centre, for

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14 Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights Information System*, online: <<https://www.cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100014686/1609421785838>>.

15 “Origins of Naming in Edmonton”, online: *City of Edmonton* <[https://www.edmonton.ca/city\\_government/edmonton\\_archives/origins-of-naming-in-edmonton](https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/edmonton_archives/origins-of-naming-in-edmonton)>.



example, the descendants of those who fled 19th century pogroms in Europe and the 20th century Holocaust spoke with gratitude about the shelter Canada offered; yet they had to camouflage the essence of their being to fit into the Anglo-French binary, confining their cultural expression to tightly-knit community events. It was only after the *Charter*, participants noted, that they were able and confident to embark on interculturalism, and to meet Canadians of many origins as equals and co-citizens — particularly in metropolitan cities where immigration-fed numbers alone transcended the presumed Anglo-French duality of Canada, in that the minorities excluded in the “two founding races” duality were in fact a significant majority.

By contrast, post-*Charter* Canadians, in particular millennials born after the *Charter* already had taken root, had quite different foci on being and belonging. Theirs is a relentless focus on inclusion, particularly the recognition of multiple genders, races, faiths, and other axial friction points of identity, with a fierce commitment to dignity at the centre of their convictions.

As Circle Rapporteur Leo Campos Aldunez captured, in a session overwhelmingly attended by millennials, participants spoke about “belonging” being a rather “elusive journey” — one of an existential nature in which re-examining one’s roots, ancestry, family of origin, faith traditions, names, and history shapes one’s identity and contemporary meaning(s). Belonging, in this sense, becomes less of a geographical place and more about the clarity of self in relationship with others. Indeed, at times it is hard to know where exactly one belongs. One forms a complex perspective if one grows up while navigating ambiguity and multiple dimensions of the self-in-the-world. People who are self-aware of the implications of multiple origins and experiences have a different journey through life. This realization of multiple identities guides the “elusive journey” toward our common destination: living with dignity in community, in harmony with one another and with the natural world.

Other circles involving both pre- and post-*Charter* Canadians evoked a sense of common duty to one another, the collective responsibilities which are the obverse of rights. As Campos captured:

We need to illuminate ... *being and belonging* [by] ensuring the well-being of our neighbours, friends, companions, colleagues, and communities. We need to re-learn how to share our stories and be intentionally present in community, witnessing, reaching out — “Mother Earth” is telling us something deeper. We cannot turn a blind eye to the challenges of our times; inquiry, critical thinking, and having space for the heart [are] fundamental. What is in the past: understand it, acknowledge it, and leave it there. The “heart-of-the-matter” [is] what is our core humanity, and we must find new ways to re-engage with the world, knowing how to ask, when to ask, and when to listen, mindfully. The challenge in such a fragmented [fractured] world is to heal the self, to reach out to community [communities] and honour your [our] presence, big or small in the circle of being & belonging. We must create the space, the opportunities for community and deeper connections — building a culture of care, empathy, and solidarity.<sup>16</sup>

Campos concluded with this finding from that particular circle:

Truth, justice, and peace must be ... our guiding lights. Value people, always. We need to be gentle; yet firm on core values. Recommit to a shared vision, shared values, a shared sense of belonging within our

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16 Notes provided by rapporteur Leo Campos Aldunez to the author post-circle. The appendix is a verbatim artifact from one circle, prepared by Campos.

realm and then act accordingly in community. Closing words of gratitude, appreciation, trust, honour, and encouragement were manifested by all.

And yet, gaps remain. A circle conversation with Francophones in Edmonton, many with roots in Africa, exposed an unfulfilled promise of the *Charter*. That circle, which was convened by La Francophonie Plurielle Albertaine (FRAP),<sup>17</sup> revealed a genuine struggle to thrive in French, even to survive in French, in a society which nearly universally used English as the dominant language. Professionals of African origin, who had credentials at the post-graduate level obtained entirely in French, spoke ruefully of the gap between the *Charter* evocation of a bilingual country, and the reality they encountered on the ground. Yet in an illustration of how the *Charter* has fostered inclusion and pluralism, participants concluded that they needed to take power, rather than wait for others to empower them. “Look at the [South Asian ancestry] Mayors of Edmonton and Calgary,” noted one Francophone community organiser who works in providing settlement services for newcomers at FRAP. “They entered politics after serving the larger community; they made their name by participating. And now they are not only accepted, but elevated.” The *Charter*, they agreed, offers them the opportunity to do the same.

## VI. Conclusion

If I may beg the reader’s indulgence, please allow me to conclude with a personal call to action. With the world in lockdown through much of 2020 and 2021, tens of millions of our fellow humans, those who rely upon a daily wage for their daily bread, faced a stark choice between hunger and illness. Some of us chose the risk of falling ill rather than bearing the agony of seeing our dependents wither away from hunger and misery in enforced isolation. At least in this way of thinking, illness is a roulette wheel with a chance of survival. So it seems, when the alternative is to be deprived of any means of livelihood, with little or no access to food and shelter in the face of calamity.

What a gap between this reality, and the reality of “defence” focused on military incursions and territorial warfare. In this reality, every person on the planet bears the risk of being invaded by an organism invisible to the eye, with dire consequences for one’s safety and security; and the very security of the polity itself. In this respect, Covid-19 brings into focus the utter futility of our machinery of warfare. The hundreds of billions of dollars spent annually to keep our people “safe” and our borders “secure,” the manufacture and sale of lethal weaponry which provides a lucrative income to the world’s richest economies, can clearly be seen as a colossal waste of money and resources that might have been better spent in building a life of dignity and purpose for all of humankind. In this respect, the plague laid bare the folly of these preoccupations, the folly of perpetuating violence as a building block of the 21st century world. The plight of Ukrainian cities bombarded into rubble by a military incursion that began in February 2022, amidst the climate crisis and a new wave of Covid infection, shows that the lethal machinations of the bygone world are still with us, even as nature itself forces us to cope with the consequences of a global pandemic and a climate emergency that threatens the very existence of our species. Can this really be the future one foresees for humanity?

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17 To learn more about FRAP, see <<https://www.frap.ca/>>.

As we emerge into an uncertain future, it is starkly evident that we must move from a corrosive culture of division and hatred to a collaborative future of inclusion and mutual benefit. The coronavirus is forcing upon us the necessity of rebuilding our world on a new foundation, animated by the spirit of non-violence and transformative social change. We cannot lose focus on this necessity, even as the unceasing brutality of the last two millennia — ever amplified by newer and more lethal ways of killing one another and despoiling our natural heritage — rampages onward. We know where we need to go. A world that works for everyone. Founded on freedom from want. Freedom from fear. None left behind. For the sake of humankind. For the future of the planet.

To get there we need to convene, collaborate, cooperate, co-exist, and converge: in community, in harmony with one another, and with the natural world. Our community engagement as part of the *Charter at Forty* initiative showed the compelling power of convening diverse people for common purpose. May we continue, and may our mutual journey to reconciliation become the hallmark legacy of our *Charter at Forty* gathering.

## Appendix

What follows is a verbatim artifact from one of the circles held during the *Charter at Forty* conference, prepared by Rapporteur Leo Campos Aldunez.

### ***Being and Belonging Circle Project: Conversation 3 — November 9, 2021***

Rapporteur: Leo Campos Aldunez

Hosted by the Edmonton Heritage Council via Zoom

Facilitated by Azkaa Rahman

### ***Opening***

We opened the evening with the song “Dignity” and with welcoming remarks to all participants to Treaty 6 territory. Circle guidelines were provided: “We listen with compassion; attention, with the intent to understand not to respond. We encourage curiosity and cultivate safety for one another. My story travels with me; everyone else’s story stays here. We welcome and host vulnerability; we speak with full intention. We unmute for laughter.”

**ROUND #1 | (a) Please ask each other the following: When you consider being and/or belonging, what crossroads or considerations do you find yourself at? (b) After hearing responses to (a), ask each other: Why is this important to you?**

One of the things that struck me in our exploration of being and belonging relates not just to me but also to the future of our city. In that light, who decides who belongs? For some, as we transition from reasonably stable jobs to joblessness, due in part to the pandemic, this question is framed in a sort of “*where do I fit now?*” We don’t always think about others, least about Indigenous peoples and their own journey of being and belonging — should we start doing it more intentionally? Also, when we speak of belonging, are we talking about neighborhoods? A family unit? A geographical area in particular? Our places of employment? Places where we volunteer? ...

How about the *many immigrants to this land* — are they the new “settlers”? What about their own fractured and diverse diaspora, in some instances, their own conflictual history; does it get lived here as well? We need to find the courage to pose uncomfortable questions to ourselves and each other, *safely*. This requires determining what is common to all of us; for instance, security, safety, freedom of choices. You know: for many born in this land, and white, asking such questions never occurred. In this first round we discovered deep wisdom, less fear, and a willingness to share between cultural traditions. For the many of us coming from zones of conflict/war it is very comforting to be here in safety. And we know the dynamics of language; meaning and ethnicity are always at play in our journeys of self-discovery.

**ROUND #2 | (a) What are three questions you would ask your ancestors (b) What are three things you would say to the seventh generation?**

*What are the stories we tell ourselves?* ... They (often) revolve around spheres of empathy while rediscovering identities and the shades of ancestry, yet we struggle to understand the comfort or discomfort of our ancestors as they settled in their new land. Knowing what we know today, we ask “how do we right the wrongs of the past”?

What are the *intersections* between African ancestries and Indigenous ancestries? My family was from a family of slaves — I took a journey to Africa and painfully discovered the lands from where my deep roots are on the shores of the sea and the ships that took many to the new world — walking the path of my enslaved ancestors — how they felt being captured and sold? Where do I find the thread that links that story with the story of Indigenous peoples in this country, with the colonizers and the settlers? ...

This conversation has been very deep and personal ... Listening to some of our Indigenous friends here this evening, I can't help but feel sadness, sorrow, and yet deep empathy. I felt their love, I felt listened to and appreciated — *tears overwhelmed me for a moment*, and a sense of gratitude for creating spaces (virtual or otherwise) where we can come together and grieve and rejoice. The truth is that we really need each other to heal and move forward ...

Job losses cause you to re-examine some of these questions [of] being and belonging. Some of us struggle to find the clarity, congruency to assert our voice, to assert oneself respectfully, but without fear. These conversations allow us to work through fears and anxieties; to start feeling *better grounded* and not alone — finding “my tribe” if you will, feel[ing] the support, validation, bravery, encouraging me to deal with the intergenerational challenges in our lives and our parents' [lives].

**Note:** there was an intense emotional moment during the evening that was promptly acknowledged by the facilitator. She offered a moment of respite/pause and a helpful breathing exercise. It was appreciated by all.

**ROUND #3 | What is one thing you would like to do today to care for yourself and care for others?**

*Integrity and self-care matters:* If we do not take care of ourselves we can't take care of others. We need to weave into our daily lives, work, play, family, social [and] communal moments dedicated to wellness, centered on a given moment, while we “work” towards a larger transformation or structural reform. For non-Indigenous people, most of us, we need to carefully

listen to Indigenous people's stories, with an open heart, and an open mind. By active listening, we enlarge boundaries, lower self-defence mechanisms, and are truly "witness" in an encouraged place, time. We need a new definition of self and community. Many among us are deeply grateful to Indigenous peoples for hosting us on their lands — we must help in correcting the wrongs of the past, and foster a deeper sense of abundance for all, solidarity from the bottom up.

***The "us and them" challenge*** is to find balance and equilibrium; balance within our own energies and our sense of care for the self and for others. We also need to attune to a painful reality out there; the sense of dislocation, social isolation, loneliness within our communities. But, caring for the self and caring for others is also an individual act, a very personal one, an act of compassion and understanding. Let's strive to find that work-life balance. And if you have it (what a blessing!), nurture it, practice it, teach it, promote it. Coming together in these circles of conversations, connecting, becoming aware of each other and listening to our stories, we then become the "movers and the shakers." In doing so, we empower each other to care for the self, and are strong enough to care for others.

***Listening carefully and planting the seeds of change:*** We struggle at times to insert into new environments we would like to belong [to or be] part of. Sometimes we tear up around issues of self-awareness unless we are brave and can gradually remove "the mask" we wear. Institutionally — in the arts, for example — some of us have taken the responsibility to foster wellness, carry on honest conversations, [and] find social media friends to share our journeys and help others amplify voices that need to be heard. As white Canadians, I/we ... do not want to re-traumatize people in any shape, way or form — yet, pushing (even if gently) for diversity and inclusion within our organizations and institutions can be a struggle, dragging us down. We must persevere ...

Even within our families we need to be more assertive on these matters. Our parents belong to a whole different time; if we can't hold them [and] each other accountable for retrograde views, how can [we hold ourselves accountable]. Are we accountable? Gently but firmly we need to open up the ***gates of silence*** and let difficult conversations unfold. In all of these personal journeys, one must be careful not to spread the self too thin; remembering these interactions are in themselves mutually beneficial, although that may not be self-evident at first glance.

***Simple things like a walk in nature, or walking in our neighborhoods*** — the idea of freeing the mind, and being in the body seeking balance, holding such and focusing on the goodness of people ("be curious, not furious"), in short, the pursuit of balancing our lives between the worlds we traverse, finding "the other" and, if one is lucky to have a good organization/board to work with, that is bound to have a "ripple-effect" in the community at large.

***"How wonderful it is that nobody needs to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."*** — Anne Frank



