

LEGISLATION

Faith voices support Bill C-15

By JOE GUNN AND JENNIFER PRESTON FEBRUARY 15, 2021

Canadian faith communities are mobilizing to play their part in this national responsibility.



More than 30 members of the churches participated in a Zoom briefing with federal Justice Minister David Lametti on Jan. 29, posing questions including whether the proposed legislation will become a high-enough priority to avoid stalling in Parliament, write Joe Gunn and Jennifer Preston. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in Call to Action No. 48, specifically called upon all faith communities “to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation.”

Then-NDP MP Romeo Saganash, a Cree lawyer who represented Abitibi-Baie-James-Nunavik-Eeyou, Que., from 2011 to 2019, tabled his private member’s bill, C-262, which was passed by the House of Commons in 2018. A coalition of church groups mobilized public support for passage of this bill, including public statements, demonstrations, and advocacy before lawmakers. However, Bill C-262 never became law because of procedural delays by a few Senators. The bill died when the 2019 election was called. The Liberals promised to introduce a government bill to implement the UN declaration before the end of 2020. A government bill, they argued, would not be subject to the same vulnerabilities as a private member’s bill.

Bill C-15: An Act Respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was tabled in the House of Commons on Dec. 3. Bill C-15 affirms the UN declaration as a universal international human rights instrument with application in Canadian law. The bill requires the federal government to work with Indigenous people to develop a national action plan with priorities and deadlines, as well as to bring federal laws into line with the declaration.

While British Columbia moved ahead in 2020 with passage of Bill 41, which addressed the declaration's effect in that province's laws, six other provinces requested delay of the tabling of federal legislation. They remain critical and uncertain of the UN Declaration's Article 32:2 which calls for "free, prior, and informed consent" to be obtained from Indigenous peoples before the development of projects affecting their lands, territories, or resources.



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Today, there is ample awareness that Christian institutions played—and sometimes continue to play—harmful roles in colonialization. Faith communities desire to move forward towards reconciliation—but with great humility. Church bodies are not immune to disagreements either—some religious conservatives balk at the very Preamble to C-15, where non-discrimination of “gender diverse and two-spirit people” raises hackles. Other groups require more time for consultation among Indigenous members in their communities and specific leadership structures.

Recently, a coalition of 15 faith communities expressed appreciation for C-15, as “one of many urgent steps on the journey of justice and right relationships.” Called “Faith in the Declaration,” senior Christian leaders released a letter on Jan. 21 that urged Justice Minister David Lametti to give “priority of this draft bill through the legislative process to ensure royal assent in advance of the next election.”

Educational webinars are being organized to engage our constituents, giving a special voice to national Indigenous leaders from the faith communities as well as Chief Willie Littlechild, former commissioner of the TRC; Kanien’kehá:ka activist Ellen Gabriel; and Canada Research Chair Sheryl Lightfoot. More than 30 members of the churches participated in a Zoom briefing with Lametti on Jan. 29, posing questions including whether the proposed legislation will become a high-enough priority to avoid stalling in Parliament.

Canadian faith communities are mobilizing to play their part in this national responsibility. They are attempting to ensure that reconciliation comes alive through education of their members, development of more inclusive and just relationships, measurable changes in power relationships, and yes, support of legislation that respects Indigenous peoples’ human rights.

Faith in the declaration information can be found here: <https://www.faithinthedeclaration.ca>

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