

Remarks by Mayor Mike Savage
January 30, 2017 Regional Council
Agenda item 17.1: Commemoration of Edward Cornwallis

This is a difficult issue for many people. We as members of Council come to it from a range of perspectives and experiences. I am no different.

In the backyards of my Dartmouth neighbourhood, we played cowboys and Indians, arguing over who would be on which side. My last name carried with it a certain inevitability. "You're a Savage; you should be the Indian," kids would say. What they meant was, 'You're an Indian; you are less than us.'

In the 1970s, the word Mi'kmaq did not exist, at least not to us. "Micmac" was reserved for a rotary, a lake, a tavern, and a long-awaited shopping mall.

In the classroom of my youth, we learned our history lessons from "Nova Scotia: A Brief History," first published in 1955.

The textbook urged students to "dramatize the Indian attack on Dartmouth," but we were not asked to consider the view of Mi'kmaq. Nowhere in the slim volume is there a discussion of what it must have been like to be in Mi'kma'ki territory watching Cornwallis and company sail into the great harbour.

I imagine the textbooks and the teachings are much different now. As they should be.

But, the point is this: We are all the product of our history. But we should not be a prisoner to it.

At this point in Canada's history, as in the history of Halifax, the issue of Truth and Reconciliation is very much in the public square. It's been a long time coming for Indigenous people, but also for all of us who have come to believe we must forge a better future from a bitter past.

One of the proudest moments of my time in public life was as an MP on June 11, 2008 when Prime Minister Harper issued a formal apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian Residential Schools. While the schools were not the only instance of abhorrent treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada, they crystallized the issue.

In this country, we had torn apart families, robbed children of their language, their culture, and even their lives – and not by accident.

From the December 2015 findings of the TRC came 94 recommendations and a set of principles. Among them: *“Reconciliation requires political will, joint leadership, trust building, accountability, and transparency, as well as a substantial investment of resources.”*

On Dec 8, 2015, I brought forward a motion to this council to recognize the TRC, particularly its relevance to our municipal government, and asked staff to report back on ways for us to enact the recommendations. This Council supported that motion unanimously.

We have taken important steps forward on a new home for the Mi’kmaw Native Friendship Centre - an important indicator of our shared intent to advance a better relationship. We have voted to create a Downie Wenjack Legacy Room in City Hall.

It is important to recognize that culture did not arrive at these shores aboard European ships. Our History did not begin when it was first recorded in French or in English.

This Reconciliation road is not easy. To progress down it, we must also face the truth, however complicated, difficult and uncomfortable.

The Cornwallis statue has become a powerful symbol. I believe its continued presence on a pedestal in the middle of a city park is an impediment to sustained progress in forging a productive, respectful and lasting relationship with the Mi’kmaq in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation.

But we must not lose an opportunity to tell a new story from the old. If we leave a hole where this statue now stands we surrender to the urge to bury the lessons of history, to hide the truth.

I am confident we can have the deep discussion that will bring about serious recommendations for the future of the statue and the use of the Cornwallis name on municipal assets.

Equally, though, we can work to recognize the incredible opportunity to honor the TRC principles in recommending a way forward that is respectful to the Indigenous people in this region. This is not about rewriting history, it is about acknowledging that it is not cast in bronze.

Today’s Halifax is not the garrison town of Edward Cornwallis; it is a thriving, diverse, modern city that I believe will be largely shaped by two groups: Those who have been here the longest and those who are finding this place for the first time.

I am proud of Council’s endorsement of efforts to develop a new relationship with Indigenous people. We will be successful only if the actions we take lead to a broader community understanding of the importance of a new relationship. I am, and I believe we are, committed to working with the Indigenous community in seeing that happen.

We are not elected to make easy decisions; but to make hard ones. This is one of those decisions for many of you. There are people for whom I have great respect who are urging me, urging us, to leave the statue be.

For me, I have always looked to the advice of the wisest person I have ever known, my mother. She told me to consider how a decision settles in my head and my heart. I have arrived at a position that passes both tests.

As we discuss this issue today, as we broaden that discussion in the days to come, let's be guided by the principles of reconciliation with respect for all points of view.

(Note: Mayor Savage voted in favour of the motion contained here:
<https://www.halifax.ca/city-hall/regional-council/january-30-2018-halifax-regional-council>
The motion was approved by Council.)