A FOUNDATION ON CONVERSATION: LEVERAGING THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE AT THE CANADIAN MUSEUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

STUART MURRAY was appointed as the first Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the new Canadian Museum for Human Rights, Canada's fifth national museum and the first to be built outside the National Capital Region, in September 2009. Mr. Murray has served as President and CEO of the St. Boniface Hospital and Research Foundation since 2006. He became Leader of the PC party of Manitoba in 2000 and resigned in 2006. Stuart also worked as President and CEO of DOMO Gasoline Corporation Ltd. from 1989 to 1999. His past positions include working with the Prime Minister of Canada from 1985-1989, Media Director and fundraiser for the Canadian Opera Company as well as Road Manager for the rock band Blood, Sweat & Tears. Stuart has also been very active in the community. As volunteer Chairman of the 1999 World Junior Hockey Championships in Winnipeg, Stuart and his team organized what was the most successful tournament in its 20-year history. He was also Manitoba Co-Chair of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet (RWB) Sustaining Applause Campaign, raising in excess of 10 million dollars. He received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012 for his contributions to Winnipeg and Manitoba.

ABSTRACT

What do Canadians see when challenged to examine their country through the lens of human rights? Does our sense of national identity change? Is there a shift in our shared aspirations for Canada, Canada's obligations to the world, or our responsibility as individual Canadians to one another? From 2008 through 2012 the Canadian Museum for Human Rights engaged citizens from every part of Canada in an unprecedented national discussion, uniquely framed to evaluate our nation's strengths, shortcomings and future challenges from a human rights perspective. The result was an expectedly complex weave of stories, insights and observations, punctuated by often intensely personal accounts of the attendant challenges of enduring and overcoming barriers to the rights many of us are able to take for granted. This national exercise served to highlight human rights successes consistent with what many identified as Canadian ideals of inclusion, equality and fairness, such as the then-recently won right of same-sex couples to marry. It also served to underscore persistent, deeply rooted barriers still facing many Canadian citizens; the inveterate poverty and associated gaps in health and education endured by many Aboriginal Canadians as a frequently cited example. The Museum's nationwide consultation yielded a rich picture of Canadians' expectations for a national human rights museum, their perspectives on how the Museum could best serve Canada, and most significantly, how the Museum could best empower its visitors to identify and dissolve the obstacles that continue to impede the rights and opportunities of many, both within Canada and abroad. This essay explores the inherent value of a pan-Canadian human-rights discussion in fostering a shared national ideal, the essential role of conversation and dialogue in giving shape to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights' galleries, exhibits and programs, and the unique role of dialogue in allowing the Museum to fulfill its public mandate to inspire its visitors to help advance the rights of all.

Four decades ago T.H.B. Symons bestowed on Canada a generational landmark; a blueprint designed to better the way the country learned about itself, the scope of its character and the reaches of its ambition.

Canada's places of higher learning were the intended and most immediate beneficiaries of Symons' inquiry, his appraisal of "the state of teaching and research in studies relating to Canada" undertaken to sharpen the tools with which we taught, pondered and debated our nation within our academic institutions.

Yet the larger legacy of Symons' remarkable contribution to Canada, I would argue, is yet to be fully known, because the seeds of his pan-Canadian effort of the early and mid-1970s continue to foment new growth, and much of it beyond the boundaries of Canada's colleges and universities.

As CEO of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), I know this first-hand. Ours is a relatively small staff, headquartered in Winnipeg, Manitoba. And yet we have within our fledgling ranks no fewer than three graduates of Trent University, the small-but-venerable institution, synonymous with Canadian Studies, of which Symons served as founding president and instilled in so many a persistent curiosity to find and unearth the enigmatic machinery that makes this country tick.

That pronounced passion for Canada – its idiosyncrasies, its contradictions, its promise – is the requisite to taking up the considerable and at times daunting challenge of crafting, from the ground up, a museum tasked with untangling a central thread in the story of this country's democratic evolution, and in turn equipping Canadians with the tools to author fresh chapters. We at the CMHR are privileged to have among us staggeringly accomplished graduates of many of Canada's esteemed universities; some the direct descendants of Symons' Trent, but all linked by a profound interest in the successes and stumbles that have come to define this country. The fuller measure of Symons' legacy arguably rests here; the long reach of the debate spawned by his inquiry and numerous recommendations having impacted the way so many of our universities approached the teaching and study of Canada, and the progeny of those institutions now engaged in grand undertakings of their own at places like the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

Indeed, as we will explore here, there are echoes of Symons inherent in both the creation and the aspiration of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Symons was lead architect of a national discussion that sought perspective on Canada through the lens of teaching and scholarship. From 2008 through 2012 the CMHR facilitated a national discussion of its own, engaging some 3,500 Canadians from every region of the country to solicit perspective on Canada through the lens of human rights. It is my own sincere hope that as with Symons, the value of return on our museum's national exercise will continue to reveal itself decades from now. But even today, it has served to establish an infrastructure on which to build, for the first time, a uniquely Canadian museum fully dedicated to the cause of human rights. This "foundation on conversation" defines the very character of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights; it is the summation of the qualities that afford the museum its distinct "Canadianness;" it informs the mechanism by which we develop and program our museum exhibits; and it is the soul of our learning and public programming offerings, which are as essential to our museum's mandate as the exhibits themselves.

There are key differences: most appreciable among them, the seismic shift in the communications landscape in the years since Symons. While there remains no perfect surrogate for the inherent humanness of face-to-face communication, technology has unquestionably brought us closer together. At the very least, it affords us the chance to extend the opportunity for dialogue to more places, to communicate more frequently, and to better negotiate the logistics of orchestrating a national conversation in a country challenged by having "too much geography."

Yet conversation is conversation. The byproducts of dialogue have not changed. When we speak to each other we generate heightened perspective, tolerance for different ideas, and, although not always, and not always all at once, respect, acceptance and understanding. These "dividends of dialogue" are the precursors to the advancement of human rights, and it's for this reason that dialogue is both the objective and guidepost for virtually every aspect of our work.

In the context of creating a national human rights museum, what does this dialogue-driven approach yield? What are its implications for Canada as a nation, or for ourselves as Canadians? Most significantly, what does it

mean for the museum's mandate, which is not merely to foster opportunities to examine rights issues, but to effect genuine change in the lives of others by advancing the cause of human rights both at home and abroad?

THE ANSWERS ARE SEVERAL.

First, much as the outcomes of Symons' investigation allowed us to better know ourselves, the CMHR's national public engagement exercise served to add new texture and detail to the national portrait. Yet our work also proved to be one of excavation and, we hope, over time liberation of stories central to our nation's evolution that have nonetheless been hidden or long ago tucked away in the darker recesses of our past. Among the more salient examples is the long-stifled narrative surrounding Canada's residential schools, the multi-generational impacts of which continue to shape the lives of First Nations and the wider story of our nation in untold ways. The Holodomor, too, was identified as a grievous human failing that had in many ways shaped Canadians, primarily those of Ukrainian heritage who came to Canada to build new lives and took up the task of also helping build what were then the beginnings of contemporary Canada. "Forgotten" stories of resilience and triumph like that of Nova Scotia's Viola Desmond, whose refusal to surrender a seat designated for whites predated Rosa Parks' act of courage by a full decade, were cited as examples of glaring gaps in the nation's understanding of itself. We were reminded, too, that apart from missing pieces in the story of Canada's historical failings to protect the rights of its own citizens, also absent from the national consciousness were the prouder moments that marked Canada's considerable contributions to the world in the field of human rights. John Peters Humphrey, we were reminded, is far from a household name in this country or any other, yet he was the Canadian who penned the inaugural draft of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This national conversation revealed much about how we as Canadians viewed our country. It allowed us to become cognizant of the gaps and exclusions that were most apparent to others, and it will prove, I believe, to allow a much fuller, much more complete picture of Canada to emerge that will contribute to a far more detailed – yet ultimately clearer – view of who and what we are as a nation. We have seen and studied the image in analog; let us now view it in high-definition.

This unprecedented dialogue also served to identify Canadians' expectations for a national museum dedicated to the cause of human rights. We heard many times that the CMHR had an obligation to help fill in the missing chapters of Canada's story. History continues to prove that too many nations forever refuse to acknowledge and confront their human failings. Certainly Canada's own human-rights record is not without blemish. Far from it. Yet our consultations with Canadians highlighted a frequently shared belief that a willingness to confront, apologize for and learn from past failings was also a point of pride; a differentiator many felt was inherently Canadian. Most consequential to the museum's mandate, Canadians were also candid about what they did not want their human rights museum to become. Canadians articulated in the clearest terms the museum's responsibility to deliver a fulsome, unflinching portrait of Canada's achievements and atrocities. But there was no public appetite for a 160,000-square-foot human rights museum entirely dedicated to the past. The lion's share of the museum's work, we were told, must be invested in the future, focused on allowing Canadians to both envision and help build the kind of Canada that would fully reflect Canadians' highest shared ideals.

An inclusive, non-hierarchical approach to dialogue has similarly been embraced by the museum as a formal research tool, reflective of both the organizational values of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, but also essential to preserving the essential "humanness" of the stories the CMHR has been entrusted to tell. Research founded on open dialogue is central to the museum's commitment to decolonize the exercise of research gathering, but it also yields a much richer illustration of the stories that comprise Canada's human-rights evolution. A key tenet of the museum's research effort involves our oral history project, which will not only be an inexhaustible trove of source material for future researchers, but is indispensable to our planned programming and exhibits. Although many of those interviewed for the museum's oral history project were so identified because of their contributions around distinct issues under the broader umbrella of rights, it is never our practice to initiate an interview with specific inquiry about disability rights, or gender rights, or same-sex rights. Instead, we commence the process in the broadest possible terms – we take a life history. Consistently, this serves to uncover a persistent truth: that rights issues are often intertwined and interrelated, even within one person's own life. The

remarkable story of British Columbia's Chris Morrissey is a distinct example. She is most often celebrated for her landmark work around same-sex immigration rights and her work on behalf of gay and lesbian refugees escaping persecution in other nations. But this is a woman of 70 years who has contributed a lifetime of human rights advocacy. Only in capturing, quite literally, the story of her life, do we also now have profound insight into her having grown up as a homosexual person in mid-twentieth century rural Canada, her life as a nun, her romantic relationship with her life partner, who was also a nun, and how the confluence of these experiences was entirely foundational to the refugee work for which she's most widely recognized. This is but one small example among many that illustrates that people are not the product of a single event or experience, but rather are shaped by a host of factors over the course of their lives. The museum's life history approach allows us a far more comprehensive understanding of our participants, underscores their essential humanity and complexity, and ultimately allows us to build a far richer collection of profound national and international value.

Embracing dialogue as the central plank in the CMHR's creation is also central to our effort to deliver an immersive, participatory experience that reflects a fundamental rethinking of the traditional museum visit. This effort begins with the conceptual exhibit design – for example, a cross-Canada advisory council comprised of disability advocates that allows us to ensure universal design and the opportunity for full participation is *built in* to our exhibits via an inclusive, bottom-up process, as opposed to being merely *fit in* later. The outcome of this approach is a museum that is setting new Canadian *and global* standards for universal accessibility. This is a wonderful and rightly proud contribution to the world in Canada's name, and it would have been fully impossible in the absence of the museum's dialogue-first approach. But it goes further, because many of the exhibits themselves embrace this spirit of dialogue. They are more than interactive, they are responsive, both to the actions of the visitor engaging with the exhibit, but in some parts of the museum, to the actions and behaviours of other individuals. The exhibits foster contemplation, then, not simply of subjects and things, but of how our thoughts and actions affect and influence other people, and how theirs in turn affect us. Implicit in the museum experience are all the hallmarks of a great conversation.

Of highest significance, however, is the museum's mandate and responsibility to create the tools, mechanisms and motivation to spur new dialogue; to allow Canadians to shape discussions of their own both within the boundaries of the museum and beyond; to fuel a broadly inclusive narrative about the future of our country where all can contribute toward creating a culture of human rights.

To some extent, we can leverage existing and emerging tools: social media is at once a potent force in dissolving barriers to human rights and also familiar and intuitive to a new generation of Canadian leaders. But we can also work with educators' groups like the Canadian Teachers' Federation to open an interprovincial dialogue around how best to incorporate human rights learning into the curriculum to spur fresh dialogue within our schools. We can leverage technology to bring the conversation happening inside the museum to those in other cities and even other countries. And we can then extend to museum participants, no matter who and where they are, the invitation and the means to bring the fruit of that discussion back to the museum, effectively creating a feedback loop that will continue to take on new shapes, offering a real-time glimpse of the evolving portrait of our nation; a temperature reading providing insight into the tenor and tone of discussion on rights issues over time; and in turn an evolving sense of where we are and where we are going.

As we look back on the tremendous impact of the Symons report in helping us come to better know ourselves, the CMHR in turn commits to preserving and fueling that same quest for civic understanding and discovery, and to continue to make the national conversation ever more representative, more inclusive and more illuminating.

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights is the promise that a national process of inquiry will continue in perpetuity. And we will inspire our fellow citizens to ask questions that, even when we look back at the founding of the CMHR forty, fifty or sixty years on, will remain every bit as fresh, potent and relevant as they are today:

As Canadians, what can we contribute? As a great nation, what kind of country do we wish Canada to be?