DECOLONIZING
LEGISLATIVE PRAYERS

A *House of Prayers*
supplementary report

BC Humanist Association

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DECOLONIZING LEGISLATIVE PRAYERS

A *House of Prayers* supplemental report

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Abstract

Each day the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia opens with a prayer led by a different Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). The BC Humanist Association's *House of Prayers* study investigated this practice, analyzing the 873 prayers delivered between October 6, 2003 and February 12, 2019. This study identified that a number of MLAs included Indigenous language in their prayers and that several prayers delivered by invited guests were recited entirely in an Indigenous language, typically by an Indigenous Elder. This paper analyzes the Indigenous content within prayers delivered in the BC Legislature during this same time period. Overall, a steady increase in Indigenous content in prayers was identified; however, only 6.0% of prayers contained Indigenous content and the vast majority of this content (85.7%) was restricted to the use of a single word. NDP MLAs were significantly more likely to include Indigenous content than Liberal MLAs (11.7% versus 0.2%). This paper concludes by expanding on the recommendation that legislative prayer be replaced with a territorial acknowledgement.

Contents

Introduction

The goal of *House of Prayers* was to create a comprehensive understanding of prayer in the BC Legislature. To this end, prayers delivered in the Legislature from when video recordings were made available, October 6, 2003, to the end of the 3rd Session of the 41st Legislature, February 12, 2019, were examined (N=873). Details of methodology and initial findings are described in that report, which also outlines a number of broad arguments against the practice of starting legislative sessions with prayer.

This paper outlines and discusses the results of quantitative analysis that specifically relates to Indigenous content in legislative prayers. It begins by outlining the ways in which legislative prayer can be viewed as a tool of colonialism before briefly surveying Indigenous participation and inclusion in the BC Legislature. It then details how these prayers were analyzed and discusses the findings of this analysis. Next, we explore one of the recommendations in *House of Prayers*: that the Legislature consider replacing the daily prayer with a territorial acknowledgement in the context of the Government's stated commitment to reconciliation.[1] We conclude by considering the impact on Indigenous content in the Legislature of the amendment to the Standing Orders, such that the daily routine business now begins with 'Prayers and Reflections' rather than simply 'Prayers', that was adopted following the publication of *House of Prayers*.[2]

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[1] Phelps Bondaroff, T, Bushfield, I, Marshall, KE, Prasad, R & Laurence, N. (2019, September). "House of prayers: an analysis of prayers in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2003-2019." *BC Humanist Association*. Retrieved from https://www.bchumanist.ca/house_of_prayers_report, p. 14; and see Sandford, M. (2013). "Traditions and customs of the house: House of Commons background paper." Retrieved from https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/business/prayers/.

[2] Legislative Assembly of British Columbia (2019, November 28). "Official Report of Debates of the Legislative Assembly (Hansard)." 41st Parl, 4th Sess, No 301 at 10870 (Hon M Farnworth); and see MacMinn, EG (2020). *Parliamentary practice in British Columbia* (5th Ed). Government of British Columbia, 97.

Legislative Prayers as a Tool of Colonialism

The final reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) thoroughly document how, dating back to the first arrival of European colonists, Indigenous peoples in Canada have been subject to persistent and deliberate human rights violations. With the arrival of colonialists came concerted efforts to proselytize Christian worldviews, which ran contrary to many Indigenous understandings of the world. As written in the MMIWG report:

Claiming land for European monarchs was also tied to the practice of claiming souls for God. In the case of Christianity, and, in particular, early Catholicism, core beliefs brought to communities by missionaries challenged Indigenous notions of gender and relationships between men, women and gender-diverse people, as well as their leadership, as well as women's leadership within communities. They directly impacted the rights to culture, as well as associated political and social rights as enjoyed by women and gender-diverse people within their communities prior to colonization.[3]

As part of these efforts to proselytize Indigenous peoples, the Government of Canada created the residential school system and granted control of those schools to four major Christian denominations. As the TRC documented:

Christian teachings were a fundamental aspect of residential schools. Aboriginal children were taught to reject the spiritual ways of their parents and ancestors in favour of the religions that predominated among settler societies. As their traditional ways of worshipping the Creator were disparaged and rejected, so too were the children devalued. They were not respected as human beings who were equally loved by the Creator just as they were, as First Nations, Inuit or Métis peoples. Rather, their Christian teachers saw them as inferior humans in need of being

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[3] National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). (2019). "Reclaiming power and place: the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls." Vol 1a. Retrieved from https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a-1.pdf, p 236.

'raised up' through Christianity, and tried to mould them into models of Christianity according to the racist ideals that prevailed at the time. The impact of such treatment was amplified by federal laws and policies that banned traditional Indigenous spiritual practices in the children's home communities for much of the residential school era.[4]

As discussed in *House of Prayers*, the tradition of beginning a legislative debate with a prayer dates back to the English Parliament in 1558 during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. At the time, the Queen was attempting to unify Protestant and Catholic factions in England under the Anglican Church.[5] This included, for example, the 1558 passage of the Act of Uniformity, which required all persons to attend Anglican Church once a week.[6] Enshrining the practice of legislative prayer is thus connected to efforts to propagate a Christian worldview as dominant. This mindset of Christian supremacy informed the colonialist thinking of English and French settlers in the 16th and 17th Centuries and in successive Canadian governments, arguably persisting to today.

Figure 1 - Queen Elizabeth I opening Parliament. (D'Ewes)

The 47th Call to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions report calls upon:

federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous peoples and lands, such as

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[4] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). "Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada." Retrieved from http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf, p. 220.

[5] Phelps Bondaroff *et al.* 2019:14; and see Sandford, M. (2013). "Traditions and customs of the house: House of Commons background paper." Retrieved from https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/business/prayers/.

[6] Neale, JE. (1950, July). "The Elizabethan Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity." *The English Historical Review, 65*(256), 304-332.

the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius, and to reform those laws, government policies and litigation strategies that continue to rely on such concepts.[7]

Given that these colonialist concepts were intricately enmeshed in the creation of the Government of British Columbia and in the development of its legislative practices, repudiating them necessarily entails reforming the practice of legislative prayer.

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[7] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2012). "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: calls to action." Retrieved from http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf, p 5.

Indigenous Exclusion and Participation in the Legislative Assembly of BC

British Columbia has a long history of excluding certain people and groups from its democratic process. In 1874, the province's first government passed *An Act to make better Provisions for the Qualifications and Registration of Voters*, which disenfranchised all 'Indians' and people of Chinese ancestry in the province.[8] It was not until 1949 that Indigenous peoples were finally granted the right to vote and to be elected to the BC Legislature. Inuit were not able to vote federally until 1950, although that franchise rang hollow until 1962 when ballot boxes were finally delivered to remote communities.[9] Until 1960, 'Status Indians' were also unable to vote in federal elections without renouncing their status and rights under the *Indian Act*.[10]

Despite these moves toward enfranchisement, Indigenous participation rates in voting and electoral politics have consistently been lower than that of settler communities.[11] This is partially attributable to a concern among Indigenous communities that participation in colonial democratic systems could be perceived as a legitimization of those systems and a further step toward erosion of traditional rights and title.[12] The discourse has shifted recently, notably in the 2015 federal election, with record participation of Indigenous voters and candidates.[13]

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[8] Elections BC. (2019). "Electoral history of B.C." Retrieved from https://elections.bc.ca/resources/outreach-and-education/electoral-history-of-bc/; and see Leslie, JF. (2019, May). "Indigenous suffrage." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/Indigenous-suffrage

[9] Elections Canada. (2007). "A History of the Vote in Canada." Retrieved from https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=his&document=chap3&lang=e

[10] Leslie 2019.

[11] Ladner, KL. & McCrossan, M. (2007). "The electoral participation of aboriginal people." *Elections Canada*, Working Paper Series on Electoral Participation and Outreach Practices. Retrieved from https://www.elections.ca/res/rec/part/paper/aboriginal/aboriginal_e.pdf.

[12] Ladner *et al.* 2007; and see Dabin, S, Daoust, JF & Papillon, M. (2019, March). "Indigenous peoples and affinity voting in Canada." *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *52*(1), 39-53.

[13] See *inter alia* Leslie 2019; Mike, J (2019, September 24). "Indigenous youth weigh the tough decisions to vote." *The Tyee*. Retrieved from https://thetyee.ca/News/2019/09/24/Indigenous-Youth-Weigh-Tough-Decision-Vote/; Courchene, A. (2019, September 3). "Elections 2019: moving beyond 'to vote or not to vote." *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives/Centre Canadien de Politiques Alternatives*. Retrieved from https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/monitor/election-2019-moving-beyond-%E2%80%9C-vote-or-not-vote%E2%80%9D; Minifie, L. (2015, October 19). "To vote or not: the issue facing Indigenous people." *Ricochet*. Retrieved from https://ricochet.media/en/681/to-vote-or-not-the-issue-facing-Indigenous-people; Deer, J. (2019, September 24). "Why Haudenosaunee

Figure 2 - Frank Calder, MLA. (BC Archives)

The trend toward increasing Indigenous engagement can also be seen inside the BC Legislature. There have only ever been six Indigenous persons elected to the Legislature, with only one elected prior to 2005. Frank Arthur Calder of the Nisga'a Nation was elected in 1949 and was the first Indigenous MLA to be elected to the BC Legislature (or to sit in any legislature in Canada[14]). He served until being defeated in 1979.[15] Marc Dalton, who is Métis, held office from 2009 to 2017.[16] The other four MLAs are current members: the Hon Carole James, who is part Métis (elected 2005); the Hon Melanie Mark, who is of Nisga'a, Gitxsan, Cree and Ojibway ancestry (elected 2016); Adam Olsen, who is a member of the Tsartlip First Nation (elected 2017) and Ellis Ross, who is a member of the Haisla Nation (elected 2017).[17] In addition, Edward John of the Tl'azt'en Nation served as the Minister of Children and Families but was appointed by Premier Ujjal Dosanjh as an unelected cabinet minister from 2000-2001.[18]

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won't be voting in the federal election this October." CBC News. Retrieved from https://www.cbc.ca/news/Indigenous/two-row-wampum-haudenosaunee-voting-election-1.5273605

[14] Louis Riel was twice elected to the House of Commons but expelled both times prior to taking his seat; see Marleau, R & Montpetit, C. (2000). "Expulsion", in *House of Commons Procedure and Practice.* Retrieved from https://www.ourcommons.ca/MarleauMontpetit/DocumentViewer.aspx?DocId=1001&Sec=Ch04

[15] Nisga'a Lisims Government. (nd). "Honouring our past – Dr. Frank Calder." Retrieved from https://www.nisgaanation.ca/news/honouring-our-past-dr-frank-calder; and see McCardle, B. (2018, March). "Frank Calder." *The Canadian Encyclopedia.* Retrieved from https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/frank-calder

[16] Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. (nd). "40th Parliament members at dissolution on April 11, 2017 – Marc Dalton." Retrieved from https://www.leg.bc.ca/learn-about-us/members/40th-Parliament/Dalton-Marc

[17] Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. (nd). "Carole James." Retrieved from https://www.leg.bc.ca/wotv/Pages/Featured-Women/Carole-James.aspx; Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. (nd). "40th Parliament members at dissolution on April 11, 2017 – Melanie Mark." Retrieved from https://www.leg.bc.ca/learn-about-us/members/40th-Parliament/Mark-Melanie; Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. (nd). "MLA: Adam Olsen." Retrieved from https://www.leg.bc.ca/learn-about-us/members/41st-Parliament/Olsen-Adam; and Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. (nd). "MLA: Ellis Ross." Retrieved from https://www.leg.bc.ca/learn-about-us/members/41st-Parliament/Ross-Ellis.

[18] Legislative Library of BC. (2001, June 5). "Dosanjh Cabinet – 36th Parliament (3rd – 5th Session 2000-2001)." Retrieved from http://www.llbc.leg.bc.ca/public/reference/dosanjhcabinet.pdf.

Indigenous Content in Legislative Prayers - Method

In consideration of this background, it is valuable to understand the extent that Indigenous languages and content have been incorporated into prayers delivered in the BC Legislature. In this regard, the content of the 873 prayers delivered in the BC Legislature from October 6, 2003 to February 12, 2019 were analyzed. A detailed and comprehensive description of the methodology employed for all of the coding and analysis can be found in the full *House of Prayers* study.[19] The portions directly relevant to Indigenous content are summarized as follows.

As prayers delivered in the BC Legislature are not transcribed by Hansard, we first had to transcribe prayers from available video recordings (commencing from October 6, 2003). Prayers were transcribed by a team of volunteers with an error rate of 5.7%. As transcribers were not equipped to translate content that was not in English, they were instructed to flag such content and to identify the language where possible.[20] Apart from length and language spoken, the content of any portion of a prayer delivered in a language other than English could not be analyzed. This notably included four prayers that were delivered entirely in an Indigenous language. Two of the videos contained significant sections that were either inaudible or unintelligible and these were excluded from the analysis.

In order to ensure reliable results, prayers were coded by two coders with a third checking for intercoder reliability.[21] Prayers were coded for the following:

- The use of a single word from an Indigenous language.
- The use of a single sentence/expression from an Indigenous language.
- The use of multiple sentences from an Indigenous language.
- The entire prayer was delivered in an Indigenous language.

In addition to identifying use of Indigenous languages, coders also identified prayers that contained Indigenous content delivered in English. Prayers were only coded as containing Indigenous content when they explicitly made reference to or used language typically associated with Indigenous traditions. This included expressions such

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[19] Phelps Bondaroff *et al.* 2019:45.
[20] *Ibid*, p 59.
[21] *Ibid*, p 11.

as 'Great Spirit' or 'all my relations.' A more detailed description of this coding can be found in *House of Prayers*.[22]

It should be noted that two broad varieties of prayers are delivered in the BC Legislature: those delivered by MLAs before regular sittings and those delivered by invited guests prior to a Speech from the Throne. We refer to the latter as 'Throne Prayers.' As a result, it was sometimes necessary to exclude Throne Prayers from analysis pertaining to such elements as party affiliation and those specific to MLAs.

Figure 3 - Elder Shirley Alphonse of the T'Sou-ke Nation delivers prayers before the Speech from the Throne. Sep 8, 2017. (Hansard)

For analytical purposes, quantitative analysis was conducted in the R Language and Environment[23] using the plyr package for data reorganization as required.[24] We used general linear models (ANOVA, ANCOVA and regression) to test for statistical differences among predictors within groups with a continuous response. We examined the distribution of both continuous predictors and responses by generating histograms and natural logarithm transformed these variables to improve normality if necessary. When we tested differences among groups with a binary response, we implemented logistic regression as a generalized linear model with binomial distribution. Alpha was set to 0.05 in all tests; however, for $0.05 < p > 0.10$ we report the effect size and p-value for interpretation of trends. The generated R script showing analysis steps has been made available in Appendix 5 of *House of Prayers*.[25]

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[22] *Ibid,* p 55-56.

[23] R Core Team (2018). "R: a language and environment for statistical computing." *R Foundation for Statistical Computing,* Vienna, Austria. Retrieved from https://www.R-project.org/

[24] Wickham, H. (2011). "The split-apply-combine strategy for data analysis." *Journal of Statistical Software, 40*(1), 1-29.

[25] Phelps Bondaroff *et al.* 2019:112.

Indigenous Content in Legislative Prayers - Results

We found that 42 prayers (4.8%) used a single word from an Indigenous language. These were typically used as declarations of affirmation or ritualized conclusion, in a fashion similar to 'amen' or 'thank you.' Given significant variations in spelling by transcribers, we were unable to generate precise numbers for each term used; however, the most common term used was 'SABAK,' a Gitxsan term employed most often by the MLAs from Stikine and Skeena,[26] followed by 'HÍSWḴE' (SENĆOŦEN) or 'Huy ch q'u' (Hul'q'umi'num'), which is a Salishan (Coast Salish) term for 'thank you.'[27]

Table 1: Use of Indigenous languages in prayers

Content	Number of Prayers	Percentage (N=871)
Single word	42	4.8%
Single sentence	1	0.1%
Multiple sentences	1	0.1%
Entire prayer	5	0.6%

One prayer (0.1%) contained a sentence in an Indigenous language and one prayer (0.1%) included more than one sentence. Five prayers were delivered almost entirely in an Indigenous language and all were Throne Prayers delivered by invited guests. Three of these prayers were delivered by Chief Elmer Seniemten George, an elder of the Songhees Nation.[28] The others were delivered by Syilx Elder Delphine Armstrong and Elder Shirley Aphonse of the T'Sou-ke Nation.[29] In total, 5.6% of all of the prayers delivered in the Legislature contained at least one word from an Indigenous language. It

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[26] See for example prayers delivered by Robin Austin, MLA for Skeena, October 21, 2009; and Doug Donaldson, MLA for Stikine, November 3, 2009. We are grateful to the Doug Donaldson's office for assisting with identifying the language of this word.

[27] See for example First Voices. (nd). "SENĆOŦEN words – HÍSWḴE (thank you)." Retrieved from http://tiny.cc/w8w6bz; School District 79 Aboriginal Education. (nd). "Hul'q'umi'num' greetings." *Cowichan Valley School District 79*. Retrieved from http://abed.sd79.bc.ca/hulqumimum-resourses/hulquminum-greetings/.

[28] See prayers from February 14, 2006; November 21, 2007; and May 11, 2016. The last of which was delivered jointly with Mary-Ann Thomas.

[29] See prayers delivered on March 16, 2016 and September 8, 2017.

should be noted that there were two sentences delivered in languages that could not be identified; these were included in a distinct category.[30]

We examined the effect of party affiliation on the use of Indigenous language in prayers, excluding non-partisan Throne Prayers. BC NDP MLAs were significantly more likely to use Indigenous words, with 11.7% of their prayers containing Indigenous language content compared with 0.2% for BC Liberal MLAs ($X_{1,838}$ = 4.79, p < 0.001; logistic regression). Neither of the two prayers delivered by a BC Green MLA contained Indigenous content and there were no prayers delivered by independent MLAs.

Studying how the use of Indigenous languages varied over time, we found that there has been a steady increase in the proportion of prayers that include Indigenous words ($F_{1,13}$ = 12.0, p = 0.004 for the linear effect of time; Figure 4), although overall use, particularly by Liberal MLAs, remains relatively limited.
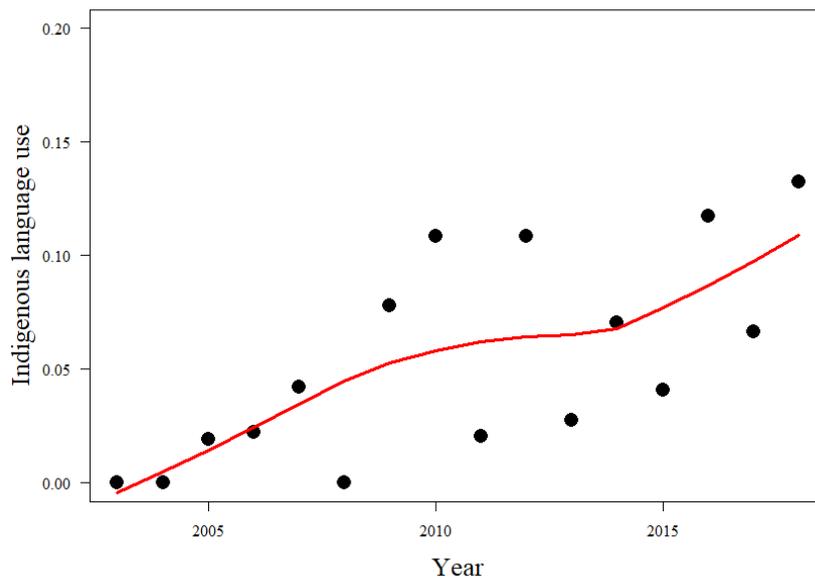
Figure 4 - The proportion of prayers in each legislative session that includes at least one word of an Indigenous language over time. Line represents a locally-weighted regression.

In order to gain a better understanding of the degree to which not just language but Indigenous content more broadly is being incorporated into prayers in the BC Legislature, the use of Indigenous languages (49) can be combined with those prayers coded as containing Indigenous concepts delivered in English (3). When this was done, a total of 52 prayers (6.0%) included Indigenous content.

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[30] Phelps Bondaroff *et al.* 2019:59.

Of the 35 Throne Prayers in the dataset, eight (23%) contained Indigenous content; half of these were delivered entirely in an Indigenous language. Six of those eight prayers were delivered since 2014, with one of these prayers being delivered by a guest who was not Indigenous.[31] Two prayers were also delivered in both an Indigenous language and English.[32]

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[31] See prayer from March 3, 2014 delivered by the Reverend Margaret Cornish.
[32] See prayers from May 10, 2016 and September 8, 2017.

Discussion

During this time of reconciliation, it was positive to observe a steady increase in the use of Indigenous languages in the BC Legislature; however, there are several caveats that must be applied. First, the usage of Indigenous languages was not evenly distributed between the parties. NDP MLAs were far more likely to use Indigenous languages in their prayers. Even then, of the 49 prayers containing Indigenous languages delivered by NDP MLAs, 85.7% employed a single word and two MLAs delivered the majority of these.[33] The four prayers delivered almost entirely in an Indigenous language were all Throne Prayers presented by invited guests.

It is worth noting that all of the Indigenous content delivered by MLAs was delivered by members who are not themselves Indigenous. As previously discussed, since the enfranchisement of Indigenous peoples in BC in 1949, there have only been six MLAs elected who have Indigenous heritage. One of those MLAs, Frank Arthur Calder, was elected and served before our data set. Notably, Calder is said to have addressed the House in the Nisga'a language in 1952.[34] We are unable to confirm whether this usage was during prayers or debates as transcriptions of debates only date back to 1970.[35] Of the other five MLAs, only Marc Dalton delivered a prayer during the time frame covered by the study. During his two terms as an MLA, he delivered ten prayers, all of which were coded as 'religious.' Nine of Dalton's prayers began with either "Lord God" or "Heavenly Father," while the other prayer was a reading from Psalms. Seven of Dalton's ten prayers were identified as explicitly Christian. None of his prayers included Indigenous language or content.

Unfortunately, the small number of Indigenous MLAs elected in British Columbia and included in the dataset means we are limited in our analysis. Individual circumstances or the unwritten practices surrounding the selection of who delivers the prayers could explain the absence of most of these MLAs. For example, the longest serving of these MLAs, the Hon Carole James, served as leader of her party from 2003 until 2011. One curious fact that arises from the dataset is that no sitting or former party

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[33] Robin Austin, MLA for Skeena; and Doug Donaldson, MLA for Stikine.
[34] Nisga'a Lisims Government. (nd). "Honouring our past – Dr. Frank Calder." Retrieved from https://www.nisgaanation.ca/news/honouring-our-past-dr-frank-calder
[35] Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. (nd). "Hansard Services." Retrieved from https://www.leg.bc.ca/learn-about-us/hansard-services

leader has delivered a prayer in the Legislature. The Hon Adrian Dix delivered one prayer in March 2006 and Andrew Weaver delivered two in October 2015, but each of those prayers was delivered prior to these individuals becoming leader of their respective party. While we are aware of no formal rule that precludes current or former party leaders from delivering the prayer, this seems to be a general convention and James' absence in the dataset is consistent with the behaviour of other party leaders.

Indigenous content was more prevalent during Throne Prayers than those delivered by MLAs, likely due in part to the number of Indigenous Elders invited explicitly to provide the prayer. The invitation to deliver the prayer prior to the Speech from the Throne is facilitated by the Speaker's Office, often in consultation with the Premier's Office.[36] It is clear that it has required the commitment of successive governments to ensure Indigenous content is delivered in the Legislature, as demonstrated by the governments led by Christy Clark and the Hon John Horgan.

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[36] Bueckert, C, Hill, R, Parisotto, M & Roberts, M. (2017). "Religion, faith and spirituality in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia." *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, (spring), 25-29.

Decolonizing the BC Legislature

House of Prayers concludes that the status quo, where sittings of the BC Legislature open with a prayer, is no longer tenable in a diverse province (if it ever was). The practice discriminates against non-believers and members of non-Christian faith traditions and by so doing violates the state's duty of religious neutrality. The practice fails to promote diversity. Instead, it favours one faith tradition over others and religious beliefs over irreligious beliefs. Fewer and fewer MLAs are delivering prayers in the Legislature and those prayers are increasingly religious. In order to make the BC Legislature a more inclusive chamber, one where all British Columbians feel welcome, the practice of beginning sittings with a prayer should be abolished.

To this end, *House of Prayers* recommends a number of alternatives; prominent among these is replacing legislative prayer with an Indigenous territorial land acknowledgement. The procedures, protocols and details surrounding this practice should be developed in close consultation with Indigenous stakeholders. This latter requirement is critical to ensure that the practice represents the diversity of Indigenous peoples across the province and that the practice forms a meaningful part of reconciliation, rather than lapsing into perfunctory routine.

Our analysis has revealed a gradual increase in the proportion of prayers with Indigenous content in the BC Legislature. However, relying on the prayers and reflections portion of a sitting to acknowledge this important relationship is unreliable, will necessarily exclude many Indigenous peoples and will not impart sufficient emphasis on the importance of reconciliation.

The vast majority of the Indigenous content included in prayers constituted a single word and the most common of these (the Gitxsan word 'SABAK') was delivered by the two MLAs for Stikine and Skeena.[37] The Government of BC notes that "[t]here are 198 distinct First Nations in BC, each with their own unique traditions and history" and elaborates that "[m]ore than 30 different First Nation languages and close to 60 dialects are spoken in the province."[38] The fact that the use of Indigenous content in prayers is

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[37] Delivered at the conclusion of various prayers by Doug Donaldson, MLA for Stikine and by Robin Austin, MLA for Skeena.

[38] Government of British Columbia. (2019). "BC First Nations & Indigenous people." Retrieved from https://www.welcomebc.ca/Choose-B-C/Explore-British-Columbia/B-C-First-Nations-

intermittent at best and that two MLAs delivered most of that content indicates that MLAs cannot be relied upon to include this content in their prayers and reflections going forward. Continuing to hope that MLAs will remember to incorporate Indigenous content into their prayers and reflections ensures that many Indigenous communities and traditions will continue to go unacknowledged. Furthermore, this reinforces colonialist practices of the governments endorsing some Indigenous peoples, Nations and/or traditions over others.

The current practice of sporadic incorporation of the rare Indigenous word or references into a prayer does not give Indigenous peoples and their intimate relationship with the lands of BC the prominence they deserve. This paltry amount of content is in no way a substantive or meaningful move towards reconciliation, nor does it address the need for a meaningful territorial acknowledgement. The BC Legislature starting without a territorial acknowledgement is a serious omission. Such an acknowledgement should, at the very least, warrant its own place in the Standing Orders. Ultimately, the procedures, protocols and details surrounding any acknowledgements delivered in the BC Legislature must be developed by Indigenous peoples.

Several MLAs that we approached over the issue of prayers in the Legislature mentioned a desire to see the practice replaced with a territorial acknowledgement.[39] Adopting such a practice is consistent with the Government's commitment to reconciliation.[40] As a result, the Government and all BC MLAs could follow through on this commitment by developing protocols and procedures in close consultation with Indigenous stakeholders.

Indigenous-People; and see Dunlop, B, Gessner, S, Herbert, T, & Parker, A. (2018). "Report on the status of BC First Nations languages." 3rd Ed. *First People's Cultural Council*. Retrieved from http://www.fpcc.ca/files/PDF/FPCC-LanguageReport-180716-WEB.pdf.

[39] See for example Sonia Furstenau, MLA for Cowichan Valley, correspondence with authors.

[40] British Columbia New Democratic Party (NDP). (2017). "Working for you. Our commitments to build a better BC - 2017 BC NDP platform." Retrieved from https://action.bcndp.ca/page/-/bcndp/docs/BC-NDP-Platform-2017.pdf, p.82-85; and see for example First Nations Summit *et al.* (nd). "Joint agenda: implementing the commitment document – shared vision, guiding principles, goals and objective." Retrieved from https://news.gov.bc.ca/files/BC_FNLC_Vision.pdf; and see First Nations Summit *et al.* (nd). "Joint agenda: implementing the commitment document – concrete actions: transforming laws, policies, processes and structures." Retrieved from https://news.gov.bc.ca/files/BC_FNLC_Actions.pdf.

Figure 5 - Deputy Speaker Spencer Chandra Herbert delivers a territorial acknowledgement prior to "prayers and reflections" on March 23, 2020. (Hansard)

Following the publication of *House of Prayers*, MLAs voted unanimously to amend the Standing Orders so that the daily routine business now begins with 'Prayers and Reflections' rather than simply Prayers.[41] At the time of writing, it remains unclear what this change will mean for the content of MLAs prayers. Notably, March 23, 2020 was the first sitting that the authors are aware of that a sitting was opened with a territorial acknowledgement, aside from a Throne Prayer.[42] With a minimal number of MLAs present in the chamber due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Deputy Chair of the Committee of the Whole, Spencer Chandra Herbert, filled in as speaker. He began the sitting with:

> Thank you, honourable Members. I just want to, first off, acknowledge we're on the official territories of the Lək̓ʷəŋin̓əŋ-speaking people and thank them for having us here on their territories.[43]

It is unclear whether this represents a change in practice or was a single occurrence, though the latter is far more likely. If such an acknowledgement becomes a regular occurrence, the content and protocols surrounding it should be developed in consultation with Indigenous stakeholders.

Despite this lone instance, the fundamental arguments against legislative prayers included in *House of Prayers* continue to apply. In terms of Indigenous content within the nominally broadened 'prayers and reflections', existing Indigenous rituals that are used to begin formal meetings may be more easily be incorporated by Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) MLAs as a 'reflection.' However, not all Indigenous practices may necessarily be compatible with the format provided by 'Prayers and Reflections' - namely that one individual MLA delivers a brief statement. For example, the Nisga'a begin

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[41] Legislative Assembly of British Columbia (2019, November 28). "Official Report of Debates of the Legislative Assembly (Hansard)." 41st Parl, 4th Sess, No 301 at 10870 (Hon M Farnworth).
[42] Legislative Assembly of British Columbia (2020, March 23). "Official Report of Debates of the Legislative Assembly (Hansard)." 41st Parl, 5th Sess, No 326 at 11635 (Deputy Speaker).
[43] *Ibid.*

meetings with the ceremonial presentation of G̲anim Siwilye'enskw or talking stick by the outgoing chair to the newly elected chair.[44] Similarly, a traditional Snuneymuxw 'Welcoming Dance,'[45] a Coast Salish 'Welcome Song'[46] or a Lekwungen 'Paddle Welcome Song,'[47] among other myriad practices, could be used to open a meeting or welcome people to traditional territories.

Attempting to shoehorn such a ceremony into the time allocated for 'Prayers and Reflections' is untenable and potentially disrespectful to that practice. Nor can MLAs necessarily be relied upon to deliver content deemed appropriate by Indigenous stakeholders. To truly decolonize the Legislature, new practices are necessary.

[44] Nisga'a Lisims Government. (2008, November). "NLG newsletter: Sayt-K'ilim-Goot, one heart, one path, one nation." Retrieved from http://nnkn.ca/files/Dec_1_2008_Newsletter.pdf.

[45] CHLY 101.7FM. (2012, April 30). "Traditional Welcoming Dance performed by the Snuneymuxw Dance Group." Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSVtUxdo9tQ

[46] Indigenous Tourism BC. (2014, July 11). "Coast Salish Welcome Song." Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp3m7DFUSWc

[47] Songhees Nation. (2015, June 21). "Lekwungen Traditional Dancers perform Paddle Welcome song." Retrieved from https://www.songheesnation.ca/news/lekwungen-traditional-dancers-perform-paddle-welcome-song

A note on terminology

In writing this document, we have made our best efforts to use terminology in line with journalistic best practices and to identify the preferred spellings of Indigenous words and phrases.[48]

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[48] Journalists for Human Rights. (December 2017). "Style guide for reporting on Indigenous People." Retrieved from https://www.jhr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/JHR2017-Style-Book-Indigenous-People.pdf

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