

A Status Quo that Hurts us All

Canadians need to learn more about Aboriginals – and the country must fix a marginalization process that flies in the face of diversification acceptance in Canada’s mainstream society, writes a new PEGG columnist.

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In survey after survey, Canadians concede they know almost nothing about the history, circumstances, issues and challenges facing Aboriginal people in Canada. This lack of understanding between cultures in a country that prides itself on being so supportive of diversification has led to ignorance, stereotyping and outright racism.

Isolation, separation, segregation and marginalization of Aboriginal people by geography, law, legislation and policy combine as an ongoing and ineffective process that must end, and it must end soon. It’s my sincere hope that this article and the others I’m writing for *The PEGG* will play a role in changing a status quo that hurts us all.

The terms Aboriginal, Native and Indigenous refer to the same overall group of people. Many Canadians lump this diverse group together under the name “Indian.”

That’s not accurate. I, for example, am an Aboriginal person – but I am not an Indian. This mistake in terminology is only one example of a strong need for much more Aboriginal education.

It should be understood that the term Indian is only truly accurate when it refers to people from India – not to Canada’s founding peoples. Imagine what the Indigenous people of the Americas would be called if Christopher Columbus had been looking for Turkey rather than India.

Still, the terminology is so ingrained in Canadian law and culture that I need it to describe the different groups of Aboriginals in Canada. There are three such groups: Indians (now First Nations People), Métis and Inuit.

Most of the 46,000 Inuit live north of the tree line in Canada’s Arctic, and make up the majority of the residents of Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik and Labrador. Of the 350,000 Métis in Canada, most are located in the four western provinces and have representation in every part of Canada.

There are three categories of Indian – status, Bill C-31 and non-status. Status Indians are registered in the Indian Registry, which is maintained by the federal government’s Indian and Northern Affairs Department. These status Indians are the only Aboriginal group made up of members of “Indian bands” or tribes. And they are the only Aboriginal group of people in Canada referred to as First Nations.

Status Indians, as a whole, are governed by antiquated, race-based legislation called the Indian Act.

The 640 separate First Nations in Canada are governed individually by elected chiefs and councillors. The Assembly of First Nations, an umbrella group whose leader is Grand Chief Phil Fontaine, represents First Nations nationally.

There are 635,000 registered status Indians in Canada, although since 1985 an additional 115,000 names have been added to this number as a result of Bill C-31. This federal statute allowed those Aboriginal people who had lost their status, Aboriginal and treaty rights and benefits to make application to become “Indian” again.

However, these new registered Indians received a reduced bundle of benefits than their status counterparts do, and since their creation by the federal government they are quickly becoming an endangered species. Most of them will all but disappear in a short time frame of two generations, due to limits imposed by Ottawa.

Of the First Nations people, 60 per cent live off-reserve and the migration to urban centres continues at a torrid pace. Why is this so? Many First Nations people are simply trying to break free of the yoke of the repressive and controlling Indian Act.

A mere 50 per cent of the First Nation populations are actually treaty Indians. Whether or not a status Indian is treaty is determined by where his or her home reserve is located, not by whether he or she is on- or off-reserve.

There are only a few treaty areas in B.C. and none in the Yukon. Treaty 11, signed in 1921 in the Northwest Territories, was never implemented. There are no historical numbered treaties in Quebec or Labrador.

The Indian Act is clearly out of step with the modern realities of the Canadian legal system. It singles out First Nations people, and gives control of their lives and communities to the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs and other government officials. First Nations women living on-reserve do not have even basic property rights, because of the Indian Act imposed upon them.

Many First Nations people wish the act would be abolished, because it violates normal standards of equality and freedom. It has been referred to as an “apartheid law” that has led us to a national social disaster – and encourages an us versus them mentality.

Fifty per cent of First Nations people are under 23 and many young people leave the reserve looking for better living conditions, health services, education and employment. They want to leave behind much destitution, crime, poverty and despair that exists there. Unfortunately, they are also leaving their family members, their elders, their languages and their cultural roots.

In urban centres such as Edmonton, Winnipeg and Calgary, about 20 per cent of the homeless are Aboriginal people. They have made a decision to find opportunities, including higher education facilities, housing, employment and better access to medical services, to name a few. Much of this has to do with the physical isolation and lack of opportunities in their largely remote and impoverished communities.

Since 1995, the federal government has spent \$100 billion of Canadian taxpayers' money on roughly half of the Aboriginal population. This money comes from 33 federal departments, plus Indian and Northern Affairs, and there is no measurable indicator that circumstances and quality of life for Aboriginals have improved.

Many First Nations leaders I have spoken with have said that they only receive 20 per cent of this money, yet an Indian Affairs official recently told me – with some pride, I might add – that federal government gives 82 per cent of the allotted funding to First Nation governments and various institutions with another nine per cent going to provincial governments. (See First Nations Agenda and Budget Submission at www.afn.com)

Why as Canadians can we not get a satisfactory explanation of this disturbing difference, especially when so many billions of dollars are being spent each year with so few if any measurable benefits and outcomes?

All measurable indicators, in fact, clearly show a continuing decline in the quality of life for most of the Aboriginal people and their communities.

One exception is the number of Aboriginal post-secondary graduates, which has increased from about 800 in 1976 to well over 150,000 in total up to 2006. This year there are 50,000 Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions, with about 3,500 graduating annually. As well, the number of Aboriginal-owned and operated businesses has increased significantly over the past 10 years to more than 40,000 and there are more aboriginal people employed.

That is the good news.

Remember, every time someone leaves the reserve, the cost and obligation of the federal government for each individual is greatly reduced. What would motivate the federal government to make things better on reserves? Many Aboriginal leaders tell me the on-reserve population is continuing to grow despite the number of people leaving.

We really should be asking where the money is going and for what purpose. The Canadian public – including the Auditor General of Canada – cannot gain access to First Nations financial records. Canadians must demand an explanation.

The deteriorating circumstances include grinding poverty, tainted water not suitable for drinking or bathing in more than 190 communities at any given time, a major housing

crisis, loss of language, extreme crime rates, rampant health epidemics, and youth suicide rates eight times the national average.

For Inuit youth, living in the remote and rugged Arctic, the suicide rate is 40 times the national rate.

It's incomprehensible that are we not asking – no, demanding – that our governments deliver action rather than words. Ultimately, Canadians must realize that the Aboriginal community is a major stakeholder in the social and economic well-being of our nation's future.

But only by working together can Canadians as a whole strive to find a common ground through understanding, and create a nation that respects and cares for all of its citizens, no matter what culture, race or heritage. We must let our elected representatives know that we are not indifferent.

Robert Laboucane, president of the Calgary-based Aboriginal awareness company RippleFx (www.ripplefx.ca), works with companies and organizations across Canada including local, provincial and federal government departments, small businesses and major corporations. He's a new regular contributor on Aboriginal issues, so watch for more of his articles in coming editions.

Another article on this page expands on Mr. Laboucane's credentials.