

## **Why Such Resistance?**

Government policy and the Indian Act do not serve Canada, and actually harm Aboriginal people and their communities, writes our Aboriginal awareness columnist. It is no wonder, he says, that Aboriginals turn to the courts and confrontation to be heard

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Prior to European contact, Aboriginal societies had strong social, spiritual and government systems. Once white settlers had established their own power base in Canada, Aboriginal people began to experience physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual abuse from colonialism — an example of one race of people exercising power and control over another based on the “right of discovery.”

It is unfortunate that many Canadians believe that the Aboriginal people were conquered when in fact no such thing happened.

This is basically the same story we have heard for hundreds of years. Canadians continue to pay for this today to the tune of billions of dollars annually. Because Aboriginal people were never conquered, these payments are simply a form of perpetual rent, with the landlord continually raising the rent and the tenant — or newcomers, if you like — continually short-changing the landlord.

With the tenants in control of the money and the law, the landlord is powerless to collect the rent owed. This is a far departure from the tenant agreements both parties agreed to hundreds of years ago.

You know these agreements as treaties.

## **Habitual Confrontation**

The status quo of confrontation is alive and well. The process of battle is habitual and continues to be supported by race-based, specific legislation and policies, as well as distorted perceptions and negative attitudes such as those reflected when I hear when bureaucrats say, “Why must we continue to fund our enemies?”

The governmental, bureaucratic position is just one side of the story, however. The national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, the umbrella group representing Canada’s 633 First Nations, offers a different perspective.

“We must implement the Supreme Court of Canada’s recommendations related to reconciliation, education, new government structures and respectful negotiations — the peaceful, constructive strategy of meaningful consultation and engagement of our people,” says Chief Phil Fontaine.

I can’t help but feel that there is an obvious disconnect between these two groups — the Assembly of First Nations and the Government of Canada. They have obviously developed a true dislike for each other. Yet it is we Canadians who are paying an unacceptable ticket price to watch a never-ending game, and it’s a game that only produces tragic results.

Tragic is no understatement. The results include Aboriginal community and family dysfunction, violence, incarceration, individual trauma and lost identity, billions of wasted dollars, horrific poverty and despair.

Government employees and our politicians — who can never brag about any sustainable, measurable successes in this area, which are different from temp-orary, quick-fix, get-me-out-of-trouble programs — pronounce: “What is wrong with those people? We try and try to help them out and nothing ever seems to work.”

Yet when you ask them how many Aboriginal people are involved in policy development, they say there are none. Why not? “Because there are no qualified Aboriginal people to tell us how our policies should be designed,” government types claim.

### **Doesn’t Work, Hasn’t Been Fixed**

They may as well add: “The fact we can’t recall any policies passed in the past 10 years that have had any measurably positive results should not deter us from pressing on.”

The stereotyped image of the “Indian” — the noble savage, really — has instilled in many Aboriginals a deep pain, anger and fear about their identity. How are Aboriginals to get to the point of feeling good about themselves, their community, their history, their cultures? Many, many of these people, after all, are victims of ridicule, humiliation and isolation.

The lack of information and knowledge by their fellow Canadians is the main cause of the hurtful acts of ignorance. Many Aboriginal people truly believe that Canadians know what their government is doing to the Aboriginal people on their behalf.

Sadly, this is another misconception. I can absolutely guarantee that Canadians do not know what the government is doing to the Aboriginal people of this country on taxpayers’ behalf.

Maintaining this status quo seems critical to many people. But why? Corporate Canada does not find comfort in an environment of confrontation, yet our government seems to insist on it.

Aggressive disruption seems to be the one thing industry and government both bear the brunt of, when it comes to the Aboriginal situation in Canada. The public feels it. The media thrive on it.

### **Shouting Louder**

Put simply, aggressive actions from the Aboriginal point of view are survivalist behaviour. As we see far too often, Aboriginal communities are going to court or using direct action, such as blockades, boycotts and adverse publicity, to gain the attention of governments and the public.

This is, of course, human nature. When an oppressed group is not heard, it must simply speak louder. Shout, even. Take action to get the public's attention.

And this is what we see today.

Canada's public policy on Aboriginal affairs requires a major shake-up and it seems to have arrived — but not in a desirable form. I don't think Canadians are going to like the look of this, but every other method seems to have been exhausted.

Funding caps of two per cent per year for the past 10 years on First Nations programs and services have made impoverished conditions much worse, especially when you consider that all other budgets have grown by an average of 3.4 per cent per year. Yet all this in the face of the fastest growing population group in the country. Why?

"This is discrimination, and it's racist," says Chief Fontaine. "We are being held hostage and many First Nations people feel they are second-class citizens in this country, our homeland. We have been denied the right to our land and traditional territories. We want to be as others, independent, making a contribution to society, and stand as equals."

Adds First Nations Chief Ovide Mercredi, a former leader of the Assembly of First Nations: "The shameful federal inaction and dispossession continues. It is having a huge and deadly cost in Aboriginal poverty, morbidity and mortality in the hundreds of communities right across this wealthy land. Canada will continue on this course at the peril of its honour, self-respect, decency and social peace."

Our current laws, policies and institutions appear to be designed to keep Aboriginal people in their place; poor, oppressed, marginalized and isolated. Why are registered Status Indians (Canadian citizens) exempt, under the Indian Act, from protections under the Canadian Human Rights Act?

Think about it. This degrading legislation and mindset should have been done away with many decades ago. The fact it is still in effect diminishes Canadians in the eyes of the international community and most certainly is a national disgrace.

Why would Canadians allow this to continue? Do you think Aboriginal anger is justified?

With the tense circumstances and anticipated public service disruptions, every Canadian must be wondering what our governments are doing to the Aboriginal people on their behalf.

The plight of Canada's poverty-stricken reserves is well known by groups such as the United Nations and Save the Children, organizations that this year once again called for humanitarian assistance to meet the basic needs of these Aboriginal people.

### **Record Abroad, Record at Home**

Canada purports to champion human rights elsewhere in the world and condemns those who violate international human rights standards, but Aboriginal people in Canada have had to resort to judicial processes for the recognition and implementation of their rights.

Canada was also one of only four countries as members of the Human Rights Council to vote against the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Aboriginal Peoples on June 29, last year.

The U.S., Australia and New Zealand were the only other countries to veto the declaration while another 143 did sign the agreement. Why?

This year in Canada, a National Day of Protest was held June 29 by Aboriginal people to raise awareness of their plight. It is the same day that Canada rejected the UN declaration last year. It doesn't take rocket science to make the connection.

"I have always said that I would rather negotiate than litigate or demonstrate," notes Chief Fontaine. "If this (civil disobedience) is the only way to bring attention and action to the situation, so be it."

Many Canadians wait with bated breath for a time when our government will have a change of heart and attitude. Remember, Canada's citizens need to ask questions and demand answers.

In the meantime, I wonder what's next in this sorry saga.

Not all the news is bad. Next month I will write about a much more positive development — corporate Canada's efforts to change the status quo by building respectful, inclusive relationships with their new Aboriginal partners.