

Modern Racism in Canada

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There are few topics that are more important for the well-being of our nation than public policy issues around racism, and its antidote, equality. There *is* a lot of sensitivity around the subject of racism. For a person or party to be *called* racist in Canada today, is considered a serious slur (my lawyers will attest to that!). Many do not want to admit that it even exists, in fact many people say “surely Phil Fontaine, as National Chief, *you* cannot possibly experience racism.” But I quote Sammy Davis Jr., who once said, “Being a star has made it possible for me to get insulted in places where the *average* Blackman could never *hope* to get insulted.” I may not be a “star” like Sammy Davis Jr., but I still like the line.

Racism, among other things, is a contest over meanings. Canada’s cherished image as a tolerant society leads even progressive Canadians to the view that racism means only *overt* acts by some nasty individuals against other individuals. I do not see it that way. *No* Aboriginal person in Canada sees it that way. What we see, experience, and understand on a daily basis, is racism interwoven in the very fabric of the social system in Canada.

In this paper I will discuss both overt and covert racism. I will describe what racism is, what racism looks like from *our* perspective, and then its impacts. I will seek to identify the barriers to solutions for racism and finally, will describe our vision of what is required to achieve the future equality of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

What is Racism?

A definition of racism is, “an attribution of inferiority to a particular racial group and the use of the principle to propagate and justify the unequal treatment of this group.” It can be based on the notion of biological inferiority, or may attribute inferiority to cultural deficiency, social inadequacy and technological underdevelopment. Racism can be institutional, systemic, and individual; and it can be directly or indirectly inflicted. But when we talk of racism, it is important to go beyond definitions and attempt to understand its complexities. There are many different types of racism, implemented in many different ways, used to accomplish many different racist goals.

Racism is generally categorized into three types: (i) individual, direct racism — when individuals expressly espouse racist views as part of a personal credo; (ii) subconscious, indirect, or unintentional racism — when individuals hold negative attitudes toward racial minorities based on stereotypical assumptions, fear, and ignorance; and (iii) institutional or systemic racism — when institutions such as government agencies, businesses, and organizations that are responsible for maintaining public policy, health care, education, housing, social, and commercial services and other frameworks of society, functioning in such a way as to limit rights or opportunities on the basis of race. Institutional racism can be both direct and indirect.

A 1989 report entitled *Eliminating Racial Discrimination in Canada* describes the extent to which *individual* racism is deeply embedded in the Canadian culture. The report states that between 12 and 16 percent of Canadians admitted to strong intolerance based on race; and 94 percent of job-agency recruiters surveyed indicated that they had rejected job seekers based on race. The report also showed that 31 of 73 Toronto landlords questioned discriminated on the basis of race.

The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba captured the experience of *systemic* and *institutionalized* racism for Aboriginal people in its summary. Their report spoke of policing that is at times unresponsive and at others overzealous, intensive, and often abusive. It recorded a system of laws and courts that ignores significant cultural factors and subjects them to incomprehensible proceedings and inordinate

delays in the dissipation of cases. The report called the penal system harsh and unproductive, and spoke of parole procedures that often caused delays in releasing parolees. The inquiry talked about child welfare and youth justice systems that isolate young people from their families and their communities. It spoke too, of historical wrongs, of betrayals and injustice, and of a vision for restoring social harmony to their communities.

A popular fallacy is that racism is irrational. It is not. Particularly in politics, racism and prejudice are always founded on seemingly rational, strategic arguments, designed to appeal to “common sense” and so-called logical thinking. This approach has major consequences. It makes the specific prejudices upon which the arguments are founded seem acceptable. It could be said that racism is the idea and discrimination the practice. But there are other ways to practise racism. In addition to overt discriminatory treatment, and covert discriminatory treatment, the tools of the racist include the use of violence and genocide, racial hate messages, and threats and denial. The choice of tool often varies with the class, position, or power of the oppressor. Lower- and middle-class members of the dominate group might use violence against racial minorities, while upper-middle-class members of the dominate group might resort to denial, in their righteous indignation against “diversity” and “reverse discrimination.” Institutions — government bodies, schools, and corporations — perpetuate racism through a variety of overt and covert means. But whatever the means, all forms of racism inflict wounds, wounds that are neither random nor isolated, wounds that can be fatal. Regardless of whether we are talking gutter racism, parlour racism, corporate racism, or government racism, they all work in concert, reinforcing and perpetuating existing conditions of inequality.

Today, modern racism, as an *ideology*, is for the most part a *covert* operation. In fact, its central and most distinguishing characteristic, as compared to traditional racism, is the vigour with which it is consistently denied. An example, writ large, is the front cover of the February edition of the *Alberta Report* magazine. In its response to the federal government’s apology for the abuse of Aboriginal children in residential schools, the magazine ran a cover page with a photograph of smiling Aboriginal children at a residential school. The title

emblazoned across the top of the cover was “The Holocaust that Never Happened.” To make such a cruel assertion in the face of survivors of residential schools in western Canada shows how strong the motivation to deny racism is. The *Alberta Report*, and those for whom it speaks, know that denial is the central feature critical to the way in which modern racism works. That is to say, if you deny that racism exists, you do not have to take responsibility for it. More importantly, if you deny racism exists, any attempt to correct it can be categorized as discrimination and the creation of “special rights” for the minority group. Using the terminology of “special rights” to describe legal protection of vulnerable groups denies the fact that racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination exist. Even a superficial understanding of the history and current realities of discrimination in Canada reveals that such “special rights” talk is little more than the ignorance of privilege and the privilege of ignorance. It is no accident that the hot racial issues in equality today is “reverse discrimination” — challenges to affirmative action plans, based on claims by white people that they are victims of racism.

Another technique of denial is to call racism by another name. The media are very good at this. The presence of racism is often ignored or covered up with euphemisms such as “disadvantaged” or “underprivileged.” This status is then subtly, or even not subtly, linked to stereotypes which portray us as people who either *have* problems or *cause* problems. We are pictured as too lazy to work, failures in school, and prone to substance abuse and crime. We are portrayed as less bright, less civilized, less sensitive, less human. Is it any wonder our people are treated in ways that are less friendly and less human than the ways others are treated? Such portrayals justify oppression in the minds of racists and eggs them on.

The *Winnipeg Sun* is a case in point. For several months, the paper ran an ad for “Crime Stoppers” using a photograph of two Aboriginal teenagers being frisked by police officers. The effect of the photograph and ad was to reinforce in the minds of readers the stereotype that all Aboriginal youth are delinquents. The *Calgary Herald* provides another example. For almost a year, the *Herald* has repeatedly printed sensational front-page headlines about alleged financial mismanagement by the administration of the Stoney Reserve. At the same

time, many more egregious cases of mismanagement of much larger amounts of taxpayers' money by the provincial government causes little comment. Two things are happening here. First, the disproportionate coverage minimizing the fault of the white government and maximizing the fault of the Aboriginal government effectively maintains white superiority and Aboriginal inferiority. Second, sensational coverage over such a long period of time cannot help but create the false impression that a crisis exists, and that all Aboriginal people must be incapable of running their own affairs. Another current example is the New Brunswick furor over the harvesting of trees on Crown land. There was not much public outrage about forestry management practices in the province until a court ruled that Aboriginal people had harvesting rights on Crown lands. Now that Aboriginal people are involved, it seems that everyone has conservation concerns.

The use of negative stereotypes combined with denial of racism creates a perfect "Catch-22" situation for native people. It says *our inferiority* is systemic, but *discrimination* against us is not. Another high-profile example of creative denial was demonstrated in the Anita Hill case in the United States. The Senate committee called all the *other* women in Clarence Thomas' office to testify that Clarence Thomas did not sexually harass *them*, thus concluding that he could not have sexually harassed Anita Hill. This technique of denying discrimination through assumption of sameness of treatment is reminiscent of a comment a particularly astute judge made in a dog-barking case. It seems the judge was asked to enforce a local by-law about dogs barking. The defendant attempted to introduce an audio tape containing complete silence into evidence to disprove the allegations. The judge disallowed the tape, saying that "it could be anybody's dog not barking"!

Another way to make racism disappear is to "culturalize" it. To make this work, racism must be characterized as a phenomenon having more to do with ethnicity and culture than with domination and discrimination. Examples of this can be found in some well-meaning but misguided "culturally sensitive" interpretations of racist practices in the administration of justice, such as trying to explain the overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in jail. These analyses have concluded that cultural differences affecting demeanour in the

courtroom explain why youths are unnecessarily criminalized and labelled as unreliable, remorseless, and uncooperative. This interpretation is based on the understanding that police, lawyers, and judges administering justice on reserves, more often than not, come from cultural, social, and economic backgrounds that are different from the majority of persons in the communities they serve. As a result, they may misinterpret demeanour to the detriment of Aboriginal youth. The danger here is that under the umbrella of “cross-cultural sensitivity,” discriminatory activities which are completely unrelated to culture may be overlooked, such as Crown prosecutors who prosecute more readily because they are unwilling to overrule the police who are over-inclined to charge offenders, producing 200 to 300 percent more convictions than in other jurisdictions. There are few, if any, support services used as alternatives to jail. All these non-cultural factors contribute to an overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in jail, but they are overlooked in a “culturally sensitive” explanation. Racism is never mentioned. Occasionally, non-Aboriginal judges, lawyers, and other players in the justice and social services systems have been too quick to embrace culture in ways that fail to challenge patriarchy, colonialism, imperialism, and sexism. Their notion of culture simply confines it to a static, unchangeable, and timeless vacuum of values, beliefs, knowledge, and customs which sometimes operates to the detriment of Aboriginal women. While cultural values of healing and reconciliation must be respected, equality and the safety of women cannot be overlooked, especially in cases involving violence. Coming to terms with women’s reality at the intersection of racism and sexism is something that more often than not, can be easily lost in the rush to be “culturally sensitive.”

In order to deal properly with these complex issues, Canadian courts must come to grips with the contemporary act of white supremacy in and out of the courtroom and not simply get by with a superficial reference to history, cultural biases, and social conditions. They must strive to understand how cultural differences within and between groups operate, such as the difference in gender and race status. This approach inevitably engages discussion about differences, about control, about racism, about sexism, and about how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures work to sustain them, or eradicate them. Once

these understandings are obtained, there is a far better chance that substantive changes toward meaningful equality and respecting cultural differences will take place.

It always fascinates me that I see the world so differently from many of my non-Aboriginal friends and acquaintances. Obviously, the identity of the person doing any analysis makes a difference. When something particularly horrifying and tragic happens, such as the shooting deaths of Connie Jacobs and her little son Ty by an RCMP officer at their home on the Tsuu T'ina Reserve in Alberta, different perceptions become more stark. My reaction and the reaction of my people is to understand the killings in the context of an historical pattern of state behaviour directed at Aboriginal people generally, and Aboriginal women and children in particular — behaviour that has disrespected and devalued us, seen our women as inferior mothers and grandmothers, and failed to give us the same consideration and protection that is taken for granted by whites. As a result, we are alarmed and angry and thus call for immediate redress in the form of an independent inquiry by First Nations to examine all the surrounding contextual issues, including sexism and racism in institutional practices of the RCMP and other agencies. On the other hand, the reaction of the non-Aboriginal population to the Jacobs' killing is to see the incident as horrifying, but isolated and maybe even a result of some intemperate action by the Aboriginal woman herself. (One can only speculate whether there would have been a greater public outcry and a greater distrust of police conduct if similar killings took place in an up-scale Calgary suburb.) There is no immediate connection with context — social, economic, political, or historic. A further discussion of the incident from the possibility of race and sex discrimination has led many to the conclusion that there is no institutional or state responsibility to respond to the incident — other than through an RCMP inquiry into their own procedures and a fatalities inquiry, which would examine the narrow circumstances immediately surrounding the deaths.

These differing attitudes to the same event arise from different life experiences based on race. Most white people have never had their children spat upon, or been taunted at school, or at the hockey rink, or at the park. Nor have they had their daughters subjected to

obscenities as they walk down the street. Most elderly white women and men are respected as they buy groceries or visit a health clinic. When non-Aboriginal people are in a car accident or domestic dispute, the police are respectful and attend quickly.

Even though you would never know it from media coverage, *our* life experience tells us that racial violence and harassment *are* widespread, common, and life threatening; and that we cannot necessarily rely on the police to protect us when we most certainly *expect* respect. The arrest of five people in what police have described as the racially-motivated killing of a 65-year-old Sikh man in British Columbia clearly demonstrates that racism and intolerance are alive and well in Canada. For *us*, it is *very* logical to link together several thousand real-life stories into the interpretation we put on Connie Jacobs' case. We similarly interpret the cases involving JJ Haper, Dudley George, Donald Marshall, Betty Helen Osborne, and the Kittynowdlok-Reynolds. It is also logical for us to link the five attempted suicides on the Tssu T'ina Reserve within two weeks to Connie Jacobs and her son's deaths. The despair, hopelessness, and lack of control we all feel as a result of such a senseless and brutal loss of life, leads some to the tragic belief — supported by experiences and perceptions — that they do not have lives worth living.

The Future

As far as Aboriginal people are concerned, racism in Canadian society continues to invade our lives institutionally, systematically, and individually. The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry in Manitoba, the Donald Marshall Inquiry in Nova Scotia, the Cawsey Report in Alberta, and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People all agree. The question now is, What is to be done?

Anti-racism strategies, to the extent that they exist, are all about the relative value of human lives. A negative response to racism is a statement that victims of racism are valued members of our society. Recognizing the harms of racism and the need to strengthen our dangerously fickle collective commitment to equality requires us to *listen* to those who suffer from discrimination, and to hear their stories.

Sustainable solutions toward equality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians can be developed, but the truth of the present and past must be told.

Patricia Monture, a Mohawk woman and legal scholar, stated that if the white society cannot bring itself to understand the pain that Aboriginal men, women and children go through, then they are never going to understand anything. All the equality promises in the world will not get us anywhere because without that understanding, the theories do not reflect social reality, and do not reflect peoples' experiences. To combat racism, we must give up on monolithic, ethno-centric reality and believe that there is something to be learned and a better society to be achieved by listening to formerly silenced people. Listening to the powerless may, in turn, lead to the understanding that some groups and group members have enjoyed disproportionate privilege, including the power to define, to appropriate, and to control the realities of others.

It must be understood that racists have no interest or desire to investigate the reality of others different from themselves nor the injustices that result when others' realities are imposed upon them. Their objectives are to roll back progress through the mobilization of fear, resentment, ignorance, and intolerance. For them, difference is dealt with by making it disappear, by treating everyone the same. Non-Aboriginal Canadians must understand that this never has been and never will be good enough, because it will only perpetuate racism, indefinitely. Equality requires a commitment to the proposition that there are alternative claims to the "truth."

Another prerequisite to future equality is an accounting of the past. The heinous violations of human rights which have been perpetuated upon our people for generations, merely because of our race, cannot go unmarked. Their extent should be catalogued, their detail exposed, and their causes explored. Once all this has been done, the results must be published so that society will have a lasting record and guide to avoid future repetition of the violations we have suffered. If the truth of residential schools, religious persecution, cultural destruction, and mass abductions of our children remains unexplored and obscure, I fear that equality, peace, and justice will

elude our grasp. Only when misconduct is exposed and addressed can we begin to build a fence around it and move confidently and purposefully toward the full achievement of equality, dignity, and respect. Some progress has been made. A first step was taken with the establishment of the Healing Fund and the apology for residential school abuse. Many other steps remain which will require the partnership of goodwill of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. I look forward to travelling this path with all Canadians.

Megweetch.