

Sunday June 23, 2013

## Nothing to feel smug about

By Jim Taylor

Everyone knows that Friday marked the official start of summer in the northern hemisphere. But how many noted that it was also National Aboriginal Day in Canada?

National Aboriginal Day was first celebrated in 1996, to celebrate the cultures and contributions of First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples. Its low profile speaks volumes to the prejudice just below the surface of Canadian society.

Canadians tend to be smug about the racial/religious discrimination they observe elsewhere. After all, Canadians never made niggers sit at the back of the bus. We never made kaffirs use separate sidewalks or washrooms. We never systematically exploited people with darker skins as servants or slaves.

Nope – we just tried to eliminate them.

And we did it without wars – aside from one small skirmish at Batoche, in northern Saskatchewan. Instead, we made them invisible by banishing them to remote reserves, typically on land that white settlers considered worthless.

And then, in a misguided attempt to assimilate a stone-age culture into an industrial society, we forcibly abducted native children from their families and incarcerated them in concentration camps, euphemistically called “residential schools,” where everything “Indian” about them could be extinguished.

I say that with no disrespect for hundreds of Canadians who did their best within the system. Inevitably, a few adults abused their power. But many others sacrificed their time, their families, and their health, to make life better for the children in their care.

But the whole system was racist and ruthless.

## Policies we try to ignore

Naomi Ciesielski of Mount Allison University called her book on the subject, *A National Disgrace*. John Milloy called it *A National Crime*.

Duncan Campbell Scott, a senior government bureaucrat responsible for aboriginal concerns, identified the priorities of the time: “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic.”

To our ears today, it sounds genocidal. But it was cultural genocide, not physical. Unlike Germany or Rwanda, there was no intention to slaughter an entire race. Rather, the intent was to assimilate aboriginal people into the only kind of society that religious and government leaders of the time could imagine -- white, English, and Christian.

The system, wrote former United Church moderator Marion Best, “was designed to move all Aboriginal peoples from their ‘helpless savage state’ to ‘self-reliant civilization’. Education was deemed the best solution. ‘Take the Indian out of the child’ was the slogan.

“The children should adopt the values of the dominant society: cleanliness, obedience, respect, order, neatness, honesty, thrift, self-maintenance, charity, and industry. Christianity was to supplant Aboriginal spirituality, so there was no place for Aboriginal beliefs or rituals.”

Best went on, “In some places they were punished for speaking their native language. Their hair would be shorn when they entered the school, and they would wear European clothing. A life of seasonal hunting and

gathering would be replaced by order and routine run by clocks and bells. Their unorganized games and activities were replaced with brass bands, football, baseball and hockey where children learned rules and discipline.

“Thus children were separated from their families physically, spiritually, and culturally.”

Milloy and others have documented how school administrators repeatedly pleaded for more funding – from both government and church -- to improve food, clothing, shelter, textbooks. Over and over, national bureaucrats found higher priorities elsewhere.

Marion Best notes, “In 1938 the per capita grant to for [residential] schools was \$180 while in Manitoba the province paid \$642 per capita to the School for the Deaf.”

These inequities persist. Last year, Maclean’s magazine reported, “Aboriginal students on reserves receive about a quarter less funding for their primary school education than other Canadian children.”

## Out of place in both worlds

Marion Best continues, “Those who went home after completing the education that was offered found they did not fit in the Aboriginal culture, and they experienced racism in the mainstream culture. They didn’t fit in either world.”

By way of example, Chief Peguis, whose people lived where Winnipeg now stands, tried to help his people assimilate. George Ladd told their story in his book *Shall We Gather At The River*. Peguis and his people converted to Christianity. They adopted European clothes. They farmed plots of land. They lived in houses. They ate with forks and spoons.

They bought the whole package, in other words.

Then they found they were still “Indians,” not acceptable in English society.

Would Canada’s aboriginal peoples have been better off, left alone as hunter/gatherers? No one knows, and we can’t redo the past. What we can do is recognize the long-term legacy of genocidal policies. Native life expectancy today is at least seven years lower than the national average; its suicide rate three times higher; teenage pregnancies nine times higher; prison incarceration also nine times higher.

On the subject of race prejudice, we Canadians have little to feel superior about.

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## YOUR TURN

I’m always intrigued by the many different angles that you explore in response to my columns. Last week’s column, about Barrack Obama getting crushed under the wheels of America’s military-industrial juggernaut, was no exception.

Robert Caughill liked the quotation from George Kennan: “The American military-industrial complex would have to remain, substantially unchanged, until some other adversary could be invented.”

He commented, “In the movie ‘Canadian Bacon’ by Michael Moore, the US has run out of enemies to fight and declares war on Canada to keep its military-industrial complex going. A great satire on the US love of weapons and weapon systems.”

Laurina Tallman suggested that the juggernaut is bigger than just the military-industrial complex. But it may not be unstoppable after all: “It has made itself dependent on media that are very convenient but that anyone could do without. We can go back to paying in cash, mailing cheques in envelopes, or arranging for automatic deductions; we

can write letters and see people face-to-face. If we all let go of the internet, chief among the ropes holding it in place, the Juggernaut may pick up speed and crash into whatever stands at the bottom of the slippery slope or else topple of its own weight ... And who really knows what the shifting ecological changes may do to systems upon which this new system is predicated? ... While I am disappointed those strategies will limit the range of my voice and deprive me of blogs such as yours, there are other means of obtaining messages that inspire me in my mission....

Dale Perkins wondered, "Is 'hope' a real possibility these days? From your analysis of Obama, we'd conclude 'No!' - we cannot pin any hope on an individual, no matter how much power/authority they command. They always are subject to forces far greater than themselves."

By coincidence, Dale noted, "Some weeks ago our 'Progressive Spirituality group' met around that subject, and several people attempted to offer their suggestions and recipes for locating hope...But at the end of the meeting, I don't believe anyone was convinced they'd located hope that they could trust. I guess what we came to was a conviction that if it(?) works for someone then we can't dismiss it. Whatever they are trusting and have hope in is working for them, and that's enough.

"However, is there anything in our faith tradition which offers us real hope? And what about hoping in God? (What does that mean nowadays?)"

"Barack Obama has never been my favorite person, either as a person or politician," Freda Stewart wrote. "He came to the presidency scene five years, ego-filled and spouting promises that nobody on this earth could/should ever hope to try to fulfill if they had a lick of common sense about their own abilities. He has continued to blame Bush for his own errors in judgment -- Bush's errors were partly what he was elected to correct, according to himself. Did he misjudge so badly what he was getting into? At some point U.S. problems should no longer be considered Bush's fault. I have often wondered if 9/11 had occurred within the first few months of Obama's presidency, how would he have reacted to the most history-making tragedy in U.S. history since Pearl Harbor. Maybe it's time he dropped his Hollywood friends and started behaving like a president."

Cliff Boldt commented on the notion of a Messiah complex: "People have been looking for a Messiah, someone who can take care of their concerns and frustrations. Professional sports teams are tried, politicians are tried, none have lasting power. Bread and circuses in Rome comes to mind. This reflects a very hollow populace, no inner strength, faith or foundation. So we jump from event to event, from hero to hero, without thinking about why the last one fizzled out on us. Obama is just the latest for lazy American liberals who always go for flavour of the month. Canadian liberals are no different. Maybe Justin Trudeau will be the latest Messiah to get our attention and support?"

Charles Hill wrote, "In general, I agree with your assessment of the American power structure. I believe that it is created by fear as well as greed. Instant and world-wide media promotes fear of all kinds. Fear drives votes and behaviors. The Huns have always been at the gates. The Huns are real. President Obama promised to tear down the razor wire fence but the Huns didn't go away.

"I'm not a Bible thumper but Jesus had it right in the discussion of the future in Luke 21:9-11, 25-26. If Jesus didn't say that, Luke was clairvoyant. We will continue to keep in power the ones who assure us that they can slay the Huns."

Jorgen Hansen thought I should not have limited my comments to Barrack Obama: "Harper/Canada is going in a parallel direction to the USA re government laws and controls."

Jorgen wanted me to do a follow-up: "Why is the Canada Revenue Agency not interested in the offshore money... There is estimated \$76 trillion in non-reported banking. Should we not investigate and control this fraud on our tax payers? No wonder we can't pay our way."

I'll give the last comment to Christa Bedwin, because it's flattering: "I like this one a lot, Jim, very enlightening and interesting. You educate me about things I never dreamed of!"

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## TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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## PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrp@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrp@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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