

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 16

Cultural Racism in a Changing World:

The American and Canadian Experience

The title of this chronicle is a bit complex so I will start with some definitions: culture, racism, the American experience and the Canadian experience. (Note: I am a Canadian but spent twenty years living and working in the United States.)

Culture is based upon the way we see the world and give it meaning. Since time immemorial humans have based their culture on their understanding of the world in which they exist. This was and is still the key to our survival. When the world changes, people and their cultures must change. Today, we are experiencing four major changes to which we must adapt.

The first, of course, is the Corona-19 virus that is plaguing us. The second is the neoliberal economic system that is putting so many people out of work. It seems we are in the midst of a depression caused by both these changes.

The third, and perhaps most serious, is the climate change reality that is pressing in upon us. We and our descendants will be struggling with it for a number of generations. And the fourth is the Black Lives Matter movement energized by the death of George Floyd and other Black people.

There are two types of racism. There is individual racism—a person believes in the superiority of his or her race and denigrates people of other races. Then there is systemic racism built into the economic legal, political and social systems. In many cases systemic racism benefits the white majority who often use all systems to keep down people of colour.

The American Experience:

In the United States we have seen numerous examples of racism and culture coming together. But now people are rethinking their past and planning a different future. Many statues of confederate leaders are being pulled down; confederate symbols on state flags are being removed; buildings and institutions

named after racist historical leaders are being renamed; companies like Aunt Jemima Pancakes are changing their logos. Films like “Gone with the Wind” contain cautions about racist content; athletes are kneeling during the Star Spangled Banner to support Black Lives Matter. Some ads will no longer be shown on TV because they are discriminatory. In these changing times the NFL’s Washington Red Skins are dropping their racist name. It seems that all the outward cultural signs of racism are coming under scrutiny.

So why am I, a Canadian, spending so much time talking about the American situation? It’s because recent events in the U.S. can serve as a guide. They enable us Canadians to more easily recognize our own major systemic racism.

The Canadian Residential Schools

The Indian Residential School system was the original sin of Canadian systemic racism.

From 2009 until 2015 the Canadian government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in order to study the residential school system. Under the leadership of Justice Murray Sinclair, himself an Indigenous person, the TRC developed a five volume study of that system and its effects. Here are some of their basic findings as reported in a [Wikipedia article](#):

The Indian Residential School system was the brain child of John A. McDonald, the first Prime Minister of Canada. The schools existed from the late 1800s until the 1960s.

Though it is hard to imagine by today’s standards, parents were required by law to hand over their children between the ages of seven and fifteen to the government. Over the history of the schools about 150,000 children were forced to attend these schools.

Most of them were run by Christian religious church, the majority of them Roman Catholic. Obviously, in addition to education, the churches saw it as their mission to convert the students to Christianity.

The overall purpose of the schools was, to use a term quite common in the early days, “*to kill the Indian (including all Indigenous groups) in the child*”.

One of the earliest leaders of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932 was Duncan Campbell Scott. He described his mission this way:

“I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think, as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continually protect a class of people who are able to stand alone. Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.”

Various initiatives were implemented to destroy the children’s culture. For example they were not allowed to speak their native language. They could only speak English or French and were punished physically if they were caught speaking their own native language. There was at times sexual abuse as well.

Parents who wanted to visit their children would pitch a tent close to the residence. Often the children were only allowed to meet their parents with a staff person present. It was suggested by some members of the government that residences be located further away so parents could not easily visit.

The residences were often run down and insecure. Some of them were disease ridden. The most common disease was tuberculosis. Many children were affected.

Some of the residences had burial grounds where bodies were simply buried with no indication of who was buried there. Often there were no records of deaths and, in some cases, parents were not even informed. Because of the lack of medical records in some residences Justice Murray Sinclair suggested the actual number of deaths over the years was over six thousand children.

The permanent effects on culture

In 1980 my family and I moved to Baffin Island where I served as the Superintendent of Social services. A few years later we moved to Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories. For the next several decades I worked as a consultant with Inuit communities in Nunavut and Indian and Metis groups in the Northwest Territories.

One of the groups I worked with called the early 1900s “the beginning of the “Time of Darkness”, referring to a time when the residential schools took their children from them and family life was completely upended.

In my years working in the Arctic I witnessed the legacy described by the TRC: post traumatic stress, alcoholism, substance abuse and suicide. But I also saw families and groups rising up out of the Time of Darkness. Three things were noteworthy for me.

First, because parenting skills could not be passed on for several generations it was not uncommon for older folks to be acting as parents to their grandchildren. This was a common reality with Indigenous groups in other parts of the country as well.

The second thing was the emerging role of women. While men often worked on the land as hunters, women had dual roles: they were mothers in the community while also going to school and getting jobs as teachers, nurses and government employees. In many ways, because of their experience I thought of these women as the young elders.

Third was the rise of Indigenous organizations. Native groups organized and worked over the years to settle their land claims. They redefined their relationship with the federal government. I saw the creation of Nunavut in the Eastern Arctic and the development of a number of land claim settlements in the Western Arctic.

But there is one more thing that needs to be discussed: our role in reparation.

Reparation: Two Responsibilities

When we see the demonstrations in the streets by Black Lives Matter it is not simply about police issues. It is also about changing the systems that have discriminated against Black People since “emancipation” from slavery—the economic, political, legal, educational and social systems. These benefit white people but often discriminate against those of other races, keeping them poor in terms of housing, education, jobs, health care and so forth.

In Canada similar things have been happening. This is especially true for Indigenous peoples. Let's consider for example the issue of land. Indigenous people have lived on the land for centuries without creating fixed boundaries. But white people who have been around for only a couple hundred years have occupied and divided the land as government and private property. To regain some control over their land, Indigenous groups need to develop a land claim and have it approved by the government in power. This is a legal solution but not necessarily a just one. Even with the agreements, the government gives corporations access to the land so they can explore for carbon resources, build pipelines and so forth. This infringement is justified as a "national priority".

At religious and other public meetings in our community on Vancouver Island we now make a point of acknowledging our presence on "the unceded territory of the Komox First Nation". But we must do more to help first peoples reclaim the rights to their land: writing politicians, supporting their businesses and organizations, attending demonstrations and workshops, and so forth.

The second obligation is about a duty to better educate our children. When I was a kid growing up before any television we used to play "good guys and bad guys" with toy guns. We all wanted to be the good guys—the cowboys. The bad guys were the Indians. The only "good" Indian we knew was the one we heard about on the radio-- Tonto, the sidekick of The Lone Ranger. Fortunately I grew out of my prejudice.

We have a responsibility to tell our children and grandchildren about our Canadian experience with systemic racism. It is an essential part of their education.

Mike Bell,

Comox Valley Climate Change Network