

“Politically Speaking”

Martha Hall Findlay, former MP for Willowdale

August, 2013

ABORIGINAL / CANADA RELATIONS -- PART I

I recently attended the annual 3½ day Couchiching Conference, which I want to tell you about. A confession, however – I have served on the Board of Directors of The Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs for many years, and still do, so my enthusiasm may be a bit biased.

The Couchiching Institute (www.couchichinginstitute.ca) is Canada’s oldest and most respected non-partisan public affairs forum. For 82 years now, it has held a conference every August on the shores of Lake Couchiching near Orillia. Every year the topic is different (determined at least a year in advance), sometimes domestic and sometimes international, but always current and challenging. Last year, for example, we explored the Arab Spring and the massive changes in the Middle East.

This year, the Conference tackled the relationship between aboriginal peoples and Canada. It was extraordinary.

Most Canadians, frustratingly, know very little about the true history of our own country, and virtually none about the original Canadian peoples. Worse, most Canadians have no idea, or the wrong ideas, about what European settlers did to deny most aboriginal peoples rights to the lands they had occupied for thousands of years – and to live their own lives.

Most Canadians see the present: the reserves with extreme poverty; the news stories of great amounts of money being spent by governments, but decrepit mould-ridden shacks housing multiple generations in communities of massive unemployment and bad drinking water. People repeatedly ask questions such

as, "Why don't the unemployed learn carpentry and build and maintain better homes and schools for themselves? If they want to keep their languages alive, why don't some of the unemployed use their time to teach the younger ones? Why is there such a disconnect between all that needs to be done in terms of health, education and accommodation on the one hand, the money that is spent by the government on the other, and so many, particularly young, aboriginals sitting around doing nothing?" The biggest question is, "Why can't they help themselves?"

The reasons are complex but very, very real. And yes, there are instances where people rightfully call for greater accountability, greater self-effort. But we can't move forward without understanding the real history of European colonialism in Canada, epitomized and enforced by legislation such as the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 and the Indian Act, originally passed in 1876. These acts were based on an assumption that European ways, primarily British were superior, "better" for the aboriginals, and were focussed on forcing aboriginals to become English (or French) speakers, Christians, and farmers. The resulting marginalization and dispossession inflicted on aboriginal peoples by settlers and successive governments have been hugely problematic. The residential school system was, in particular, disastrous. In 1920 the Indian Act made attendance at school mandatory for all aboriginal children. For many, residential school was the only option – children from age six were rounded up, all across the country, and forced into to white, church-run institutions until they were 16 - often hundreds of miles from their families. They were forced to ignore -- or worse, deny and discard -- their cultures and their languages. Far, far too often they were physically and sexually abused by staff and other students, raped, underfed, even starved. The goal of these institutions was to force these children to become "white" and "religious" so that they could assimilate into "mainstream" society. The result, in far too many cases, were children who grew up confused at best, more often seriously harmed psychologically, without any understanding

of family and how parents parent. Many simply died from abuse, neglect, disease, starvation – some suicide. A key legacy has been several generations of people psychologically damaged, prone to substance abuse, and correspondingly dysfunctional. Another shameful legacy is generations of people who, because they were never ‘parented’ or exposed to what ‘family’ meant, in turn never learned how to parent – leading to even more psychologically damaged children, more substance abuse, more dysfunction and, in more recent years, an epidemic of aboriginal teen and child suicide.

Something must be done. The first step is for all Canadians, non-aboriginal in particular, to learn the truth about what has happened to generations of aboriginal peoples, why, and how much of that history explains the current challenges. Only by understanding this history, the truth, can both aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians truly work together, replacing paternalism and misinformation with mutual respect and understanding, to find solutions and a path to a brighter future for all.

Stay tuned for PART II next month: ABORIGINAL – CANADA RELATIONS, THE WAY FORWARD

If you have any questions or comments on this, or any other issue, please write to me at info@marthahallfindlay.ca, or to PO Box 69522, 5845 Yonge St., Willowdale, ON, M2M 4K3.

All best,



Martha Hall Findlay