



## Why is this Subject Taboo?

Canada's native issue needs more debate. Why it does not is, in part, explained by who we are as Canadians. Always afraid to offend, our culture prefers we avoid those subjects which are deemed sensitive. This is, of course, ridiculous. The issue deserves debate if for no other reason than that current policy is inadequate, ineffective and no one, native or non-native, is happy with the status quo.

So what is at the heart of the current dilemma or problem? (Note that I'm deliberately avoiding the term 'conflict' as I think that adjective is too extreme.)

Natives are brought up in an atmosphere of victimization. Resident within the relationship with the non-native community (as opposed to non-natives individually) is an attitude that natives are somehow victims of non-native residency and governance of the country. On the non-native side, there is a palpable sense of guilt in our native policy, a sense that somehow everything that has happened in the relationship between the two communities has been to the unfair advantage of non-natives at the expense of natives. This is nonsense.

Sticking with core principles, we are all nationals of one country, Canada. Within Canada there are many cultures, communities, histories and languages, all of which should be acknowledged and celebrated. The conferring of special rights and privileges to one culture versus another is bound to end in rancor and alienation. In British Columbia, the settlement of a particular land claim has resulted in home owners paying taxes to the local native authority. Fine you might say, but wait: if that homeowner is a non-native, the paying of taxes does not carry with it any right to vote for membership in that local government. Anybody remember what the Boston Tea Party was all about? Right, taxation without representation. You would have thought that lesson had been learned by now.

Land claims in British Columbia now exceed the total size of that province. Aside from the absolute absurdity, how is this even possible? Native rights, particularly in respect of land claims, should not be disrespected. Compensation is due and must be paid. However, the subject of compensation has context and that context should not be manipulated

in such a way as it has in British Columbia.

Any reader of Canada's history, particularly the history of our northern frontiers could not help but be impressed by the spirit of our northern native people. Proud, free spirited, incredibly brave and enterprising, these were a people who deserved respect and admiration. Preserving and promoting those qualities must be at the forefront of any native policy. Policy makers should ask themselves whether current policy initiatives have the prospect of instilling or rebuilding such qualities.

It is not Government's role, certainly not a national Government's role, to serve as the surrogate parent or disciplinarian of family life. That leadership has to come at the family and local community level. Drug and alcohol addiction, and failure to take the responsibility for education seriously, are issues for which there can be remediation programs but the ultimate remediation must come from within the family unit, whether that be native or non-native.

The answer to such problems lies not in more money or more programs. The answer is in leadership and education. Leadership which dismisses or ignores the responsibility for financial transparency and accountability should be prosecuted. Leadership which embraces such responsibility and seeks to build values, respect and self-reliance should be celebrated. As well, education in the grade schools of the country, both native and non-native, should have more focus on the cultural history of the country. Respect for one another and self-respect both arise out of an understanding of history.

Common sense should suggest that the meting out of special rights and privileges needs very careful thought. What privileges are necessary to preserve culture and tradition and which are likely to lead to cracks in the single society we call Canada? Canada cannot be at risk. We live under one flag and one Prime Minister. To play games with that principle will only invite the prospect of a fractious nation state.

One thing is certain, the issue needs more debate and that debate needs to take place in an environment free of these attitudes of guilt on one side and victimization on the other. ■

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