
The 60s' Scoop and Today

By Brian Giesbrecht

The "60s' Scoop" has been much in the news recently, and I expect that we will hear much more about it in the coming weeks and years. In fact, I am guessing that there are already plans to make it the subject of the next national inquiry, soon after the Missing Women's Inquiry has wrapped up.

So, what is the "60s' Scoop"?

It is usually described as a decade when Aboriginal children were stolen from their parents by overzealous social workers attempting to perpetuate cultural genocide by placing Aboriginal children in the homes of non-Aboriginal Canadians and American.

Is this story true?

It is true that some of the child welfare workers, who were seeing the appalling conditions on reserves for the first time, were probably overzealous in removing children from what they saw as unsafe homes and inadequate care. It is also true that adopting these children into non-Indigenous homes was a bad idea. The adoptions caused other problems at an alarming rate both for cultural reasons, and the fact now recognized, that many of these children were FASD; that is, they were born with damaged brains as a result of exposure to alcohol in the womb.

The adoption of Aboriginal children into the homes of other people has been discontinued. But the practice of removing far too many Aboriginal children from their parents has not changed much from the 1960s' to the present even with the devolution of child welfare responsibility to Aboriginal agencies. In fact, Manitoba now has more Aboriginal children in care than there was during the 1960s'. So, except for the international adoption aspect, the child welfare situation in Manitoba is virtually the same as during the so-called "60s' Scoop".

What is the reason for this? Why are so many Aboriginal children taken into care each year, and why are even more left in bad homes with poor care? And why are so many of these children born with FASD?

In a word, the answer is that the parents of these children abuse alcohol. They drink to the point where they are incapable of being responsible parents and looking after their children properly.

And how could Manitoba's child welfare crisis, and Manitoba's horrendous FASD problem be brought under control in one fell swoop? The answer is simple: irresponsible parents would have to stop drinking.

Many will consider this observation to be callous, and even ignorant. They will want to point to “colonialism”, “residential schools” and other historical facts that they think explain that alcohol abuse in Aboriginal communities is the inevitable result.

Harold Johnson says that these people are wrong to think this way. In an important new book entitled “Firewater” he takes direct aim at what he calls the “Victim Model” and insists that the enormous problem of alcohol abuse that plagues so many Aboriginal communities must be acknowledged and openly discussed if there is to be any hope of change. He does not deny that the historical injustices are real, but he passionately believes that using them as an excuse condemns Aboriginal people to be helpless victims forever.

He asks why Aboriginal leaders, who are so vocal on some issues, seem to be so afraid of acknowledging the problem. For instance, he points with some humor to the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples that devoted a measly few pages of its massive 60 million dollar report to the subject of rampant alcohol abuse in the Aboriginal community, and concluded – farcically – that it was seen as being no particular problem. He wonders if the leaders fear that someone will raise the old “drunken Indian” stereotype if the issue is openly and honestly discussed. So, they remain silent.

He also wonders why non-Aboriginal people in important positions are so strangely silent on a problem that is so obvious. He says, correctly, that any white man who uses the words “Indian” and “alcohol” in the same sentence will find himself or herself branded as a racist. Mr. Johnson says that these people too must gather up their courage and speak out.

And just who is Harold Johnson to say these things? He is a Cree Indian from Treaty Six Territory in Saskatchewan. The subtitle of “Firewater” is “How Alcohol is Killing My People (and Yours)”.

What is his background? Mr. Johnson had a hard life. His father died young, as did his siblings. He was bitter, and lived a life of hard drinking as a young man. But, at a certain point in his life he did a major rethink. He went back to school, became a lawyer, and then a Harvard graduate. He quit drinking completely, and has been a respected crown prosecutor in Saskatchewan for years.

Harold Johnson turned his life around not as a result of anything that a government did or did not do. He did so as a person deciding how he wanted to live his own life. He explains that he never saw himself as a victim, but as a person responsible for his own future. He explains why he wrote the book on Page 13:

“I can’t stay silent any longer. I cannot with good conscience bury another relative. I have now buried two brothers who were killed by drunk drivers. I cannot watch any longer as a constant stream of our relatives come into the justice system because of the horrible things they did to each other while they were drunk. The suffering caused by alcohol, the kids with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), the violence, the poverty, the abandoned children, the mental wards and the emergency rooms, the injuries and the illnesses and the loss of hope and the suicides have all piled up within me to the point that I must speak.”

And speak he does. He estimates that one in two people in Treaty Six communities dies directly or indirectly from alcohol. He notes that in many Aboriginal communities alcohol and its aftermath are the only real economy. He refers to the judges, lawyers, and workers who hold court in these communities, where virtually all the cases involve drunken misbehavior, as “Alcohol Aftermath Administrators”. They do their work, and come back only to find the same people in front of them again and again. Despite their best efforts they accomplish little.

Mr. Johnson talks about “stories”. He says that we all live by the stories that we tell ourselves. But sometimes we are fooling ourselves. Here are some of the stories that occur to me:

The story told about the “60s’ Scoop” is of uncaring social workers stealing children from their parents and hurting them both. But the real story is about irresponsible parents abusing alcohol and placing their children in danger. The real story is about drinking.

The story about the child welfare system is of a government and a welfare system that doesn’t know what to do with the thousands of Aboriginal children who come into care. That part of the story is true, but the real story is about drinking.

The story told about the justice system is of racism and too many Aboriginal people going to jail. The real story is about drinking.

The story told about missing women is about Aboriginal women being treated as less than human, and too often casually murdered and forgotten. That part of the story is true, but the real story is about women driven from their communities by alcohol-fuelled violence, and the many more Aboriginal women with no option but to stay behind, trapped in hopelessness.

The story is told of communities with epidemics of young people who see suicide as the only option, the Aboriginal leaders who demand that the government fix the problem and the government responding with money and programs that both the leaders and the government know will make no difference. The real story is of young people driven to despair by their parents’ drinking.

The story about FASD is about how it affects all races and groups (true) and that there is not a grossly disproportionate number of Aboriginal FASD children in our province (untrue). The real story is about irresponsible parents drinking.

Mr. Johnson, however, offers some hope. He notes that, according to his research, 35 per cent of Aboriginal people do not drink at all. That is higher than the figure for non-Aboriginal non-drinkers. These people can lead the way. He talks of “sober houses”, based on the Block Parent model, where people returning from jails and treatment centres with the motivation to change could drop in and have a cup of tea and a chat, instead of immediately being thrust back into a community where even their friends and family are urging them to “have a drink”.

He talks about motivated communities turning themselves into virtual treatment centres. Everyone in such a community would have to be fully committed to the plan, as opposed to so-called “dry reserves” where the bootleggers are often schoolteachers or other middle class people who have the money to buy pickup trucks and pay the bribes necessary to operate as well-paid bootleggers.

None of these solutions have anything to do with government programs, “government money”, or national inquiries. Instead, they involve individuals making personal decisions to stop thinking of themselves as victims, and then making positive changes to stop drinking.

Finally, Mr. Johnson notes that maybe the elders knew best all along. When Treaty Six was negotiated, the one thing that the Indian negotiators were adamant about was that there must be an absolute ban on alcohol in the treaty area (this was later struck down in the Drybones case by the white elders of the Supreme Court of Canada who thought that they knew better.)

Harold Johnson did not have to write this book. He knew that he would be criticized by many for doing so. He felt a duty to tell a story that needs to be told. All Canadians should read it to understand what happened during the 60s' Scoop and what is happening today.

About the Author



Brian Dale Giesbrecht received his education at United College and The University of Manitoba, where he obtained his LLB in 1972. He worked with Walsh, Micay and Co., and then joined Legal Aid Manitoba in 1975 to become Senior Attorney and the first Area Director for western Manitoba in Brandon. Appointed to The Provincial Court (Family Division) in 1976, he heard child welfare cases and general family matters until he transferred to the Criminal Division in 1989. During his career he served on the National Family Court Committee, and various provincial court committees. He was an Associate Chief Judge from 1991 to 2005, and he became Acting Chief Judge in 1993. Among the notable cases he heard was the Lester Desjarlais Inquiry. His report strongly criticized the government's decision to devolve child welfare responsibilities to racially based child-care agencies. Following his retirement from the Bench in 2007, Mr. Giesbrecht has written extensively for various publications. His main theme has been the need to abolish The Indian Act and the separate systems of government that exist in Canada.