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You Can't Solve a Problem That Can't Be Discussed

By Brian Giesbrecht

What is now called “the Beyak controversy” illustrates that it has become virtually impossible to openly discuss Canada’s most important domestic issue—namely, the chronic problems of poverty and unemployment in Indigenous communities.

People who disagree with the claim that the problem stems from Indigenous victimization—namely, colonialism, bad governmental policy, discrimination, residential schools, and the like, are not listened to. People who suggest that aspects of Indigenous culture stand in the way of progress, are called racist.

Indigenous advocates do not tolerate dissent, and even the old war horses in the Conservative party, those who should know better, have caved in to this politically correct pressure.

How can this be explained?

There are many very contentious issues that have confronted Canadians over the years, from conscription to separatism. Many of these issues have been very complex and divisive. But, here’s the thing: In order to deal with any of these issues, a great deal of open and frank discussion—even heated debate—had to take place. And it did.

But this discussion is not happening with Indigenous issues. Why?

Perhaps the main impediment to honest discussion is guilt. People feel guilty about the views they held in the past, and the way Indigenous people were treated—often badly. They were an ignored and downtrodden people in yesterday’s world, and we are all guilty of failing to give them proper respect. There is a reason that the racist stereotype of yesterday—“the lazy, drunken Indian” stereotype—retains such power and the ability to hurt today. Not that long ago it was accepted as mainstream thinking.

However, shutting down honest discussion is not the way to go about correcting past wrongs. Now, more than ever, candid conversations are absolutely essential.

Maybe we should be openly confronting that stereotype rather than letting it prevent us from finding solutions to problems that have bedeviled the country since before we were even a country.

First, let me make it clear that I think the stereotype is false. Canada now has a growing middle class of successful Indigenous people who have put that stereotype to rest for good. In most cases these people have completely integrated into the Canadian social system and economy without, in any way, losing their Indigenous identities. They have demonstrated conclusively that a person's race or ethnic origin has nothing to do with how hard-working or productive that person is likely to be. They have also conclusively proven that an Indigenous people can successfully integrate into the Canadian society without losing their identities.

But at the same time, there is a very large underclass of poor and under-employed Indigenous people in First Nations communities and in the raw parts of our cities. And yes, alcohol abuse and reluctance to seek gainful employment are definitely problems. This is not a stereotype, it is a fact.

How can this be explained? We don't know because it is not something that is candidly discussed. Our mainstream newspapers and academics—people who should be frankly and openly discussing these issues, are not doing it. There are countless articles and published papers about Indigenous people as victims, but there is precious little about the very real problem of alcohol abuse and the reluctance to seek employment of Indigenous people.

Let me give two examples of Indigenous issues that are not being discussed.

Some years ago a meat packing plant set up a shop outside a city near my home. Part of the company's business plan was to employ the many unemployed Indigenous people who lived in the surrounding communities. In fact, the company went to great lengths to make this happen. Special recruiting and training procedures were used. Transportation was provided.

It did not work. Although there were still some employees at the plant from those communities, the company had to recruit workers internationally, as most of the Indigenous workers did not stay at their jobs. As it turned out, the recruitment of workers from many parts of the world made this city a better place. However, while the company was recruiting elsewhere, the unemployment problem among Indigenous communities persisted.

There are probably many reasons why this happened. The way our social assistance system is structured for Indigenous people, combined with the benefits status Indians receive simply by virtue of their race certainly played a part. If a person finds that getting up early to catch a bus and work at a tough job five days a week is really not much more lucrative than simply staying home, that probably goes some way to explaining why the company's honest efforts failed.

Or, perhaps there is something within the Indigenous hunter-gatherer culture that is contributing to chronic unemployment in the First Nations communities. In *Hillbilly Elegy*, the author talks of what appear to be habits of shiftlessness, and even laziness, among the people of "the hollers" of Appalachia. Those habits are due to cultural differences between the hillbillies and the mainstream culture, and are not personal defects. Could some of those same dynamics be at play in Indigenous communities?

The unfortunate fact, though, is that we don't know why this bold experiment failed. To my knowledge, there has been no serious effort to delve into this issue by any of the organizations responsible for doing just that. The local newspaper should have made this a major issue. Academics at the local university should have devoted themselves to understanding what happened. Instead, there is silence on what was supposed to be a win-win situation for the company and the Indigenous community but failed to be such. If successful, this business venture would have been a template for other regions with unemployed Indigenous people.

Another example of the Indigenous issue that gets scant treatment is alcohol abuse in many communities. Manitoba has the highest rate of Indigenous child apprehension in the country. In most cases involving the apprehensions of young Indigenous children, the immediate problem is the alcohol abuse of the parents. This has been the case for decades, although lately other drugs are being used as well.

At one time, the old child welfare system tried to deal with these children. Since the 1990's Indigenous child welfare agencies have taken charge, but the statistics show that has made no difference. The number of apprehended children keeps climbing. And the factor that seems to be driving these apprehensions—alcohol and drug use—has not changed.

The problem is made much worse by Indigenous women who continue to give birth to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) babies in alarming numbers. At least half of the Indigenous children in care in Manitoba suffer from FASD.

However, instead of openly discussing this terribly serious problem, gallons of ink are devoted to criticizing this or that government response to the problem, this or that "new" approach, this or that agencies' or government will try, what the latest inquiry has said, how this or that Indigenous group is critical of these approaches, etc. Politicians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, go from meeting to meeting in Winnipeg and Ottawa, while the same old thing takes place on reserves—alcohol abuse.

It is that very alcohol abuse that leads directly to the need to apprehend the children who are swamping the system. Meanwhile, the politicians attend meetings and pretend that the problem can be solved by yet another rearranging of the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic.

The truth is that politicians and Indigenous advocates have almost no control over this situation, and no amount of money or new government programs or approaches will make any significant difference. The only thing that will work is if potential parents can be persuaded, shamed, or forced to stop drinking. Self-control is needed.

Because the truth is that an Indigenous child born with FASD has practically no chance to succeed, regardless of whether that child is in care or left with the parents.

It is strange when you think about it: A parent who beats his or her child with a stick and causes the child to have permanent brain damage goes to prison. A parent who does the same thing to the child—but uses a whiskey bottle—gets sympathy from others.

A few brave Indigenous authors have tackled the issue of alcohol abuse in Indigenous communities. Harold Johnson, in *Firewater*, describes how drinking is a way of life on some reserves. He claims that drinking is responsible for about half of the deaths in many communities, including his own community. Calvin Helin, in *Dances with Dependency*, takes a hard look at the alcohol abuse problem and the related victim mentality and the dependency mind-set that cripples reserves.

But for the most part, these Indigenous people are ignored. But, when non-Indigenous authors try to do the same thing, they are not ignored—they are vilified. In fact, Johnson makes the obvious point that a non-Indigenous person who uses the words "Indian" and "drinking" in the same sentence will be universally condemned as being racist.

So, the institutions that should be crying out for real solutions to this awful child welfare problem and its direct connection to alcohol abuse—the media, the universities, the politicians—all prefer to talk about other things. Even the Conservative Party of Canada has made it clear that its members are to keep their mouths closed or stick to safe explanations.

These two examples illustrate why an honest and open discussion about the Indigenous issues is not possible in Canada at this time.

There is a considerable talk of “reconciliation,” but, realistically, there is no prospect of anything approaching reconciliation with problems like these unsolved.

Why?

Because you can't solve a problem that can't be discussed.

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.