

The Wet'suwet'en Conflict—A Hopeful Perspective

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In 1969 a federal White Paper on “Indian Policy” focused on the individual:

To be an Indian is to lack power - the power to act as owner of your lands, the power to spend your own money and, too often, the power to change your own condition. Not always, but too often, to be an Indian is to be without - without a job, a good house, or running water; without knowledge, training or technical skill and, above all, without those feelings of dignity and self-confidence that a man must have if he is to walk with his head held high.

The proposed solution was full participation—including economic participation—in Canadian society, without discrimination and with full respect for cultural identity. Government would eliminate not only *The Indian Act* but also reserves as we know them, leaving bands free to use or distribute treaty lands as they see fit.

The Indigenous leadership of the day reacted strongly against these proposals, perhaps not surprisingly, since their power derived from people who were tied to their land base. Prime Minister Trudeau (the Elder) succumbed to pressure and withdrew the White Paper in 1970, abandoning Indigenous policy to sustained, well-funded and one-sided nationalist advocacy.

What followed was a long-term process to cast Canada-Indigenous relations in collectivist, nationalist terms. Exercises like the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls inquiry focused on historic grievances to mobilize nationalist aspirations, rather than advance economic justice for individuals.

The White Paper could be seen as an early sign of public will for what we now call Reconciliation. Its demise, however, led to massive public investments filtered through the interests of a rent-seeking leadership class, absorbing almost all the billions spent on Indigenous issues.

As a result, not much has changed for the individual Indigenous person. Today about 40% of Saskatchewan's reserve population is on welfare. Off the reserves, Indigenous people are disproportionately mired in poverty, family dysfunction and crime—both as perpetrators and victims—while policy debate is framed almost exclusively in terms of legal and constitutional rights manufactured whole cloth by legal activism.

Thus our current, chaotic state, where small groups of Indigenous nationalists make common cause with non-Indigenous activists to hold the country ransom against their demands. In the face of this, our elected leadership seems both flummoxed and frozen in uncertainty.

Bewilderment should not surprise us. The nationalist model of Indigenous relations offers no credible model for the country to move forward to shared, sustainable well-being.

This situation is seventy years in the making and will not be easily rectified. But there is a glimmer of hope amidst the noise of barricades and sloganeering, passion and opportunism, tire fires and deliberate confrontations.

Faintly heard, at present, are the voices of emerging Indigenous leaders that understand that their people need jobs and personal economic well-being much more than they need leaders pursuing untenable sovereignty goals.

Canada as a country has unfinished business. European colonialism created the basis for a wealthy multicultural society, but too many descendants of the peoples on whose lands that society was built still don't share in Canadian prosperity.

Misguided public policy created and sustained this situation through too many decades, decades when most Canadians were hoping for better. It is past due the time when we should expect our governments to take responsibility for all their citizens, including Indigenous people. This is the true path to Reconciliation.