

Transcription

Wâhkôhtowin 2014 Keynote Address
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The Right Honourable
Paul Martin

Thank you Marie for that kind introduction.

To begin let me acknowledge the Peoples of Treaty 6 and the Métis Nation as we are visitors on their traditional territory.

And once again let me thank you, Dr. Battiste, and all those responsible for giving me the opportunity to engage in open discussion with you this morning, and to learn from those who will be speaking throughout the conference, for when it comes to the how of *Indigenising Education*, I will be the first to admit that I have more questions than I do answers.

The fact is we are here today because the history of the Indigenous populations of the world is a book most people have never read. This is certainly true of Canada, and unfortunately when we do read the book of the First Nations, the Métis Nation, and Inuit, it begins with the European explorers who after they figured out this wasn't India or China, believed they had discovered a new continent where no one of any consequence lived, and as a result, believing that native culture had no value, the settlers who followed made no attempt to understand it because they assumed its people had nothing to say.

Thus began the tradition of dismissing Indigenous knowledge out of hand in order to impose the European's blinkered view on everything they saw, touched, or heard in the so called new world.

In short, from the start, the newcomer's message to North America's First Peoples was the mantra used by colonial powers the world over. We told them, and we told ourselves that all that we believed was good, and that all they believed—their history, their traditions—was irrelevant.

And over time and because we imported disease, had bigger guns and had a different view of the land, the prejudices of the settlers became ever more entrenched.

Indeed this bias continues until today, reaching even unto those bastions of so-called objective thought – our universities. Dr. Battiste points this out in her remarkable book *Decolonising Education*¹ where she writes, and I quote: “Indigenous knowledge needs to be interpreted...as the Indigenous people themselves understand it...” the problem being, she goes on to say is that, “every university has been

¹ Battiste, Marie. *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*. Saskatoon: Purich Press, 2013.

structured to see the world through the lens of Eurocentric vision which opposes Indigenous perspectives”.

What should we do about this?

Thankfully, having diagnosed the problem, Dr. Battiste then offers a prescription. “Post colonialism,” she writes, “is not about rejecting all theory or research or Western knowledge. It is about creating a new space where Indigenous peoples’ knowledge, identity, and future is calculated into the global and contemporary equation.” End of quote.

The question before us today is “how” do we do that?

How do we create that new space that will make a place for Indigenous knowledge, identity, and future? My first suggestion, would be to recognise who *our allies* are. And the fact is, there is a branch of University learning that should be a natural ally.

It is the humanities: philosophy, literature, history, and art for instance, those who share with Indigenous thought a deep historic desire to make sense out of the world around us.

Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? Are these not the questions human beings have asked themselves since the beginning of time? And should we only reserve these questions for the evolution of certain cultures, traditions, and beliefs? I think not!

If it is, as I believe ‘knowledge for knowledge’s sake’ that has led to humanity’s greatest triumphs, then the question is quite straightforward: it is how can we move ahead, if Canadian scholars are confined to a conventional wisdom bound by Western limits, and sustained by the least curious among us?

The answer is we can’t. Thus one of the major goals of a university must be to open the doors of curiosity and critical thinking to all who seek to advance our understanding of humanity’s path.

Whether it is acknowledged by the majority or not, the underpinnings of Canadian society are not derived solely from European origins, and if our thinking continues to ignore the perspective of a people who were here long before the Europeanisation of the continent took place, then we will be turning our backs on the very traditions of learning that the humanities seek to uphold.

The fact is, our civilisation is built upon one that existed long before most of us got here, and to deny the consequences of that coming together is to misunderstand our own origins and it is to subvert the very questions that have advanced human knowledge thus far.

Now some of course will say that Indigenous stories are allegorical, and hardly the material upon which a modern thinker can build. To that, I can only say, read Genesis in the Old Testament, and then tell me that we can’t build a belief system on allegory.

Or again, listen to the creation story of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which begins with rock dust swirling in space, then pouring into the earth and eventually emerging as the Blackfoot. Allegorical perhaps, but can someone tell me how thousands of nights ago when that story was first told around a

campfire, a Blackfoot elder had figured out the Big Bang theory which today's scientists describe as the beginning of what led to us all.

Now at this point someone will say that I am being naïve in seeking greater emphasis on Indigenous thought in our universities. Perhaps! But over the last number of years, our universities have shown a far greater willingness to advance the cause.

And if there are those who still question whether Indigenous thought should fill increasing space in our great institutions of learning, I would simply point out the demographic reality that Indigenous Canadians are the youngest segment of our society. As this cohort, increasingly aware of their culture and history, enters university, it is Eurocentric thought that will be the casualty if humanity's great questions are not considered in a much wider mosaic than at present.

Indeed it is this reference to the next generation of students that raises the second issue I would speak to, in light of Dr. Battiste's quest for the battle will not be won on university campuses alone.

It will only be won, if real change takes place in the Nation's primary and secondary schools as well, for it is they who house the university students of tomorrow. In this context the question is, how long can we ignore the need for Indigenous thought in our off reserve schools where too often Aboriginal students find themselves in classrooms which unconsciously deny their presence, by way of inadequate curriculum and teacher training? And in the same vein, how long can we ignore the gross underfunding by the Federal government of "on reserve" schools which not only deprives First Nations students of the breadth of education afforded those attending provincially funded schools, it deprives educators of the flexibility to create curriculum that takes into account Indigenous learning.

Dealing with this unacceptable discrimination in funding was one of the successes of the Kelowna Accord in 2006, a consensus arrived at over 15 months of negotiation by the country's Aboriginal leaders and by governments of all political stripes— Liberal, NDP, and Progressive Conservative from the provinces and territories and the federal government.

That the current government axed the Accord upon taking office and then ignored the consequences of its action is unforgivable, as confirmed by the UN Special Rapporteur for Indigenous Rights who found that for much of the past 10 years there has been no visible improvement in First Nations education.

It is in this context that we wonder about the government's recent education bill – C33, which not only does not provide sufficient funding to meet the need, but incredibly delays any increase for two more years.

Furthermore seemingly oblivious to the importance of community involvement in a child's schooling, the bill would legislate that Ottawa, which has no department of education, should nonetheless assert final control over on reserve learning. And finally, compounding its perversity, when the First Nations stood

their ground and opposed the legislation, the government rejected any pretence of consultation, the minister stating unequivocally that it was the “government’s plan or no plan,” confirming that in Cabinet’s view, the future of Indigenous students should simply be pawned off to the lowest bidder.

What is perhaps the most inconceivable is that the federal government would betray its fiduciary responsibility in this way when in fact it has before it – or more likely on a dusty shelf of a shuttered library – the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples published in 1996 which says and I quote: “We believe that Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal communities must have the opportunity to implement their vision of education.”² For “Aboriginal children are entitled to learn and achieve in an environment that supports their development as whole individuals.” It is this statement that must penetrate the conscience of the nation and for that to occur there are two things that must happen.

The first is that Indigenous history must be taught in our schools, otherwise Canadians who are a fair people, will be forced as they are now to rely on one-dimensional stereotypes with no historical dimension. This was especially evident during the recent Truth and Reconciliation hearings, where the common refrain of Canadians was that they had never heard of the Residential schools and its cultural genocide, prior to the survivors telling their stories.

The second essential element required to bring Canadians into the debate is that the media must enter the fray, and it has to do so knowledgeably.

The reason that Indigenous concerns do not make the news is because they are not considered news. Circumstances that would dominate the national headlines if they occurred in non-Indigenous communities, such as: 60% dropout rates, schools built on toxic dumps, or the failure to teach language skills are not considered “newsworthy”. And the issue does not end there!

This is because what little reporting there is on Indigenous issues is most often given without sufficient context, even when the stories are sympathetic, that is all they reflect—sympathy but no analysis. The problem is sympathy without analysis simply builds upon the false stereotypes of the First Peoples, and does nothing to inform the public about the biases that created those false stereotypes in the first place.

It is against these odds that one joins the battle to provide the Indigenous worldview its place in the national spectrum.

² *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996.

For instance, a Master's thesis by Chloë Ferguson in my office, found that when expert opinion is used in the reporting of Indigenous issues, it is rarely Aboriginal expertise that is called upon, let alone that is decisive.³

This clearly reinforces the false notion that there are few Indigenous professionals capable of providing firsthand experience and needed insight, leaving the impression that those who haven't lived the issue are more knowledgeable than those who have.

The same thesis also pointed out that when Indigenous leaders raise issues, the media too often challenges their point of view, but the government's response is taken and presented as fact. For example, not long ago, when the members of the AFN met to discuss how to approach Ottawa on the widely recognised education funding gap, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs announced that his department had completed an extensive study which concluded that there was no such gap. The minister did this deliberately on the same day as the AFN's meeting in order to create a wedge between the participants.

It worked as the chiefs differed tactically on how to react to the government and not surprisingly this resulted in a skewed media focus, the result being that the substance of the chief's meeting was ignored and all that Canadians heard was more of the same regarding leaders who couldn't get along.

Then to add insult to injury, a couple of months later, when the government backpedalled and admitted there was a funding gap, the fact that the government had misled the public was barely raised in the mainstream media, which had earlier allowed themselves to be used as pawns of government spin.

In short, like it or not, in an arena where wedge politics replaces sound policy, winning the media battle becomes crucial if fair and comprehensive reporting to Canadians is to be the order of the day, and unfortunately, we are not winning that battle.

That being said, is the responsibility here only the media's? The answer is no.

In my opinion, Indigenous leaders and educators must explain to Canadians to a much greater extent than they have to date what is at play, for when they do, the results can be dramatic!

Let me give you a couple of examples of what I mean. When the federal government first presented its education plan, it contained no new funding and the minister gave the AFN short shrift. Subsequently the AFN's position was explained to the Association of Deans of Education of Canada's universities, who after learning the facts then came out publicly against the government's plan. Shortly thereafter the government announced there would be new funding—inadequate perhaps—but still new funding. Coincidence? I doubt it!

³ Ferguson, Chloe. *How Come We Don't Know? The social construction of Aboriginal protest in the mainstream Canadian print media*. Thesis, submitted for a Masters of Journalism, London College of Communication, London, 2013.

The second example took place two months ago. In speaking to the Canadian Public School Boards Association about Indigenous education, I found huge support for the Indigenous position, not because of anything I said, but because the school trustees understood the issues from their own experience.

Let me tell you, this is the second time I've spoken to the School Boards and their support can be invaluable, not only in the larger fairness battle but in terms of specific programs.

For instance, the education initiative I'm involved in has a business program for Indigenous students in grades 11 and 12 on and off reserve. This is one of the only programs of its kind in the world, which uses workbooks and textbooks specifically designed for Indigenous students.

Two years ago the Saskatchewan School Boards Association approached us about taking the program on, and as of this month it will have been implemented in 17 high schools province wide.

If that's not a testament to a school board's desire to advance the cause then I don't know what is.

And this brings me to my final point. Three of the key questions that must be answered for Canadians are: Why should there be fair funding? And why should Aboriginal schools be under Aboriginal control?

Both questions relate to elementary and secondary schooling, and the answers should be self-evident to anyone familiar with equality rights, or with the discussions which have brought us here today. The third question however is a bit more difficult primarily because, to be frank it is not yet part of wider public debate.

That question is how do you provide the Indigenous worldview with the recognition it deserves in our universities? It is the answer to that question which Marie Battiste and so many of you are now taking into the cloistered halls of our universities, and if I may say so, the timing for this battle to be enjoined has never been better.

For instance, clearly in the fight for environmental sustainability the Western Model doesn't stand a chance. Despite this however, the powerful tie that Indigenous Canadians have to the land is too often portrayed as a refusal to get on with the 21st century.

This is the line the government uses when the First Nations insist on proper environmental analysis of new projects. Well let me tell you, if my water had been contaminated by mercury due to industrial runoff for the last 100 years, I certainly wouldn't regard the call for environmental analysis as a refusal to get on with the 21st century – quite the opposite!

Nor is the environment the only arena where the debate will take place on favorable ground.

For example, of all the economic systems, I believe it is the free market which provides the greatest opportunity. However I also believe the free market will not survive, if we fail to deal with the increasing inequality that accompanies it. I am not alone in believing that inequality is an issue that can no longer be ignored.

Alan Greenspan who is not known as a bleeding heart liberal has also expressed similar views as have an increasing number of prominent economists. What has this to do with the Indigenous worldview?

Well, the anthropologist Wade Davis tells a story about a South American tribal group called the Penan who when visiting Canada were struck by the homelessness they saw because they could not comprehend how in cities as rich as ours such a thing could exist.⁴

While there are those who would preach that homelessness is the inevitable if unfortunate result of a successful economy, the Penan believe that the poor man shames us all. The Penan are right.

And the sooner we realise this, the sooner we will face up to the economic stagnation now burdening today's post-recession democracies. Or if you want to make this point even stronger—ask yourself how you responded to the argument that the staggering number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada are random crimes with no sociological origins. Enough said!

Can Indigenous thought hold its own? Of course it can. The Western scientific approach compartmentalises knowledge in order to advance it, and it has been tremendously successful. However this is not the approach that flows from the holistic nature of Indigenous thought which is grounded in relationships and is one of the reasons Aboriginal thinkers have trouble making themselves heard.

On the other hand, I'm not sure quantum physicists wouldn't have a similar problem if they were to walk into a contemporary lecture hall where knowledge is broken into silos that debate cannot breach.

Quantum physics is the foundation stone for today's scientific endeavour, yet as with Indigenous thought, its message is not one of locked boxes but the links between all of nature. In fact, quantum physicists call quantum the language of Mother Nature. Sound familiar?

So what's my point? It's simply that while the Indigenous traditions differ from much of their Western counterparts, this is not to say that in the search for the truth, we can't learn from each and the time to drive that home is now!

Why? The answer can be found in an insight of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor who suggested that it is non-recognition, the fact of simply not being there in the minds of the majority—of being invisible, that is one of the major issues facing Aboriginal Canada and he's right!⁵

He's right because no student, should have to leave their culture and identity at the door when they walk into a classroom in order to succeed.

Thank you.

⁴ Davis, Wade. *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*. pp 174-175. Toronto, Ontario. House of Anansi Press, 2009.

⁵ Taylor, C. 'The Politics of Recognition' in A. Gutmann (ed.). *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton University Press.