

Burning Effigies of John A. Macdonald Doesn't Help Natives

The anti-John A. Macdonald demonstration by a group of protesting native people in Kingston on Jan. 11, the 201st birthday of the country's chief founder, was a shocking incident that has been under-publicized. At the same time as an effigy of Macdonald was hanged, burned, and stabbed, there was a respectful ceremony of remembrance that occurred only about 50 feet away, near the statue of Macdonald in Kingston's main square. He lived nearby and represented Kingston in Parliament for over 40 years, 28 of them as leader or co-leader of the so-called United Province of Canada (Ontario and Quebec), or as prime minister of Canada. As the principal father of Confederation was being soberly praised by former premier Dalton McGuinty and others, the Idle No More faction of native radicals, particularly spokesperson Beth Newell, reviled Macdonald as a racist and genocidist. Newell called Macdonald "the father of apartheid in Canada ... and of Canadian hatred," and declared that any native person who joined in the praise of Macdonald "betrayed their people." Natasha Stirrett, another Idle No More supporter, disparaged the pro-Macdonald group, which included Kingston's mayor and MP, for celebrating "violence ... and crimes against humanity," and declared "It is akin to celebrating Hitler."

I have often written, here and elsewhere, that the native people have legitimate grievances that must be addressed. But the native people and their leaders will have to understand that whatever the rights and wrongs of their history with the Europeans who came to Canada and their descendants, their advancement now, and their hopes for compensation for past wrongs, depend on the good will and conscientious altruism of

the great majority of Canadians composed of those who came, or are descended from those who came here from other continents. (And they found here, contrary to widespread current fables, a native culture which had not discovered the wheel, or knitted fabrics, permanent buildings, or metal tools, and were largely engaged in purposeless inter-tribal wars that featured the torturing to death of prisoners, including women and children.) If the First Nations and their authorized spokespeople persist in defaming the memory of John A. Macdonald by likening him to Hitler, and calling Macdonald a genocidist, a purveyor of hate, a partisan of apartheid, and a racist, they will very seriously damage the legitimate interests they claim to pursue.

John A. Macdonald was a civilized and decent man, as well as a great statesman. He did not consider the so-called Indians (so described because Jacques Cartier and Champlain hopefully thought they were the eastern vanguard of the Indies), to be an inferior people, though he correctly judged that their civilization was comparatively primitive, other than in physical prowess, mastery of the outdoors and certain handicrafts. There is not one shred of historical evidence that justifies comparing him to the Nazi leader who murdered 12 million innocent people in death camps (half of them Jews, which really was genocide), and unleashed aggressive war on Europe from the Pyrenees to Moscow, and from the North Cape to the sands of Egypt, as well as on the high seas, killing tens of millions of combatants and civilians. Nor is there any evidence to justify likening Macdonald to the evil and repulsive apartheid system of Afrikaaner white supremacy in South Africa.

Newell even claimed Macdonald was hostile to the French. This would certainly have come as news to his French-Canadian allies, including George-Etienne Cartier, Sir Adolphe Chapleau, and H.-L. Langevin. He was never a racist and never publicly uttered a racial or ethnic slur. He was, along with

Cartier, and following Baldwin and LaFontaine, the chief architect of Anglo-French conciliation in Canada, and of Canada as the world's only trans-continental, bi-cultural, parliamentary confederation, a status it has held these nearly 150 years and that remains unique in world history. He had many allies among the native people, including the eminent Blackfoot chief, Crowfoot, whom Macdonald stopped to visit when he made his famous trip across Canada on the Canadian Pacific Railway that he had essentially built, in 1886.

Newell and Stirrett and the others certainly had the right to hang and burn an effigy of Macdonald and burn the Canadian flag, but that sort of conduct will retard the cause of justice for the native people. Non-natives have over 95 per cent of the Canadian population and a higher percentage of its money and political influence, and will not be persuaded or impressed by these outrageous misrepresentations of the chief founder of the country as an evil racist monster. It is somewhat reminiscent of when pro-Viet Cong and North Vietnam demonstrators in the New York financial district in 1969 urinated on the famous statue of George Washington, beside Wall Street, near where Washington took leave of the Continental Army, after leading it to victory in the seven-year war of independence against Great Britain. Two to four hundred young Americans were coming back dead from Vietnam every week and the antics of the pro-communist demonstrators caused construction workers to come down from building sites nearby so they could physically beat up the admirers of those killing American soldiers, unhesitatingly employing some of the blunt instruments of their trade. The police prevented fatalities, but the American people, most of whom had reservations about their country's participation in the Vietnam War, were not about to tolerate extreme desecration of the statue of the founder of the country, and outright support of a totalitarian regime exchanging fire with and killing young Americans.

Of course, the comparison is not exact: Canada is not at war, and there was no violence in Kingston, though the pro-Macdonald event organizer, distinguished and congenial historian Arthur Milnes, and former MPP John Garretson's, automobiles were vandalized and a Canadian flag was burned and thrown in Milnes' garbage. It was not alleged that Idle No More did this, but it was a strange coincidence and a regrettable incident. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King recognized that the only way to achieve their goals was to arouse the conscience of the British (in Gandhi's case) and the white majority of Americans in King's, and to force those societies to confront the hypocrisy and moral unacceptability of the regimes Gandhi and King and their followers opposed. Gandhi and the Muslim leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, represented 95 per cent of the people in the Indian subcontinent. King represented almost all the 11 per cent of Americans of African or Caribbean origin. They prevailed when those whose consciences they were targeting recognized the virtue of their complaints (despite, in India, Gandhi's advocacy of granting the Japanese army free passage to the Middle East and his advice to the Jews to acquiesce submissively in their massacre by Hitler's Nazis)

It is inconceivable that Idle No More, or at least Newell and Stirrett, really represent the First Nations in their exposition of these scurrilous falsehoods. They have the right to demonstrate, to get almost anything they want off their chests (thanks in large part to John A. Macdonald), and it is impossible to defame the dead. Even the current chief justice of Canada, Beverley McLachlin, has feebly attempted to legitimize the fraud that it was official Canadian policy to practice "cultural genocide," an irresponsibly provocative phrase and an absurd concept. But persistence in this sort of gratuitous insult to the country and the great majority of its inhabitants will alienate most Canadians, cause support for native conciliation and a generous policy toward them to evaporate, and will fulfill the ambition of the former federal

government to fill new prisons with wholly unrepresentative numbers of native people.

Idle No More and the First Nations generally have serious grievances most Canadians want to address, but insulting Canada and comparing the father of Confederation to the Führer of the Third Reich is not the route to progress for the native people. Even in the era of Palmerston, Lincoln, Bismarck, Disraeli, and Gladstone, Macdonald was a great statesman, and was seen to be so by all of those just mentioned (except Bismarck, as their paths never crossed). And he is the most admired political figure in the country where Newell and Stirrett seek redress of their grievances. On Jan. 11 in Kingston they served the interests of the bigots, although our politically correct media seemed hardly to notice.

First published in the