Canada’s treatment of aboriginals was shameful, but it was not genocide

I yield to no one in my fervour to make amends to the native people for violations of treaty rights and other mistreatment, but the phrase “cultural genocide,” as I wrote here last week in reference to the Chief Justice of Canada’s use of it in a speech given in honour of the Aga Khan, is deliberately provocative and sensational. We might as well accuse Canada and the United States and all countries built on immigration (ultimately almost all countries) of cultural genocide, of the natives or the arrivals, though of course immigration is voluntary. All words bearing the suffix “cide” refer to physical extermination: suicide, homicide, genocide, regicide, etc.

The native people, or First Nations, were here first, but there were not more than a few hundred thousand of them in what is now Canada in the 17th century. They had a Stone Age culture that had not invented the wheel, and which graduated, however brusquely, to more sophisticated levels of civilization, but the culture was not exterminated. Apart from a few mid-western farming tribes and Pacific and Great Lakes inhabitants of log dwellings, the First Nations did not have permanent buildings or agriculture, metal tools, or knitted fabrics. They were nomads, clothed in hides and skins, living in tents, surviving on fish and game, and usually at war, which included the torture to gruesome death of prisoners from other tribes and nations, including women and children.

They were genius woodsmen and hunters and craftsmen, and had artistic abilities, and I am not suggesting and do not accept that they were anything but the complete natural equal of the arriving Europeans. Some European notables, such as Champlain,

were interested in and generally respectful of the native people; some made expedient alliances with them, but generally, traders bought their animal furs for consideration the natives sought, including alcoholic beverages and firearms, and settlers encroached on their land, moving inland from the ocean shores and river banks. There were certainly unjust provocations by the Europeans. The British promised the natives occupancy of the land between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes, even as they signed the same territory over to the successful American Revolutionists (somewhat as, 135 years later, the British promised Palestine, then occupied by the Turks, simultaneously to the Jews and the Arabs. Selling the same real estate to two different buyers at the same time is complicated on every continent).

Even that eminent humanitarian Thomas Jefferson, one of history's prototype limousine liberals, described the native people in the Declaration of Independence as "merciless Indian savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions." The Shawnee chief Tecumseh greatly helped General Isaac Brock and the Canadians and the British in the War of 1812; Colonel Richard Johnson took credit for killing him, being elected vice-president of the United States in 1836 on the slogan "Rumpsey, Dumpsey, Who Killed Tecumseh?" When President Andrew Jackson transported 250,000 native people westwards to open up more land for the importation of slaves, and was found liable by the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice John Marshall, of treaty violations against the native people, Jackson, in control of the Congress as well as the administration, replied "The chief justice has made his decision; now let him enforce it."

As the settlement of the United States by Europeans proceeded much more quickly and on a much larger scale over a more temperate country than the corresponding development of Canada, and the British and Canadian officials dealing with

the natives were generally less corrupt than their American analogues, our relations with the native people stayed largely clear of the violence so fabled in American history, including the death of General George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry at the Little Bighorn in 1876.

Once the white men were indisputably preeminent in this continent, administration of native affairs was largely unsatisfactory, frequently corrupt, and sometimes brutal. The Canadians and Americans did not simply massacre them all, as the Argentinians did (that was genocide), and there were many sincere and entirely benevolent contacts among the natives, including from most of the Christian churches. It was widely assumed that assimilating the native people was the ultimate compliment and service. Lord Durham assumed the same about the French Canadians and the United Province of Canada, Ontario and Quebec today, was set up for that purpose. Of course, it was all nonsense and an outrage, and the French Canadians easily resisted this clumsy and arrogant effort to relieve them of their culture. Their numbers and importance within Canada as a whole were such that they had the political muscle to be a co-equal race when Canada was swiftly launched in 1867 in the tenuous hope that it could retain its independence from the post-Civil War United States and its Grand Army of the Republic.

The native people were less fortunate, fewer and less politically powerful than the French Canadians, and there is no doubt that they were short-changed, condescended to, and in a heartbreaking number of individual instances, mistreated: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s belief that five to seven per cent of native students in residential schools died in those schools is a horrifying accusation. But none of it justifies the invocation of the word genocide, which is a contemptible device to tar esteemed people like John A. Macdonald with the brush of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and others who set out to murder millions of totally innocent

people.

The policy, which was one of assimilation, acculturation, or even deracination, was misconceived, frequently unjustly administered, and the horror stories of what happened in the residential schools are the very worst of it. But the fact that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission employs the term "cultural genocide" is neither true nor conciliatory, though I wholeheartedly support the official purposes of the commission, and am mortified by the summary of its findings I have seen. We must know the proportions of wrongs committed, and do whatever we can to make amends.

But we are dealing with a policy of using high office for unctuous national moral self-flagellation; the country didn't murder native schoolchildren and at every stage would have been just as shocked as we are now to learn of it. In the same address the chief justice lamented that West Coast Japanese Canadians were rounded up without trial, their property seized, and bustled into "concentration camps." It was a shameful policy, made more odious by it being a heel-clicking imitation of the United States policy devised by some of its greatest modern liberals, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, John McCloy, Felix Frankfurter and William O. Douglas (and was chiefly opposed in that country by J. Edgar Hoover, a fact the left has almost air-brushed from history).

But the victims were not in "concentration camps" as the chief justice perfectly well knows; they were in boredom camps, with their families, where they had nothing to concentrate on. It was shameful and was recognized as such in the Mulroney government's commendable restitution and apology of 1993, but the efforts in high and authoritative places to invoke the Nazi and Communist vocabulary of oppression in respect of the morally insalubrious official episodes in this country's history, compound, and do not ameliorate, the shame.

There appear to be terrible strains in the native community

between the emotional attachment to traditional life and the notorious temptations and diversions of modern Western life. It is not the case that the Europeans have no right to be here, and we have made vastly more of this continent than its original inhabitants could have done; it was only the mighty continent of North America that prevented the triumph of real genocidal regimes in Europe and the Far East in the great wars of the last century. It ill behoves the chief justice to rail against the proximity to the Supreme Court of a monument to the victims of communism, while imputing to the society whose senior jurist she is the practice of any form of genocide. Nor should the federal government be building superfluous prisons and deliberately worsening the conditions of the incarcerated, especially when it can be certain that an inordinate number of the occupants of these prisons will be native people, a policy that is a triple declaration of bankruptcy: in criminal justice, rehabilitation, and native peoples policy.

In fairness to the Harper government, it did its best in agreeing a $2 billion education catch-up program for the native people; their leaders rejected it and forced out the First Nations' national chief, Shawn Atleo, who negotiated it. The relationship between official Canada and the First Nations is full of sadness, mistakes and dishonour, but both sides share it, and respect for native government often results in grievous corruption and despotism by the native leaders.

Despite everything, even the First Nations should be grateful that the Europeans came here. There has been quite enough shameful conduct to go round, including by some of the natives. Let us all repent past wrongdoing without demeaning histrionics and hyperbole, and be proud of whatever we are ethnically: all cultures and nationalities have their distinctions. The whole country must do what it can to atone for the past, but a continuing orgy of recriminations will be unjust in itself, produce a nasty backlash, and will aggravate grievances.

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