



The election of Perry Bellegarde as the new AFN chief provides an opportunity to “re-set the relationship,” writes Dale Eisler. Here, Bellegarde delivers a keynote to a Canada 2020 symposium on First Nations. Canada 2020 photo, Matthew Usherwood

First Nations and Public Policy:

A LEGACY OF FAILURE WITH BLAME ALL AROUND

Dale Eisler

The relationship between the federal government and Canada's First Nations and aboriginal peoples has been fraught with misjudgment, mistrust and injustice for as long as our nation's history has been recorded. The findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission needs to be a turning point that helps shape a national commitment to right the wrongs of the past and chart a new path forward.

There has been no greater failure of public policy in Canada than the inability of successive governments to deliver social and economic justice for First Nations and aboriginal people. Given the facts, it's long past time for serious soul searching by all involved.

The social and economic evidence is stark and overwhelming. Aboriginal people represent 4.3 per cent of the Canadian population and their numbers are growing faster than the general population. Yet by virtually any measure, the majority are a people apart, disconnected from the mainstream of the Canadian economy and society.

They suffer from an unemployment rate more than double (14.6 per cent vs 6.3) the national average. Their educational outcomes lag far behind those of other Canadians. Only 40 per cent of young adults living on reserves have completed a high school education. The completion rate climbs to 70 per cent for off-reserve First Nation students, compared to a Canada-wide completion rate of 88 per cent. Only 8.7 per cent of First Nations Canadians have a post-secondary degree, compared to 26 per cent for the rest of the population. With education more critical than ever in today's economy, the outcome is predictable. In far too many cases, First Nations people face a life of grinding poverty. It's a truth reflected in other ways, not the least of which being that First Nations and aboriginal people account for more than 23 per cent of people in custody in federal institutions, a number that has grown 43 per cent in the last five years.

This is not to say there haven't been extraordinary individual and collective successes of First Nations and Aboriginal people. There have been, which makes their success all the more remarkable considering the historical, social, economic and systemic barriers they have faced.

As you might expect, this all translates into dreadful social outcomes that are visible across Canada. Unfortunately, often the worst results are most evident in rural and remote First Nations and aboriginal communities, where poverty, social dysfunction and a lack of opportunity can be a part of daily life. The vast majority of Canadians are either not exposed to that reality, or if they are aware of it, can keep it out of mind because they don't witness it on a regular basis.

Every so often, though, the reality of life for many First Nations and aboriginal people intrudes on the conscience of Canadians. But never has the emotional impact been greater than with release of the summary report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into residential schools.

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The horrific consequences of a public policy that destroyed generations of First Nation families by stripping them of their dignity and identity—with the consequences still evident today—should haunt Canadians. It amounted to what Supreme Court Justice Beverley McLachlin, as well as Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair and others have explicitly termed “cultural genocide.”

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This intrusion on the Canadian conscience has happened too with the growing national focus on missing and murdered aboriginal women. Even more compelling are recurring cases of child poverty, neglect and the failure of social service agencies to adequately protect children that come into their care. In Saskatchewan, the province's Children's Advocate Bob Pringle has chronicled in heart-wrenching terms the suffering and death of children, many of them of aboriginal ancestry, in the care of an over-burdened child welfare system. The most recent was the death of a six-year-old boy at the hands of a 10-year-old. In Canada, the aboriginal youth suicide rate is six times the rate for non-aboriginal youth.

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Despite annual funding from the federal government of \$6.8 billion in 2014-15—almost \$6.7 billion flowing as grants and contributions—the living conditions for many First Nations people remain bleak.

The causes of this reality are documented and deeply rooted in our nation's history. They reach back to the first contact between First Nations people and European settlers. From the signing of treaties or encroachment without treaty, colonization through the creation of reserves, attempts to assimilate and ultimately eradicate aboriginal culture and history through residential schools, we all see the result. It is played out now as First Nations struggle to break free from that history by asserting their treaty rights and establish the mechanisms for sustainable self-government.

All that we know. The challenge is to find a path forward that finally begins to change what is a stain on the Canadian conscience.

A good starting point would be to accept collective responsibility. There is plenty of blame to go around. That is not to suggest all the public policies applied through the decades were done with malicious intent. Certainly in some cases they were, as documented by University of Regina historian James Daschuk. In his award-winning book “Clearing the Plains” Daschuk describes the “politics of starvation” that were used as a state-sponsored weapon against the Plains First Nations. But many other decisions were taken based on what people thought were appropriate at the time, however misguided and ill-conceived they might appear now.

But before a new path can be set, there needs to be strong and clear-minded

leadership. That means a willingness to admit failure by all involved and a commitment to not repeat the mistakes of the past.

The foundation for effective public policy is public credibility. Credibility is based on trust, and trust begins with a belief that all those engaged in the issue are willing to admit their mistakes, take their share of responsibility for past failures, learn from them, and demonstrate a willingness to work collaboratively to tackle what are daunting challenges. Apportioning responsibility for the state of First Nations and aboriginal Canadians is always a delicate subject. But reconciliation requires it.

The guilt and responsibility must be shouldered by non-aboriginal society and governments. The loss of land, culture, language, way of life and identity, as part of being a colonized people, has led to today's reality for many First Nations people and communities. There have been some efforts to admit mistakes and accept responsibility. Chief among them has been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission itself and \$1.6 billion in financial compensation that was offered to survivors of the residential school system.

But as part of reconciliation contemporary First Nations and aboriginal leaders need to recognize their own challenges. With many First Nations lacking any serious economic base, many are effectively welfare communities. In some cases, the result is grossly unequal distribution of wealth, with chiefs and members of band councils using their positions to allocate financial resources to themselves and others they designate. This type of behaviour is far from unique to First Nations, but is more visible because of the lack of economic opportunity so many face. Indeed, the Idle No More movement was at least partly driven by grassroots discontent with existing First Nations leadership.

With the election of Perry Bellegarde as the new National Chief of the As-

sembly of First Nations, there's an opportunity to reset the relationship. A cornerstone of Bellegarde's agenda is the recognition of treaty rights as the foundation for building a new relationship between First Nations and non-aboriginal Canadians. He talks about the creation of an independent Treaty Commissioner as an arbiter to ensure historic and legal obligations are met. Bellegarde also points to the "fiscal gap" that separates First Nations people from other Canadians. It becomes evident in child poverty rates in First Nations communities almost double the national average, where First Nations children receive 22 per cent less funding for child welfare services than other Canadian children. "We are caught in a system that has First Nations administering our own poverty," Bellegarde says.

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Clearly, addressing the fiscal gap is part of the answer, but only part. A new way forward must tackle the need to improve educational outcomes for First Nations. Until First Nations students can access the same quality of education as non-aboriginal students, real, transformational change will not occur. The collapse last year of the federal government's attempt to reform First Nations education dealt a damaging blow to relations with First Nations. But rather than inhibit further attempts at on-reserve education reform, it should serve as a catalyst for both sides to redouble efforts. Former Prime Minister Paul Martin's Aboriginal Educational Initiative, which focuses on giving First Nations and aboriginal kids a chance at a quality education,

is one example of a possible model for a path forward. There's no doubt that successful reform of First Nations education will be costly. But as the bumper sticker says: "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

Another critical dimension of the answer is real and sustainable economic development. First Nations need access to their own-source revenues that come from investment and entrepreneurship, or potentially sharing of natural resource revenues. As Chief Clarence Louie of the Osoyoos, B.C. First Nation says, the most important thing First Nations people need is jobs. Without employment, there is little hope. "Every child should wake up with one parent going to work. A working parent is the first role model we need," says Louie.

These are all worthy and urgent policy objectives. But the first step down the road to real progress and meaningful change begins with the admission of past failures. The time has come to accept collective responsibility for the missteps of past leadership that have bequeathed our country such a sad legacy.

Canadians, both non-aboriginal and aboriginal, need to hear that from their leaders. Until they do, there won't be the necessary good will and public pressure to finally overcome the grim past and hopeless present of so many of our citizens. Now is the time for good will to emerge on all sides and with it a focus on public policy that actually, finally, makes a difference. **P**

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