

Systemic Racism Against Canada's Indigenous People Cries Out for Action

By Beverly Sabourin & Peter Andre Globensky - Hamilton Spectator, June 10/20 *

It has been a horrific diversion. From the cable news carpet-bombing coverage of the COVID crisis and its related urgencies and stupidities, the murder of George Floyd has quite literally redirected the world's attention to that other infectious disease — racism. The recording and subsequent social media sharing of what some have correctly called a lynching by a police officer has roused and animated American and international protests including those in Canada. It has galvanized the **Black Lives Matter** movement and provided the media with a focus of attention on the Black community in North America unseen since the beginning of the movement. The ongoing protests and the continuous razor-sharp focus brought to them by the media have brought racism back to the forefront of the public narrative.

Interview after interview with members of the Black community in both countries have underscored the breadth and depth of racism — in our public institutions and private attitudes rendered complicit by the comfort of middle-class lives and the privileges they enjoy. The evidence is overwhelming. From discrimination in employment and housing to racial profiling, the Black community in Canada has been too often deliberately and unacceptably marginalized and brutalized in the process.

But something is missing in all of this and appears only rarely in the seams of the carpet coverage of the protests following the Floyd murder. From the 2018 report of the Office of the Independent Review Director in Ontario: "*Overall, systematic racism exists in the Thunder Bay Police Service at an institutional level*" to the disturbing findings of the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, bigotry and racist actions and attitudes both systemic and personal have been the rot chewing away at our national identity as an allegedly fair and tolerant country.

With the bright and shining spotlight now so justly fixated on Black Lives Matter in Canada, why has the glare of that spotlight diminished to but a flickering shudder when it has come to highlighting the treatment of Indigenous people in Canada? Does our own history not suggest that now is also the time to give those issues of systemic racism and discrimination the attention, the glaring spotlight it justly deserves? From the forceful acquisitions of their lands, to "*taking the Indian out of the child*," to occasionally changing the dust covers on the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or the National Inquiry into Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, our response to systemic racism in Canada has been weak-kneed at best.

Focusing media attention on one maligned community does not support common cause and it is unfortunate that Indigenous leaders have had to yell so much louder to receive equivalent attention for the often genocidal policies of past governments in Canada and the current ones that have paid lip service to "*reconciliation*."

There are a number of possible reasons for this. The blanket exposure given to the protests have been a "*welcome diversion*" from the constant COVID coverage creating that low-grade and persistent anxiety caused by isolation and worry. More likely, repeated exposure to almost nine minutes of one of the most brutal, publicly-filmed executions in recent memory has generated the outrage required to rail and rally against this gross injustice and demand change. There is no known film footage of a 16-year Indigenous girl viciously beaten and bruised, raped repeatedly and dumped naked into an isolated ditch.

There are scores of proposals of where to start. One way to encourage systemic change, especially with governments whose ability to follow-up on commitments is negligible at best, is to establish formal, independent “*accountability*” inquiry mechanisms. Their twofold objective? First, to track and publicly report on the implementation of recommendations they, these same governments have both commissioned and accepted. Second, to annually and formally report to parliaments and the public on the progress of implementation. Conscious of this measurement tool, politicians would be more reluctant to so glibly “*move on to the next fire that must be smothered.*” Replacing the rot with more a solid foundation is a sound way to build.

* Beverly Sabourin is a former director of the Indigenous Access Program at Red River College (Winnipeg) and retired as the vice-provost of Aboriginal Initiatives at Lakehead University and is a member of the Pic Mobert Ojibwe. Peter Andre Globensky is a former senior policy adviser on Indigenous Affairs in the office of the prime minister and was the first director of programs and advocacy at the Canadian Centre for Rights and Democracy.

What I Have Learned So Far - By Mary Oliver *

**Meditation is old and honourable, so why should I
not sit, every morning of my life, on the hillside,
looking into the shining world? Because, properly
attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion.
Can one be passionate about the just, the
ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit
to no labour in its cause? I don't think so.
All summations have a beginning, all effect has a
story, all kindness begins with the sown seed.
Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of
light is the crossroads of — indolence, or action.
Be ignited, or be gone.**

Mary Jane Oliver was an American poet who won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In 2007, The New York Times described her as "far and away, the US's best-selling poet."

...if we really want an effective end to violence we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally.

Monsignor Óscar Romero, El Salvador

LAMENTATIONS 5 FOR 2020 – BY SOONG-CHAN RAH *

Remember, Lord, what happened to Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd;
look and see the disgraceful way their bodies were treated.
Our inheritance of the image of God in every human being
has been co-opted and denied by others
The family of Ahmaud, Breonna, and George Floyd has lost their loved ones,
widowed mothers once again grieve their dead children.
We must scrap for our basic human rights (even to sit peacefully in our homes);
our basic needs (even the need to breathe) have a great price.
Corrupt officers pursue us with their knees on our necks;
we are weary and we find no rest.
We submit to uncaring government officials and to big business to get enough bread.
Our ancestors sinned the great sin of instituting slavery;
they are no more — but we bear their shame.
The system of slavery and institutionalized racism ruled over us,
and there is no one to free us from their hands.
We get bread (or jog in our neighbourhoods) at the risk of our lives
because of the guns on the streets.
George Floyd is down on the street, his body crying out for air.
Black women have been violated throughout our nation's history;
Taylor gunned down in her own home.
Noble black men have been hung, lynched, and gunned down.
elders and spokesmen are shown no respect.
Young men can't find work because of unjustly applied laws.
Unjustly incarcerated because of staggering negative expectations.
The elder statesmen and civil rights leaders have been assassinated;
young people who speak out their protest through music are silenced.
Trust in our ultimate triumph has diminished;
our triumphant proclamation of victory has turned to a funeral dirge.
Our sense of exceptionalism has been exposed.
Woe to us, for we have sinned,
because of this our hearts are faint,
because of these things our eyes grow dim,
for our cities lie desolate with predatory lenders and gentrifiers prowling over them.
You, LORD, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation.
Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us for so long?
Restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return;
renew as that we may find a new way forward
unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.



* From: Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times by Soong-Chan Rah-Milton, Englebretson Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. The poem appeared in Sojo.net - an on-line daily news service of Sojourners Magazine – on May 29/20.