

Banking While Brown: Indigenous People and Structural Racism in Canada

by Nikki Sanchez

FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA, life can be hard. There is a long list of socio-economic indicators that testify to that fact. In our everyday experiences, there can be little space to breathe amid the cascading indignities, to see hope in movement towards change here and there. But, they are often short lived, and punctuated by moments in our collective history that reveal how hollow whatever gesture towards transformation is on offer.

Despite promises from the second Liberal Government under Justin Trudeau to address racism via the “full implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Recommendations” and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women’s and Girls Calls to Justice, instances of structural anti-Indigenous racism in Canada are on-going, if not escalating, and continue to make headlines.

A very recent case at the Bank of Montreal highlights this trend. It also signals the possibility of change, which has so often been fleeting. When the BMO case was made public, Indigenous peoples and Canadians spoke up, recognizing this injustice and calling for institutions to be accountable. Could we be on the eve of a lasting movement towards change to finally address structural racism?

A LACK OF “RESPECT” AT THE BANK OF MONTREAL

One of these moments occurred on December 20th, 2019, when Maxwell Johnson visited BMO for an appointment with his 12-year-old granddaughter Tori-Anne and son Morgan.

His intention was to help Tori open her first bank account so he could transfer her money when she travelled with her basketball team. Johnson, a 56-year-old Heiltsuk artist, had been a customer of the bank for many years prior.

He, like all Heiltsuk tribal members, had recently received an **Aboriginal Rights Settlement Package**. Upon presenting both of their government-issued status cards, his birth certificate, and his granddaughter’s medical card, the BMO employee questioned their ID and claimed the numbers in his account didn’t add up. The BMO employee took their identification and left them to wait until she called them upstairs. When they were called to retrieve their identification, the Vancouver police also came to meet them. Both Maxwell and his granddaughter were then handcuffed, detained, and read their rights.

Maxwell, who waited until the second week of January to come forward with his story for fear of the public backlash, told Gitksan reporter Angela Sterritt that after they were both put in handcuffs, he looked over to see his granddaughter crying; “You can see how scared she was ... It was really hard to see that,” he told Sterritt, who broke the story in the mainstream media.

Despite BMO's CEO statement asserting that Johnson and his granddaughter were not treated with respect, as well as an RCMP and mayoral acknowledgement that a mistake had been made, Johnson and Sterritt were still subject to public scrutiny for naming the incident as racial profiling.

The consistent response of victim-blaming and shaming is symptomatic of the ever-evolving and ongoing structural racism against the original peoples of so-called Canada. Experts say what happened to Johnson is part of what they call a rise in “commercial racial profiling” whereby Indigenous and other racialized individuals are received with suspicion by retailers, bankers, etc.

Sadly, stories like this—and the notion of commercial racial profiling—reflect one of the many forms of structural racism that impact Indigenous peoples of all ages, locations, and nations. They are a daily occurrence, whether it be the recent incident where a 19-year girl old who had just “aged out” of foster care was found dead in her tent (where she had been living since being ejected from her final foster home), the unbelievable acquittals in the trials of the murderers of both 15-year-old Tina Fontaine and 22-year-old Colten Boushie, or the preventable deaths fueled by racist assumptions and neglect in the Canadian medical system.

These tragic and regular events make it impossible to deny that structural racism not only remains prevalent in Canada; but also that the implications of this systemic anti-Indigenous racism means that at anytime or place, we are potential victims of racial profiling, death by the social apparatus' that claims to be in place to protect us.

Considering the historical and economic legacy of Canada, for Indigenous people like Maxwell Johnson and his granddaughter to be treated with inequity, injustice, and inherent suspicion, makes perfect sense. Indeed, while the history of Canada is short, historical amnesia is effectively national policy. How else can we explain that despite federal government apologies for residential school, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a National Inquiry into the over 4000 missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two spirited people, this racism endures?

How can we find so-called “reconciliation” when acts of violence, land theft, and economic disenfranchisement remain ongoing?

LINKING CULTURAL GENOCIDE AND STRUCTURAL RACISM

Although we are in an era of so-called “reconciliation”, the colonial practices that were first enacted in order to clear and claim a country have never ended. These practices include (but are not limited to), resource extraction, predatory capitalism, patriarchy, hetero-hormativity, and assimilation into European cultural norms, also known as white supremacy.

While Indigenous resistance challenges each of these processes, they change forms through settler colonial time.

As an example, while compulsory residential school attendance officially ended with amendments to the Indian Act in 1951, it transformed into the Sixties Scoop. The mass apprehension of Indigenous children from their families to white foster care and adoption that lasted into the mid-1980s and continues today.

There are many more examples of this shape-shifting: continued economic disenfranchisement, racially motivated violence, overrepresentation in prisons, under funding of Indigenous students per capita, and of course, racial profiling, are the modern manifestation of everything from the Doctrine of Discovery to the Indian Act.

The Truth and Reconciliation report classifies all of the above as “Cultural Genocide”. Over the past five years, Amnesty International has released multiple reports accusing the Canadian government of human rights violations against Indigenous peoples. While “structural racism” and ongoing processes of colonization may seem like vague or abstract concepts, concrete examples of how they manifest in the lives of Indigenous people are not hard to find:

Apprehension of children: While the last residential school closed in 1996, this country removes Indigenous children from their families at a rate that ranks among the highest in the developed world. While only 7% of children in Canada are Indigenous, **they account for nearly half** of all the foster children in the country. One example of this is the common practice in the province of Manitoba for child and family services to apprehend babies at birth if CFS deem them “at risk”. They are **often taken** directly from their delivery rooms with parents given no prior notice.

Violence against Indigenous bodies: The most recent estimates assert that there are **currently over 4,000** missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada. Despite an government inquiry on this issue, the number continues to rise. There are also hundreds of cases of undocumented missing and murdered Indigenous men. Additionally, the statistics of police violence against Indigenous people and deaths in police custody are **exponentially higher** than any other demographic in Canada. Indigenous women are **four times** more likely to be victims of violence than non-Indigenous women.

Incarceration: While Indigenous people make up only 4% of the Canadian population **more than a quarter** of all prison inmates are First Nation, Metis, or Inuit. **38 percent** of incarcerated women are Indigenous. This number rises to more than 50 percent in Prairie provinces.

Poverty: According to Statistics Canada, **the median income** of First Nations living off reserve is approximately \$22,000, while for First Nations living on reserve is just over \$14,000. **Over 60** First Nations communities are currently under “boil water advisories”.

Environmental Racism: from Elsipogtog First Nation in New Brunswick where members were **arrested** for trying to protect their treaty territory from fracking; to the communities in Northern Alberta who are being **poisoned** on their homelands due to Tar Sands extraction; to the communities in Northern Saskatchewan who are seeing exponential rates of cancer as a result of the **uranium/nuclear** industry operations in their territory; to the flooding **and removal** of communities from the Peace region to build infrastructure for the Site C dam; to the Coastal First Nations who are putting their bodies in the pathway of pipelines; to the battles over **fish farm licences** in West Coast territories.

Coastal First Nation communities have spent decades fighting to keep oil tankers out of our waters as well. While successful to date, it has come at a high cost to communities, individuals and the rebuilding of a coastal economy as time, money and energy are spent fighting the environmental racism that comes with resource development.

It is time for change.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that in order to address these harms, foundational changes to Canadian institutions are required. That being said, it is no mystery what those specific changes are in order for just and respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples. Over the past 30 years, various inquiries and commissions such as the Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba (1991), the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), the Ipperwash Inquiry (2007), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry (2019) have all articulated the violence that Indigenous peoples continue to face as a result of ongoing colonialism in Canada.

In fact, more than 1,000 recommendations in total have emerged from these inquiries and commissions in the past three decades.

In short, not only have the issues been identified relating to structural racism and inequality, but so too have the solutions, hundreds of them. Some of these are included in Yellowhead's "How do we solve Structural Racism: a 5x5 Review?"

The fact that these prescriptions have been ignored for so long calls into question a respectful future for our collective relationship. How can it be so hard to open a bank account without arrest, or fly on airplanes without being racially profiled?

With the capacity for dignity so limited among Canadians, and while we wait for the calls to justice or action to be answered, we can continue to support each other as Indigenous and racialized communities in building a different kind of world.