

The House of Commons, Jagmeet Singh & The Disappearing Trick of Canadian Racism

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THE LAST TIME the House of Commons sat, they kicked out NDP leader Jagmeet Singh.

The thin justification was that Singh had to be expelled for calling Bloc Québécois MP Alain Therrien “racist,” after Therrien blocked Singh’s motion on the racism of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). While many MP’s have **called each other racist** and **used racist or sexist slurs over the years**, few, if any, were similarly removed.

Singh’s ejection has contributed to igniting a public conversation on racism in Canada. But the truth is that these fires of racism have been burning all along.

A HISTORY OF RCMP VIOLENCE

This public conversation should really begin with the RCMP.

Despite their leadership’s persistent denialism about the existence of systemic racism, the RCMP has a clear track record of abuse against Indigenous, Black and Muslim communities. This is well documented. And yet, the RCMP continues to be funded, armed, and accorded a licence to kill.

In the last few weeks alone, RCMP officers **killed** Mi’kmaw man Rodney Levi (bringing the total Indigenous people killed by police in 2020 so far to nine), **assaulted** an Inuk man by hitting him with a truck, were **exposed** for brutalizing Athabasca Chipewyan Chief Allan Adam, and were found by a BC court to have “falsely arrested, falsely imprisoned, assaulted, and battered” Wet’suwet’en elder Irene Joseph. Instead of addressing this violence, the RCMP is being permitted to further expand its arsenal of military-style weapons with the **purchase of two new “counter assault tactical vehicles”** (the same tanks used in the military occupation of Afghanistan).

But it is difficult to “reform” racism and violence when it is so deeply embedded in the system. RCMP practices of **killing, rape, torture**, and assault have been copiously documented by **public inquiries, truth commissions, international human rights groups**, and **civil liberties organizations**.

The 2006 O’Connor Inquiry on Canada’s role in the secret imprisonment and prolonged torture of Maher Arar in Syria **determined** that “the RCMP inaccurately described Mr. Arar and his wife as Islamist extremists...and refused to support the Government of Canada to have Mr. Arar released from prison in Syria.” None of the RCMP officers involved were ever prosecuted for their **complicity in torture**. Instead, **several** were actually promoted and even honoured for “exceptional service.”

In 2013, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) **investigation** on the RCMP's "abusive policing" of Indigenous communities in northern British Columbia found "levels of fear [of the RCMP] that HRW normally finds in countries such as Iraq where security forces have played an integral role in state abuses and enforcement of authoritarian policies."

Six years later in 2019, **the final report** of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls concluded that "the RCMP have not proven to Canada that they are capable of holding themselves to account – and, in fact, many of the truths shared [at the Inquiry] speak to ongoing issues of systemic and individual racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination that prevent honest oversight from taking place."

All of this is, perhaps, not surprising given that the RCMP was **established** in 1873 as a paramilitary organization to expel Indigenous peoples from their lands. It makes sense that the organization would continue to reproduce the racial violence and domination it was created to inflict. It is equally unsurprising that Canada's Parliament, **premised on the genocidal erasure** of pre-existing Indigenous political systems, would continue to reproduce the racism lying at the heart of its settler colonial sovereignty.

WHOSE NATIONAL SECURITY?

Sparked by the death of George Floyd in the United States and those of Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Chantel Moore, Rodney Levi, Ejaz Chaudhry, and so many others in Canada, many Canadians are currently rising up against police brutality. But the logic of racial policing extends far beyond the bodies officially bearing the name of "police".

Do Canadians know the scope of their complicity in the dispossession, exploitation, and brutalization of racialized people?

There are the **national security agencies** like CSIS empowered to engage in mass surveillance while their own abuses remain protected from sight; and the **military** deployed to supposedly prevent "terror attacks" at home by **preemptively** inflicting mass terror on populations abroad. There are the immigration authorities patrolling the **colonial borders** that permit **corporate power** to flow freely while migrants from the Global South are blocked and **detained**. And there are the everyday Canadian citizens effectively deputized to act as the **eyes, ears, mouths, and private arms** of the White supremacist status quo.

There is also the House of Commons, which gasps in shock at the word "racist" while it entrenches and enables the material violence of systemic racism, including by the RCMP. This hallowed space supposedly profaned by Singh is the same institution that has presided over a vast catalogue of abuses, including:

- The continuing **denial** of Indigenous sovereignty and **violation** of Indigenous territories for corporate development projects;
- The **proliferation** of mandatory minimum criminal sentences, further intensifying the colonial confinement and control of Indigenous and Black people through **mass incarceration**;
- The expansion of mass surveillance, pre-emptive detention, and no-fly lists with the **2015 Anti-Terrorism Act (Bill C-51)** and **2017 National Security Act (Bill C-59)** – bolstering a national security apparatus that targets **Muslim communities** and **Indigenous land and water defenders** as "terrorist threats";
- The exclusion and denial of fair process for refugee claimants, with the **US-Canada Safe Third Country Agreement** and **amendments** to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act – punishing **predominantly Black and Brown** asylum seekers, including people **escaping conditions** that Canada bears responsibility for creating;
- The **extreme exploitation** of Black, Brown, and Asian migrant workers, enabled by the **legislated precariousness** encoded in the Temporary Foreign Workers Program;
- The **defunding** of international development, and concomitant **escalation** of funding for the military – wielded primarily against **Global South countries** and **Indigenous nations** resisting land theft;
- The **perpetuation of impunity** for Canadian mining corporations profiting from severe violations of Indigenous peoples' rights abroad; and

- The **criminalization** of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities with the Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act; it is apparently more acceptable to pass a law calling certain communities “barbaric” than it is to call out an MP for being “racist” (While the name of the law has now been changed, its problematic substance remains fully intact.)

The list here is far from exhaustive. In fact, I suspect readers can add an equal amount of legislation from Parliament or policy from one federal government or another. Another Brief could be written for each of most of the provinces in this country, too.

The point here is to ask: what does it tell us when breaches of “civility” such as Singh’s are treated as more scandalous than the anti-Indigenous, anti-Black, anti-Brown violence upon which this facade of “civilization” has been built?

CANADIAN APOLOGIES

Following the ejection of Singh from the House of Commons, the media fixated on whether the NDP leader owed Therrien an apology. The coverage barely looked at Therrien himself, if reporters even mentioned his name or his actions at all, and largely refused to engage with the history of racism in Canada. Perversely, the word “racist” is treated as more offensive than racism itself.

More, there is a tremendous failure to examine the structural elements of racism and the institutions that uphold it.

Instead, when the harm becomes so extreme and the advocacy by the victims so powerful that it must be confronted, there are apologies and in some cases compensation – for example, for residential schools, or the torture of Maher Arar and **several other Muslim men**. But there are few meaningful actions to address the structures giving rise to the violations in the first place. Canada is still working to deport Muslim refugees like **Mohamed Harkat** to torture; there are **more** Indigenous children taken from their families by the contemporary child “welfare” system that at the height of the residential schools.

While the calls for Singh to apologize aggressively defend Canada’s racial order, government apologies for past wrongs serve to mask it. The stinging consciences of Canadians are anaesthetized. But the underlying wounds continue to fester.