

Renaming Institutions

By Rosemary Brown, Brentwood Cares

Last year the Federation of Calgary Communities issued the following statement. “Racism and discrimination have no place in our communities”. The Federation also asked us to think about our role in eliminating racism and discrimination.

I think that one role we can play is to implement the Calls of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Many of the 94 calls stress the importance of educating Canadians about “the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, Aboriginal-Crown relations....” and anti-racism training.

These calls are meant to address the serious gap in knowledge and understanding on the part of most Canadians when it comes to our history. This gap explains why in the process of naming public institutions to acknowledge the contributions of public figures, we often end up honouring people who in fact have caused great harm to others. As one Indigenous woman states:

“I am a member of the Change Langevin School Group. My family is mourning with the rest of the Indigenous community -people across the country. I spent a decade in a school named after one of the people responsible for the harm that affects my family today. The pain we face is heartbreaking and heavy. We knew they were there. This is the reality I face as an Indigenous mother”. (Heather Lucier, June 2021)

Some, instead of heeding the words of an Indigenous mother, continue to argue against changing institutional names, saying that this is rewriting or erasing history.

This argument begs the question of whose history are we talking about and what limited aspects of history are we learning about. We learn only men like MacDonald and Langevin were great because they were the fathers of Confederation, and built this country we call Canada. What we are not taught are the racist assumptions of white superiority that they shared and had the power to act on; implementing policies like the Indian Act and the residential school system, and other practices that did so much damage to Indigenous communities and families. I would like to believe that if we knew the full story, we would not want to honour their legacies as we have.

Meanwhile, then one Indigenous colleague has reminded me recently that we should not be so focused on the past that we ignore how colonization continues to operate through: systemic racism (being treated as “less than human”, poverty and institutions like the child welfare system.

We need to know the past but also what is going on today so we can participate in a meaningful journey of reconciliation.

To the 215 Indigenous children buried at the Kamloops Residential School

Now that your bodies have been discovered,

May your spirits find peace and solace in the embrace and ceremonies of your ancestors, living
and dead

We know your spirits do not want or need our settler tears

May we honour you by acting now

On the Calls of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,

By defending the land

And by no longer honouring the names of those responsible for your deaths.

Change the Name!

“It is estimated that 6000 children of the 150,000 who attended residential schools between the 1970’s and 1996 either died or disappeared.” (Bob Joseph, *21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act*, p.66)