'CULTURAL GENOCIDE'? NO, CANADA COMMITTED REGULAR GENOCIDE

Posted on June 11, 2015 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

Jesse Staniforth, thestar.com, 10 June 2015

Perhaps the most controversial issue to follow the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been the affirmation that the government of Canada had committed "cultural genocide" against Indigenous people through the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) system.

The word "cultural" seems to suggest that the IRS system was designed to destroy cultures but not people, a fact far from the reality of Residential Schools.

Jesse Staniforth, thestar.com, 10 June 2015

Perhaps the most controversial issue to follow the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been the affirmation that the government of Canada had committed "cultural genocide" against Indigenous people through the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) system.

The word "cultural" seems to suggest that the IRS system was designed to destroy cultures but not people, a fact far from the reality of Residential Schools.

"Cultural" is a civilizing adjective: it says that our policies were not truly evil, just deeply misguided.

Already this strangely diplomatic term has been a flashpoint among people unwilling to admit that our country committed any kind of genocide, even one eased by a reductive adjective. Our history must make these critics uneasy. The IRS system, though its mandate did not include deliberately killing members of Canada's Indigenous populations, was active in the following crimes, each of which constitutes genocide under the UN's convention on Genocide (1948):

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; and
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Canada did not pack Indigenous people onto train cars and send them to be gassed, or march them into fields and execute them with machine-gun fire. However, our country committed not "cultural" genocide, but just regular genocide.

We forcibly took children from families — sometimes at gunpoint — and flew them to remote locations they could not escape — sometimes in tiny handcuffs — where they were submitted to a program of forced labour and "education" designed to destroy their cultures and civilizations. This desire to destroy cultures seems to be the reasoning for various public figures' use of the adjective

"cultural" before genocide. The other reason, I presume, is that some cling tightly — and childishly — to the idea that Canada has always been on the side of goodness and justice, and they find it very hard to accept, admit, and announce that we are a country that committed a program of genocide that lasted for many decades.

Yet Residential Schools were predicated on the notion that Indigenous children were less human than other children, so they were worked like animals in the slave labour many schools mandated. For the same assumption of their lesser humanity, children in the IRS system were often deliberately malnourished and kept in cramped, filthy quarters. When they subsequently fell sick as a result of this racially motivated neglect and mistreatment, they were not provided adequate medical treatment and died by the thousands.

The Canadian government was happy to leave these children to die because they were Indigenous. In the early part of the century we stopped keeping track of how many children died: the commission concluded this was because it made us look bad as a country. We did not change any of the conditions — we just changed the habit of keeping track of the children our system killed. And when Indigenous children died, we often did not consider them human enough to inform their families, to record their genders or their ages or the causes of their deaths, or to mark their graves.

Which part of this sounds civilized enough that it deserves to be mitigated by the adjective "cultural"? I'm not talking about the sexual violence. That was closely connected but it wasn't part of our state policy. The rest was, and it constituted a policy of genocide.

As a Canadian journalist working in Indigenous media, I have faced the fact that the history of this country is difficult and tragic. My great-grandfather was decorated for valour at Vimy Ridge at the same time as Aboriginal children were being taken at gunpoint to have their culture beaten and starved out of them. National histories are too big and complex to love simply.

I'm not so attached to my country to contort myself into defending our history of genocide — and I'd like to ask those who are: how would admitting that our country was guilty of this crime against humanity change your relation to this nation, to yourself, and to Indigenous people?

As of the closing of the TRC, the facts of the Canadian genocide of Indigenous peoples are now a part of the official record of this country's history, both for those who wish to face it, and those who wish to pretend it isn't there. These facts stand and will not change, because they are in the past. In the present day, it is only Canadians who can change — and will have to change — in order to acknowledge the disgraceful but fixed facts of our history.

Jesse Staniforth *is a Montreal-based freelance journalist and a regular contributor to the Nation magazine, serving the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee and the communities around James Bay.*