

Toronto Star

Facebook comment adds to Thunder Bay's battle with racism

The Thunder Bay Police is investigating its own members after Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler was the target of racist comments on The Chronicle Journal newspaper's Facebook page.



Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler wrote a letter to an editor to the Chronicle-Journal in Thunder Bay earlier this month. The letter, posted on Facebook on Sept. 17, received a number of racist responses, which the police are now investigating. (MICHELLE SIU / THE CANADIAN PRESS FILE PHOTO)

By **TANYA TALAGA** Global Economics Reporter
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THUNDER BAY—A one-line letter to the local newspaper by a prominent indigenous chief has caused further scrutiny of the conduct of Thunder Bay Police.

The police service is already being reviewed by Ontario's police oversight body regarding its conduct in the investigations into the deaths of indigenous people.

The Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD) has indicated the systemic review will examine how the force handled the deaths of seven indigenous students after a misconduct probe into the death of Stacey DeBungee, an indigenous man, is completed.

Now the force is investigating its own members after Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler was the target of racist comments on The Chronicle Journal newspaper's Facebook page.

"A number of specific comments posted on September 17 and 18, 2016, are now the subject of a Police Services Act investigation by the TBPS Professional Standards Unit. It is alleged that these comments had the involvement of members of the Thunder Bay Police Service," Chris Adams, an executive officer with the Thunder Bay Police Service, told the Star.

He added the investigation into these comments is a "top priority."

"These types of comments are not acceptable. They do not reflect the values of Thunder Bay Police Service. We would like to apologize to our indigenous community for the hurt these comments may cause," Adams said.

Fiddler sent a letter to the newspaper in response to an editorial published Sept. 15, headlined, "Racism claim not backed up."

The editorial concerned a female trainer who was providing anti-racism training to the police. The local CBC station had reported that the trainer was verbally abused during training sessions with the officers. However, the police and the city administrator in charge of the training argued the incident was misunderstood and blown out of proportion.

The editorial dismissed the story and said the police and the city are trying hard to improve relations with local indigenous residents.

Fiddler wrote that "the only thing worse than the conduct of Thunder Bay Police officers as reported by the CBC is the attempt by the police, and this newspaper, to justify it."

Some readers took Fiddler, the head of 49 First Nations who comprise NAN, to task.

One user, Rob Steudle, posted this on Facebook:

“Natives are killing natives and it’s the white mans fault natives are drunk and on the street and its white mans fault natives are homeless and its white mans fault and now natives are lying about how they are treated by white men an explanation is given and it’s the white men who are lying. Well let’s stop giving the natives money and see how that goes.”

In another post, someone using the name “just me,” noted, “Fiddler made a very short comment as he was probably in a hurry to check out of his fancy hotel and make it to his steak and eggs breakfast, as HIS PEOPLE are living in squalor on reserves.”

A local reporter from Aboriginal People’s Television Network noticed the comments and gave them to police.

Adams would not comment further. There is no confirmation that Steudle is a police officer with the Thunder Bay force or that he posted from Facebook accounts. There is a Robert Steudle listed as constable in Thunder Bay on the 2015 provincial Sunshine List.

Fiddler was extremely discouraged by the comments since an eight-month-long inquest into the deaths of seven indigenous students heard testimony that many former students experienced racism. Students testified they had eggs thrown at them or were called “dirty Indians.” Some complained about treatment they received by the police.

“There is a long history of distrust between the aboriginal community and the police. And even though there have been efforts to bridge that divide, it is still very much there,” Fiddler said before joining a walk in remembrance of residential school survivors.

The review by the OIPRD on the force is expected to begin this fall.

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