

Racism is misunderstood in letters, conversations about the Thunder Bay

Police Service

Posted: Saturday, October 8, 2016 6:00 am | *Updated: 7:41 am, Sat Oct 8, 2016.*

VIEWPOINT | [28 comments](#)

BY RICHARD MATTHEWS

FOR THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

I want to address some misunderstandings about racism that have emerged recently in letters and conversations about the Thunder Bay Police Service. I hope this will contribute to eliminating racism towards indigenous peoples in Thunder Bay as well as in Canada.

Many things keep racism alive and well. One of them is a lack of understanding. Racism is not well understood and it takes many forms. Interpersonal racism and systemic racism are particularly pertinent here.

Interpersonal racism involves acts of violence towards individuals because they belong to a particular ethnic group. It includes physical assaults, sexual violence and murder. It also includes verbal humiliations, insults and derogatory generalizations about entire groups.

The remarks of a police officer currently suspended and under review by the Thunder Bay Police Service is an example of interpersonal racism: “Natives are killing natives and it’s the white man’s fault. Natives are drunk on the street and it’s the white man’s fault.”

Interpersonal racism towards indigenous people is common in Canada. But there are Canadians, including police officers, who would never make such a statement and who would never seek to humiliate, insult or degrade indigenous people. Some of these people also do superb anti-racism work as far as they are able.

However, the problem of racism is much more complicated than this.

A recent anonymous letter to The Chronicle-Journal criticizing a respected indigenous leader shows this. After acknowledging the terrible things that have been done to indigenous peoples by Canadians and Canadian governments, the author objects to being called a systemic racist. But individual people cannot be systemic racists.

Systemic racism is about the social, economic, cultural and legal systems that advantage certain groups of people while disadvantaging others. In this case — Canada’s original sin — it is about the ongoing violent imposition of Canadian law upon sovereign indigenous peoples. The result of this is the widespread and continuing damage to their health, welfare, education and quality of life.

This violence shows up in specific federal and provincial laws, in the legal and prison systems, and in local, provincial and national policies. It shapes who gets what and how much.

Three current powerful examples of this are the inequitable funding for on-reserve child welfare services for First Nations children; the gross underfunding of the nursing stations on the fly-in First Nations communities; and the low pay and poor working conditions for indigenous on-reserve police forces.

More generally, we see it in the ignoring of treaties — where treaties exist — and in the treatment of both treaty and non-treaty indigenous peoples as conquered subjects rather than as sovereign peoples.

Importantly, interpersonal racism cannot be addressed without addressing systemic racism. One can be the finest, kindest person in Canada but still be working in and promoting that system. As an individual one can do great anti-racist work. But the background systemic racism cannot be resolved by the great characters of a few anti-racist individuals. Systemic racism is a problem of Canada's historical and ongoing colonialism. Ending it is a problem for all of us, including myself, who continue to benefit from it.

I urge that all of us in Thunder Bay, and in Canada, not let our fears stop us from considering how racism shapes us individually and socially. It is in us and amongst us.

As Gord Downie said, “We are not the country we thought we were.” Racism towards indigenous peoples is a fundamental problem in Canada. But it does not have to be this way. We can become a much better country. Here are some things anyone can do:

- Listen respectfully to the experiences of racism as told by Indigenous people.
- Believe them.
- Share those stories with others, so that they can also understand.
- Accept responsibility for our participation in racism and for the role we play in its continuation.
- Work to reconcile with indigenous peoples through changing our economic, political and legal systems to eliminate these imbalances and the systemic violence of Canada.

Instead of focusing on the hurtful rhetoric that occasionally appears in local and national media, our time would be better spent on the pursuit of knowledge, understanding and healing so we can move towards reconciliation and bring about positive change for ourselves and our communities.
