

Canada's Original Sin

Canada is recognized world-wide as one of the best countries in which to live. Its social programmes, standards of education, income levels, and economic opportunities are most attractive. Hence, refugees and immigrants line up to gain entrance. As a boy I too immigrated to Canada. My European parents recognized that a better life could be lived here. I have benefited greatly from their decision to move, and from Canada's immense freedoms and opportunities. Canada is now my homeland, it is in my blood. It is who I am. It defines me.

Who I am as a Canadian is not, however, without blemish or stain. There is in my collective Canadian past a "fall from grace." Canada as a nation was "born in sin."

Canada's "original sin" was the manner in which Europeans treated the Aboriginal Peoples as one nation. That original sin lies in the past. But, it also recurs daily. My freedom to prosper and benefit from what this great land offers has come at the cost and detriment of Aboriginal Peoples. This situation continues to be part of the present context. Canada's original sin perpetuates every time creative solutions intended to free Aboriginal Peoples are thwarted by non-native interests.

We easily deny sinful acts of the past. Then, of course, they also do not recur in the present either. Without an awareness of the past, we unwittingly repeat its mistakes.

Only recently have we become aware of, let alone acknowledge, the

atrocities committed to Aboriginal Peoples as Canada marched toward nationhood and prosperity. School textbooks portrayed Aboriginals as "savages", and it was in white society's interest to believe and perpetuate this notion.

We have now come to realize who the real savages actually were (Daniel N. Paul, We Were Not the Savages). Even the Christian churches, which ought to have recognized most acutely the notion of original sin, its perpetuating consequences and the need for (daily) confession and reconciliation, has sullied involvements in this sordid past.

Of interest, therefore, are the reactions to the recently released "Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples." Most media attention has centred on its cost: \$58 million. That diverts focus away from its real content, which profiles the legacy of Aboriginal treatment and reality in Canada: high rates of suicide, poverty, incarceration and substance abuse, low educational attainment, poor health and inadequate housing conditions.

Inaction, or even denial, in regard to the Aboriginal situation is to live a lie. After 500 years many still deny involvement in the historic and systematic destruction of the Aboriginal Peoples. Worse still, we "remain willfully oblivious to the destruction of Aboriginal communities, still maintain these issues are someone else's



responsibility and have nothing to do with us, still refuse to see ourselves implicated and complicit in our everyday lives" (Lorraine Land, "Recipe for assimilation or a new relationship?" Catalyst Vol 19, No. 8, Dec. 96 - Jan. 97).

Some of us have examined our collective souls, found matters wanting, and taken some initial steps. The United Church of Canada, as one example, has officially confessed its complicity in Canada's original sin, and in a very moving ceremony asked Aboriginal Peoples for forgiveness. That forgiveness was granted. This ecclesiastical body, along with others, now strives to heal past and present injustices through restitution and reconciliation.

Many today recognize that positive steps must be taken to bring long term health and survival to Aboriginal communities. Some call for their assimilation as the best solution (David Olmstead, Speech in the NB Legislature, Dec. 4/96). But that amounts to little more than continued colonization at best, and paternalism at worst.

Commission Co-chairs George Erasmus and Rene Dussault, in their opening remarks upon the reports

release, stated the following: "The fact is that in crucial dimensions, Aboriginal cultures, values and world-views were — and remain — fundamentally different from the organizing principles of mainstream North American society. Yet Aboriginal Peoples have been (and still are) denied the right to fashion their societies and institutions in ways that are consistent with these values."

This recognition will go a long way in determining whether Canada will continue the assimilation (colonization) patterns of the past, or whether Aboriginal Peoples will be permitted the freedom to determine their own destiny, something other Canadians strongly insist on themselves.

The confession of sin is a matter of the heart, and it is good for the soul. It is also a daily necessity. One must not put it off till tomorrow, hoping it will go away or be forgotten. Sin — injustices, evil, wrong-doing — does not dissipate. It festers like a cancer, and pervades the entire body unleashing devastation slowly but surely. Only confession, reconciliation and restitution will bring genuine healing. The time to do so is now, today.

Forest Breeze

clear cutting?" I would probably have to agree: no, we would not. If anything, these conflicts certainly make resource managers realize that there are other values to account for and I believe that we, as Forestry professionals, have gotten that message and are trying to deal with it.

My problem, as I have previously mentioned, is not with the validity of the debates and controversies — it lies with the final value of these conflicts. As with any conflict evident in our society, there is usually some underlying causal factor lying at the heart which rarely gets unearthed. Quite often, as illustrated by the clear-cut debate, emotions run high.

The result has been that the environmental types have grabbed hold of the most obvious symptoms of a given problem (ie. the clear-cut) and have used this as a banner for their front-lines. As a last-ditch measure, I would grudgingly agree that this produces results to a degree; a piece of land gets saved or a species may get a temporary reprieve from human nature... things generally seem better. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that this is as enduring and effective as some would like to believe.

The reason for my pessimism is that I am looking in from the other side, and it seems to me that the resource manager's first reaction to accusations of wrongdoing, negligence, or ignorance is defensiveness. We get defensive. "What do these people know about it?" "Where do they get off?" "How dare these people say we don't know what we're doing while they sit in their wooden homes,

writing on pads of paper, sitting on their wooden furniture." So, in the end, it comes down to each side squaring off with their best refutations for each argument made. Strangely though, I don't see any real changes in the amount of clear cutting done or in the forest industry's opinion of its use.

My opinion is that clear cutting represents the most expedient method of removing large volumes of wood used to produce pulp and lumber products. The problem here is that our economy and forest industry requires increasingly more wood for these projects for two reasons.

First of all, society is and has been irresponsible and greedy with our resources. We constantly demand more wood products. Secondly, the forest industry is caught in the destructive cycle of "more is better." My prediction: clear cutting will continue regardless of restrictions placed on the industry. It is not readily apparent that these debates have changed anyone's attitude. I would argue that, if anything, the clear cutting issue has acted to solidify already stubborn opinions.

If we assume that this is a problem, maybe we should be asking "What is the limit?" "What are going to be the consequences?" "Who is responsible?" I am not sure whether this is a realistic argument but it seems that nothing can be "real" in our minds until we accept that old may not be good and that change is not necessarily bad. If we truly directed policy-making on this premise... who knows? What do you think?

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