

Racism in Canada – PROGRESS?

Presented to the Community of Federal Visible Minorities

So this Sikh guy invites a Jewish guy to an Irish pub to speak to a multicultural audience.

It is perhaps the ultimate irony that we meet here tonight, at a place named after Darcy McGee, a great Canadian leader, indeed one of the Fathers of Confederation. What is so ironic is that the man who was tried for Darcy McGee's murder was convicted and hung only a few blocks from here. Patrick Whelan, was condemned and killed in large part because of his ancestry, he was Irish. It was largely because of his heritage that he was associated with an insurrectionist political group, the Fenians, that he was targeted for prosecution.

His so called trial, featured the Prime Minister of the day sitting next to the trial judge, forensic evidence which should have proven his innocence, but didn't, and a spectacle of a trial which was completed in a few days.

Some of the greatest travesties of Canadian Justice have been borne of racism. Our willingness to paint the majority with the tarred brush of the radical, unrepresentative few, has been unrelenting and with tragic consequences. We have over and over again, failed to learn the lessons of our intolerant past. We continue to choose to euphemistically "ethnically profile" minorities in the name of our collective security. Our representatives unrealistically respond to racism through legislation instead of education. And we, as individuals, for the most part, remain silent except very occasionally, in response to the blatant acts of racism.

Chinese immigrants first came to Canada in 1858. From 1880, thousands of Chinese workers were imported to build Canada's national railway and were paid starvation wages for performing the most dangerous tasks. The Canadian government thanked them by imposing a unique and racist law, the head tax of 1885, which forced all Chinese immigrants to pay a \$50 tax. Between 1885 and 1923, the Canadian government collected an estimated \$23 million from 81,000 Chinese immigrants. (This would be worth approximately \$1 billion today.)¹

¹ Racism against Asian Canadians
Diversity and Human Rights at uoguelph.ca

The head tax imposed a crushing burden on the impoverished new immigrants. At the time, \$500 was the equivalent of two years' wages. Many paid off their debt through long, painful years of hard labour. At the same time, the Canadian government was paying many European immigrants to settle on land that had been seized from Aboriginal peoples. The Chinese were the only immigrants ever forced to pay a head tax.

In the early part of this century, Sikhs started to migrate to Canada, mainly to B.C. By 1906, about 1,500 Sikhs were living in the Vancouver area. Sir Wilfred Laurier alleged that Indians were "unsuited to live in the climatic conditions of British Columbia and were a serious disturbance to industrial and economic conditions".¹

Visible because of their turbans and beards, Sikhs were prime targets. In addition, this community was considered to be docile, and assaults on Sikhs were a daily routine in Vancouver.¹

In 1908, the Canadian government passed two orders-in-council specifically designed to prohibit East Indian immigration to Canada. One prohibited entry into Canada of people unless they came "directly from the country of their birth or citizenship by a continuous journey and on through tickets purchased before leaving the country of the birth or citizenship".¹

Only East Indians were subject to these restrictions.

To circumvent the order-in-council, the Japanese ship Komagata Maru was chartered for a direct journey from Calcutta to Vancouver. On board were 376 Indians, all but 30 of them Sikhs. Even though all the requirements were satisfied, the Indians were not allowed to leave the ship on arrival in Vancouver. Sir Richard McBride, then premier of B.C., said that "to admit Orientals in large numbers would mean in the end the extinction of the white peoples, and we have always in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man's country".¹

In May 1914, two months of negotiations proved fruitless and the Komagata Maru returned to Calcutta with her load of passengers. There, British authorities opened fire on the passengers as they disembarked, killing 18 and wounding 25, and imprisoned more than 200 of the remaining.¹

Prime Minister Mackenzie King later pressured the Indian government to stop the migration of Indians and enforced the Emigration Act of 1883 to further prevent them from leaving India.¹

As late as 1973, a residential section of Vancouver stipulated on each property deed that no person of Asian or African ancestry could stay on the premises overnight except as a servant.

While the interment of Japanese Canadians is well known because of the vast number of Japanese Canadians who were stripped of their freedom, there were groups of Italian Canadians and Ukrainian Canadians who were similarly mistreated. The most troubling aspects of our longstanding mistreatment of different races, cultures or religions in Canada is that very little has changed.

Oh sure, we've done the ultimate Canadian thing, we've apologized. But the trade that has been made so many times before looms before us today and for the foreseeable future. I speak of the sacrifice of liberty and freedom for the promise of security. This is a trade that Canadians have been and continue to this very day to be willing to make in a heartbeat, despite what should be the lessons of our history.

There are some of us here tonight who are old enough to remember Trudeau Sr. responding to the question "How far would you go?" at the height of the FLQ crisis by saying "Just watch me". The overwhelming majority of Canadians supported Trudeau's imposition of the War Measures Act and the wholesale retroactive suppression of rights.

After 9/11, we watched approvingly as our elected representatives were expediently tripping over themselves to pass the Anti-Terrorism Act, an Act which outdoes even the U.S. Patriot Act when it comes to the suspension of freedoms.

Ironically, our current Prime Minister is committed to undoing much of the potential harm to individual rights which were so readily sacrificed by his father's government.

The exchange of individual rights and freedoms for the promise of increased security is still one which most Canadians support. That support would only be heightened if there were a real crisis. In 1970, the last time the army was called out into the streets, there had been no 9/11 or equivalent. All it took was "a state of apprehended insurrection".

So the willingness to give up the rights of the few for the promise of better security for the many is still very much present. These are the conditions which are the foundation for such sacrifice. The attribution of the most extreme beliefs and

actions of a small minority to the vast majority of Arabs and/or Muslims is the most prominent example of modern day racism.

The justification for any clamp down security measures are the outrageous actions of a few and the rationalization for visiting this upon the many, is that those many do not distance themselves sufficiently by condemning the few.

In a recent NANOS poll, seven out of ten Canadians said there is still “a lot of racism in Canada. Racism is alive and not being so politely denied or well-hidden in the streets and workplaces of our Nation’s Capital.

A recent study, Race Data and Traffic Stops in Ottawa, authored by a highly respected research team from York University, represents the largest-race-based data collection in Canadian history.

The researchers examined 81,902 traffic stops between 2013 and 2015 and found that visible minorities were stopped by the police at a disproportionate rate compared to white drivers. In simple terms, a driver of Middle Eastern descent is 3.3 times more likely than a white driver to be stopped by the police, and a black driver is 2.3 times more likely to be pulled over and detained.

“There was a greater propensity that indigenous, black and middle eastern racialized minority group were traffic stopped for nothing”. Stopping a disproportionate number of minorities for NO reason is proof that the Ottawa Police force is acting in a racist manner.

Biases persist in Canadian workplaces. In one field experiment, published in 2011, University of Toronto researchers Philip Oreopoulos and Diane Dechief sent almost 8,000 resumes to employers in Canada’s three largest cities, from applicants with either Anglophone or foreign-sounding names. They found that job seekers with names like Matthew Wilson were 35 per cent more likely to get a callback than those with a name like Samir Sharma-regardless of work experience, education or language proficiency.²

In terms of hate crimes, Canada has a recorded rate more than double that of the United States – 1,295 in 2014, or a rate of 3.7 per 100,000 people, according to

² Canada’s Racial Divide
Globe and Mail September 26th, 2016

Statscan. By comparison, the FBI recorded 5,479 hate crimes in the same year in the U.S., 1.84 per 100,000 people.

Conclusion

We have travelled an unenviable historical path. We continue to have many bumps along the current road. May we continue to recognize and combat racism wherever and whenever it exists.

“We know that it is law which enables men to live together, that creates order out of chaos. We know that law is the glue that holds civilization together. And we know that if one man’s rights are denied, the rights of all others are endangered.” –

Robert F. Kennedy, 1961

Ottawa, November 14, 2016

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