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Negotiating Indigenous Reconciliation

by Peter Jull

Many Australians wonder why the indigenous policy landscape in Canada is so different from here. Of course, there are differences. Australia alone of 'first world' countries has left indigenous affairs largely to sub-national (i.e., state and territory) governments, a sure recipe for disaster as indigenous peoples and national governments abroad know well.

Australia neither made treaties nor set aside lands until belatedly in the Northern Territory and in some few other areas under episodically progressive State governments, while trying to graze or crop or somehow use every last scrap of desert, providing an illusion of complete occupation.

Aborigines appeared to have cultures so unlike what the European 18 and 19th centuries valued that there seemed few reference points, so that now we have primary through university age students patiently trying to enlighten their not always receptive elders around the breakfast table.

For all that, however, scholars are revealing that Australia's past may be much less anomalous in the former British Empire than supposed. Henry Reynolds has found treaty policies in Tasmania and South Australia, and the instructions and intentions of many officials were little different from North America, or New Zealand.

Certain myths about Canada persist. Yes, it is true that there is a noble undercarriage of indigenous recognition in law and royal pronouncement. But Canadians knew nothing of it till the last few decades, while treaties had no effect except as models of official hypocrisy and deception (although remembered by Indians as dealings between sovereign nations). Governments invented devices to nullify the effect of what legal options there were. Canada, like Australia, has come to indigenous reform only in recent decades, and for reasons of social change, indigenous education, and international action against racism in the backwash of the Axis defeat in 1945.

The first real difference may be Canadian police on the frontier. The Mounties were there to protect Indians as much as to control them, and protect their lands and everyone else's from American expansionists and carpet-baggers of any sort. Massacres were apparently avoided in Canada.

A second difference is the military role of Indians and Métis who did so much to defend Canada. Australian war heroes fought abroad, but as a 1999 survey has revealed, Canada's heroes all fought the Yanks – Indians, French-Canadians, English-Canadians, and Other Canadians. Canadians have shunned heroes and national bombast till now, overhearing so much of it from the USA. Australia, isolated in mid-ocean, is free to let Irish myth-makers and many sorts of promoters loose to people the place with a layer of European and Asian lore atop Aboriginal and Islander foundations.

The third difference is that for at least 300 years till the 1800s across the south, and now for some 500 in the north, the Canadian economy required indigenous producers in the fur trade. There was no nonsense about how they should be farming the rocks.

All that came later, as JR Miller shows in his history of Indian-White relations, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, in press in revised edition to be published in March 2000 by University of Toronto Press. Instead of shooting people down on the wild frontier, Canadians were suffocating them in Victorian reserves of orderly homesteading and piety, their due pittances often forgotten in economic downturns or by unaccountable officials. With their population in sharp decline and their use to Canadian society lost after the War of 1812 and 1820s merger of fur trade empires, indigenous people became invisible. The north, including Nunavut, has continued a remarkable older tradition among indigenous cultures north of settlement and agriculture zones, however – a world sketched in AJ Ray's 'The Northern Interior, 1600 to modern times', *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, North America, Vol 1*, ed. Trigger & Washburn. Atlantic and Pacific fisheries, and Arctic whaling, drew heavily on indigenous labour in 19th and early 20th centuries in some areas, belying the myth of indigenes locked in Arcadian simplicity.

The final difference is important now. It is time spent in national debate with public exposure to indigenous spokespersons, cultures, and international standards. Most countries keep their idealism for ethno-cultural equality at arm's length – good for Africa but not to impair our nasty little prejudices right here in Oslo, Ottawa, Oshkosh, Omsk, or Outback Australia. Nevertheless, Australia maintained a range of official racial and cultural prejudices in official currency, post-war, at a time when other countries were removing theirs.

Also, at least one Australian prime minister, as well as various premiers and opposition figures in states and territories, the latter with representatives of both the Coalition and Labor, have winked and nudged, or made very unhelpful forays into race matters. At a stroke these, and footy heroes and other supposed role models abusing non-whites, undo hard work of teachers trying to promote tolerant colour-blind classrooms. But by and large, today's students seem marvellously free of old prejudices, as if sprung from a reborn world Prospero might have hoped for at the end of *The Tempest*. Time can heal.

Presumably a hangover of darker days is a large factor in pockets of Australian resistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations today. Canada was more fortunate. Non-Anglophone immigration had been going on throughout the 20th century, notably in the West, although it only transformed Toronto from about 1960 – for the better, most of us WASPs would say. Flashy *American Graffiti*-style roadside restaurants in Saskatchewan or Alberta have laminated bilingual menus today, i.e., Ukrainian and English.

Canada took the race relations *ethos* of the United Nations to heart right down to the grass roots, and in public tried to live it. Post-war policies in the Northwest Territories reflected the idealism and determination of modern liberals. British decolonisation around the world and the racial crisis next door in the USA also had their effect. (Danes were firmly liberal in Greenland from the 1700s, of course.)

But getting official attention was only part of the problem. Translating indigenous aspirations and cultures into politico-administrative measures was not easy. A loud and often angry dialogue went on for years. Jean Chrétien, Trudeau's long-serving indigenous and northern affairs minister from 1968, was the first minister really to take indigenous representatives as social equals and treat with them in his open and knockabout style of frankness.

A negotiation in fact if not in name was taking place. From the mid-1960s into the 1990s, Canada was learning amid much noise but little political violence. Violence then, as in Australia now, was mostly *within* the indigenous community, and Canadians were lucky or shrewd enough to act on grievances before that anger turned outwards. Even if much foolish was said, national élites were agonising in public.

Inside government I invented a betting game to keep my spirits up. Whenever a deputy minister (or 'permanent head' in Australia) or minister said firmly that 'This is absolutely as far as we will go!' – how quickly would that position be blown away? Very quickly. Why? I don't know. Inflexibility being unhelpful in the face of surging indigenous ethno-politics and public sympathy? Top brass having exchanged thinking for bombast?

There were also high officials like those who had authored the pace-setting reforms across Northern Canada from 1953 who were wiser. There were always a few junior and middle level others who kept track of what was really going on outside fortress Ottawa, or Retrograd-on-the-Rideau as one of my cheerful colleagues called it after a local river. The behemoth, however unwieldy and much ridiculed across Canada, could move.

For 30 or 35 years Canada has been going through steady negotiated change. Each debate or issue broadens understanding of public and government, and also helps indigenous people learn the ways, wiles, and values of the non-indigenous community. The main issues have been land and sea rights on the one hand, and self-government on the other. But those are very broad categories.

First there was in both south and north the demand for non-discriminatory policies and more respect for indigenous culture in practice, just like Canadians said they believed internationally. This quickly opened into a more practical and positive self-government movement. Officials and politicians had whined for years about indigenous 'apathy' as the cause of all ills, but were no less unhappy with the end of apathy and coming of activism!

Then there was the northern development debate, the search for minerals and 'frontier energy' across the northern provincial regions and the far northern territories. Hydro-electric power, mining, and oil and gas – and pipelines, rail corridors, and shipping through frozen seas – saw new indigenous activism aided by high school- or college-educated youth in the forefront. Old and young rallied against the assault on the lands, fresh waters, and seas which sustained their food species and livelihoods.

All this turned into the land rights movement across the northern two-thirds or three-quarters of Canada, including all of British Columbia, Canada's somewhat

Queensland-like province, but self-government was the rallying point across the whole country. Long struggles over northern projects on land or at sea, and major inquiries and constant shifts of policy, with the environment movement taking much of its energy from these indigenous initiatives, reshaped the public's notions of national history, economy, land and resource use, and social values. The great industrial model, America to the south, seemed to be self-destructing, giving further pause for thought.

Indigenous politicians as well as many books, films, exhibitions, etc. were re-creating notions of nationhood. Northrop Frye had seen Canadians as nervous imperials looking out from their stone forts at the dark forests and their mysterious inhabitants, the 'garrison mentality'. Now those mysterious brown people were leading them out through the woods and by far northern lakes and seas and teaching them not to be afraid. Just as the first recorded Indians met by Europeans did when the whites couldn't cope, one might add. (The Vikings didn't even bother trying, it seems, and were routinely killed or driven off from 1000 AD.)

Canada's national pastimes of constitutional reform, inter-governmental tinkering, and brooding on identity were rich fields for indigenous-white debate. Indians, Métis, and Inuit wanted a place and got it. For a country obsessed with separatism, imagine finding peoples who wanted to join! And so, over a mere short generation and a half – a mere eye-blink in the life of an indigenous society – Canadians found a new *modus vivendi*. Belated populists are in full cry, but appear to have peaked politically, and few big disputes seem left but details and consequences of steps already taken in indigenous-white constitutional and social relations.

Of course, no national leader tried to stand in the way, and most governments struggled to understand the evolution underway in their midst, however much they railed against it. Some tried to de-legitimise the indigenous leaders opposing them, e.g., Yukon and Northwest Territories leaders, but were ignored or outflanked.

The present populist positions held by politicians in Australia are untenable in the face of evolving indigenous and non-indigenous outlooks – and in the mainstream currents of civilisation, one might add. Breakthroughs should occur soon. Groups like ANTaR and the media, and all decent persons, must maintain public sanity meanwhile, and keep open dialogue amid the millennial rant and racist obfuscation pouring in through the internet.

The differences between Australia and Canada are not those usually cited to deny the relevance of each other's experiences. Both countries have struggled in post-war years with new social values, more informed indigenous people, and international currents of de-colonisation and racial equality, reviewing and renewing basic national relationships between settler peoples and indigenes. The legal and constitutional differences are not fundamental; rather, political will and social outlooks among contemporary populations in the post-war period have been so.

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