**For the kids’ sake**

How can any country claim to be unified when within it there are more than six hundred separate and distinct nations, all claiming sovereignty?

First Nations’ sovereignty:  sounds good in theory, but how is it working so far?

Since European contact, despite misguided efforts to encourage First Nations to join the mainstream of Canadian life, there has been complete and utter failure.  Evidence of that failure is set out below.

Assimilation toward equality has always been the goal of non-indigenous Canadian law makers.  Not so for many First Nations chiefs.

There will be equality among Canadians only when there is truth in the words of our prime minister:  “A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian.”

Another prime minister fumed, “We’ll keep them in the ghetto as long as they want.” That was Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s response in 1970 when First Nations chiefs thwarted his white paper plan to repeal the *Indian Act* and end First Nations’ so-called special status.

Angry words, but tragically prophetic. Since they were spoken, the disadvantaged lives of Indigenous Canadians have not changed much, unless for the worse.

Referring to gender equality, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said, “Because it’s 2015.”

Well, it’s now 2017, 146 years since the first numbered treaty, and on every important  measurable front, Canada’s First Nations peoples still fall far below any definition of equality.

Those fronts include health status, joblessness, housing conditions, water quality, incest, sexual abuse, child abuse and neglect, suicide, criminality, incarceration, recidivism, substance abuse, children in care, missing and murdered women, girls, men and boys, poverty, family violence.

And education: how important is that? Nine of ten of non-indigenous Canadians finish high school. The C.D. Howe Institute reports that only 40 per cent of on-reserve young adults finish high school.

The government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper tried, and failed, in 2014, to address this crippling imbalance by introducing Bill C-33 in Parliament. The bill was the result of extensive multi-party consultations followed by an “historic” agreement between the federal government and the Assembly of First Nations. It was titled the First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act.

True to modern historical form, First Nations chiefs scotched the plan. Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Shawn Atleo paid the price of a national Indigenous leader who tried to work with the federal government to improve education for First Nations youth. The rug was pulled out from under him by his First Nations leadership colleagues. Atleo quit as Grand Chief, and Harper pulled the bill.

Announcing his resignation in the wake of the failure of Bill C-33, Atleo said he believed the legislation was “a sincere and constructive effort on the part of Prime Minister Stephen Harper to move forward.”

He also stated he believed the bill met the conditions previously insisted upon by First Nations chiefs: First Nations control; funding guarantees; indigenous language and culture requirements; no unilateral oversight by government; and meaningful future engagement.

Still not good enough for the chiefs. The usual lame excuses: not enough consultation, too much government control, not enough respect for First Nations’ sovereignty.

In a changing world, not moving forward is the same as moving backward. The chiefs chose to put their children’s education up for ransom, preferring to insist on their version of the perfect (whatever that is), and reject the good.

The result? No progress, again. Moving backward.

There is an ongoing and recurring theme here. For many years of negotiations with chiefs, we have witnessed time and again the failure of attempts to achieve better conditions for Indigenous Canadians.

Millions are spent annually on the “Aboriginal Industry”; i.e. lawyers, judges, consultants, chiefs, bureaucrats, commissioners of inquiry, activists and others.

Most, if not all, of the money comes from taxpayers. Given the long history of the brinkmanship that too often happens when major progress is within reach, it is clearly in the financial interest of the Aboriginal industry to fight governments for “as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the rivers flow.”

But it’s not the rivers that are flowing; it’s our money, and opportunities for young Indigenous Canadians, gushing in torrents down the drain.

It is a national shame and disgrace that the next generations of First Nations Canadians will continue to live in Third World conditions because of the selfish intransigence of their leaders.

All our children will pay dearly for that.

Can anyone think of any claim to sovereignty that is worth the wretchedness and despair endured by young First Nations Canadians?

Prime Minister, your predecessors have tried and failed. We will wait a little longer, in the hope your good intentions bring real change.

Chiefs, if your mercenary behavior persists, you - not the government - will be accountable for the further hopeless decline of Canadian Indigenous youth.  You can change that. The Prime Minister appears to be trying.  Work with him.

For the sake of the kids, please.

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