**The more things don’t change, the more they don’t change**

Current problems with the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls should have been foreseen. Prime Minister Stephen Harper knew the creation of such a commission would lead to what we see today and - arguably - wisely declined to create one. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s approach:  damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.

Then, reality. Commission staff have been leaving the commission because of the dysfunction which quite naturally - and predictably - accompanies issues that should be addressed by other means. Recently, one of the commissioners quit, citing differences with the other commissioners. Additionally, the commission has already announced it will outspend its $53.8 million budget and that it will not report on time.

Some detractors claim the commission is built on a “colonial” model and therefore will not achieve the desired results. Families of victims complain they are not being heard.

A Manitoba Grand Chief has called for the Chief Commissioner to step down and for the commission to start again. Leadership of Indigenous women’s groups in Manitoba and Ontario are calling on the government to scrap the commission and start over.

At the commission’s Whitehorse hearing, one complaint was that the stories coming forward are the same kinds of stories heard by the $60 million Commission on Truth and Reconciliation.

There is no agreement, as usual, about how to proceed from here. There have been dozens of inquiries spanning decades - national and provincial - into matters relating to Indigenous Canadians. For example, in Manitoba, the 1991 Aboriginal Justice Inquiry report thoroughly documented the causes and effects of the difficulties faced by Indigenous Manitobans.

In 1969, then Minister of Indian Affairs Jean Chretien produced a white paper which recommended the abolition of Canada’s *Indian Act* and the abandonment of the special status of First Nations peoples. The goal was to bring about equality among all Canadians (assimilation?) which, it was felt by the Pierre Trudeau government, would pave the way for the resolution of many of the systemic problems endured by Indigenous Canadians.

The *Indian Act* was passed by the Canadian Parliament in 1876.The objective of Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie’s government at the time, as well as those that preceded and followed it, was the same as Mr. Chretien’s objective - equality among Canadians. The proposals to achieve it, however, were quite different.  Mr. Chretien’s proposal was to reverse, hopefully, the damage occasioned by the *Indian Act* by repealing it.

But opposition to Mr. Chretien’s 1969 plan stopped the Pierre Trudeau government in its tracks.

It seems that at the time, Minister Chretien had a lot of courage; his boss did not. That said, the decade of the later Chretien government produced no significant change either. Three back-to-back majorities: what an opportunity - lost!

And the governments of Prime Ministers Clark, Turner, Mulroney, Campbell, Martin and Harper fared no better.

Recently, 48 years later, candidates for leadership of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs lined up for and against getting rid of the *Indian Act*.

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In some important ways the *Indian Act* resembles the former hated and discriminatory  Apartheid regime in South Africa, yet it is still - in 2017 - the law in Canada. This has for years been the subject of international condemnation, and domestic embarrassment and misery.

Only when we have a government in Ottawa with enough courage to remove this cancer on the body of Canadian law will we see real progress. And if that requires First Nations chiefs - more than 600 of them -  to reach a consensus on this fundamental step toward a better life for Indigenous Canadians, so be it. The challenge is there equally for the federal government, and for the chiefs.

But we don’t need any more public inquiries to know this.

Reality, again:  yes, opposition to change will continue, and no doubt grow. The dreaded word “assimilation” will be used again and again to stress that racist colonialism is still alive and well. “Assimilation” and “colonialism” are words that have, sadly, become powerful buzz words intended to silence anybody who wishes to speak the truth about the appalling inequality of Indigenous peoples.

Working together and embracing the truth will help bring to an end the disgraceful reality with which Indigenous people, especially women and children, still live. But the federal government must act. The chiefs must act. The political correctness that prevents us from speaking the truth and acting on it serves only to slow the progress that is so desperately needed.

Is Canada serious about addressing this most critical Indigenous issue? Mr. Chretien was right, many years ago, and until our prime ministers and First Nations chiefs screw up the courage required to act, Indigenous women and girls will continue to be missing and murdered in numbers that far exceed those of their non-indigenous fellow Canadians. So will Indigenous men and boys.

No commission of inquiry - dysfunctional or otherwise - will change that.

**James McCrae,**

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