

# **The Cry of lost Aboriginal Sisters across Canada**

Universal Peace Council and Women's Peace Federation National  
Conference

Hon. David Kilgour, JD.

( Other panelists: Moderator **Judith Matheson**, Interfaith Spiritual Director, *Ottawa-Gatineau*; **Irene Goodwin**, Director, *Violence Prevention & Safety, Native Women's Association of Canada*; **Deacon Ron Boyer**, *Mission St-Francis-Xavier, Kahnawake*; panel followed by Keynote Speaker **Douglas Cardinal**, Aboriginal Architect – *Museum of Civilization, Ottawa; Museum of North American Indian, Washington*)  
*Travel Lodge, Carling Avenue*  
*Ottawa*  
*5 October 2013*

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Permit me to address our specific topic with some points made last year in a talk by U. of Ottawa PH.D. candidate, Cynthia Stirbys, about the effects of a range of legislation and policies applied by successive national governments and Parliaments to First Nations communities:

- Canada's 1967 federal Human Rights Act, for example, specifically excluded from its terms persons subject to the Indian Act. How's that for legal equality for all Canadians?
- The Indian Act of 1876 was intended to assimilate indigenous peoples. It denied self-government and segregated those subject to its provisions on apartheid style reserves. Patriarchal societies were intended to replace matriarchal ones. The 1884 Indian Advancement Act included Inuit communities, requiring their members to carry a tattoo on their necks.
- Only in 1950 did Inuit women finally receive voting rights from the federal government of the day. It took another ten years before First Nations' women got the right to vote. In traditional cultures, they were powerful, but the Indian Act did its best to end this social reality.

## **Residential Schools**

Consider for a moment probably the sorriest matter of all: residential schools. Here are some other observations by Ms. Stirbys:

- Fully 132 residential schools were funded by the federal government and later churches between the 1830s and the closing of the last one in 1996, with about 150,000 children being taken, often compulsorily, to them.
- Among the psychological traumas experienced by the survivors were marginalization of girls and women, feelings of helplessness, witnessing violence to students, a continuous focus on European values, and a

constant sense of shame, guilt and self-hate. Many said that their lives were never the same afterwards.

- Tuberculosis, which I understand even today costs as little as 75 cents per patient to treat, took the lives of a number of students. Some of the victims' parents were not even informed how their children had perished.

In short, education for Aboriginals, who as First Nations, Metis, Inuit and many other peoples were the first founders of Canada, was for many decades mostly an exercise in imposing European norms on them. I should acknowledge here that Ottawa is built on unceded territory of the Algonquin People, who generously welcomed us to their land.

### ***Clearing the Plains***

Some of you will be familiar with the newly-published book, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, by the Prairie academic, James Daschuk. The *Globe and Mail* reviewer, Aparna Sanyal, praises it strongly, but I'll offer only two of the review points:

- Canada consistently ranks among the top ten nations in the U.N. Human Development Index, but if we were ranked inclusive only of the marginalized conditions that our Indigenous population endures, we would rank #63.
- The book discusses the pre-European period for Aboriginals in Canada and then their experience after the annexation of Western Canada by the Dominion of Canada, portraying the transformation of First Nations from, in Sanyal's words, "entrepreneurs in a global economy to inmates in de facto concentration camps." He asks, for example, who was the "true Canadian, Big Bear (who refused to use violence against the government of Canada and settlers) or Sir John A." (who withheld rations in order to starve Big Bear and other Indians into submission and the miseries of reserve life)?

### **JUSTICE FOR ALL**

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has documented 582 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women across our country. They account for a disproportionate number of missing and murdered Canadians, and NWAC has worked hard to achieve a national action plan to address the issue.

I congratulate the Green Party for joining organizations across the country to support the NWAC in their call for a national public inquiry into murdered and missing Aboriginal women and girls across Canada.

"We know Indigenous women are highly vulnerable because they are disproportionately impoverished. If we are going to effectively address this tragedy, we need information about the scope of the problem, a plan to address it, and adequate political, financial and human resources to support this work," said Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party.

Last summer, Canada's provincial and territorial premiers met with Aboriginal leaders and unanimously supported the call for a national public inquiry.

Every four years, the United Nations reviews the human rights records of all member states. The Canadian government history of consistently rejecting a series of recommendations and resolutions aimed at addressing Canada's treatment of Indigenous peoples has been continued by the current Harper government. All political parties should be support the holding of an inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

Having begun practising law as a prosecutor in Vancouver, I believe strongly that our criminal justice system must be essentially blind to cultural differences in victims. Each victim is entitled to the same protection as any other--and this includes having police and prosecutors go after criminals who violate the rights of any person, especially using violence, with equal vigour.

Victims in general are no longer supposed to be the forgotten key components of the justice system. The 582 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women across our country is an excellent place to begin to create more equal justice for all across this land.

Thank you.