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To: Russell Diabo
Sent: Sunday, April 26, 2009 5:04 PM
Subject: Fallacies of a new book

The following item appears on Boyce Richardson's personal web page (<http://boycespaper.airset.com>) today:

My Log 107, April 26 09

Beliefs and rituals of Aboriginal peoples are not merely "atavistic cultural" survivals that are holding them back, as book's authors claim

Two Toronto newspapers have opened their pages this weekend to a book denouncing the deficiencies of political and social policies that have grown around Canada's First Nations people.

The article in question is the first chapter from a book called *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation* written by Frances Widdowson, a faculty member at Mount Royal College, and Albert Howard, who has been a consultant for government and native groups.

The article is closely argued, and does make some irrefutable points, particularly about the sclerotic nature of many of the representative Indian organizations, since they are all funded by the government that they purport to criticize.

But their overall argument derives from such a base of abysmal cynicism, and what seems to me to be such a basic contempt for Aboriginal people and their traditions, that I find it hard to take what they write seriously.

Their overarching argument is that Aboriginal people are mere foddors whose poverty is used to create the wealth of their so-called leaders, and that people who make a decision to help them in their struggle for justice and equality --- an army of lawyers, consultants, priests, anthropologists ---- are dishonest manipulators who have no other purpose than to create a soft life for themselves.

Though I have some sympathy with much of what they say, they push their argument so far as to make it almost ludicrous.

There is only one way I can refute their general critique. It is go to back to 1968 (and beyond) and briefly describe what I have found since then among the native people, the conclusions I came to over the years with reading, study and my interaction with them, and to describe what seems to me to be the importance

for them of their traditions, rituals and beliefs.

First, in 1969 the native people were at the beginning of a revival after decades in which they had been forgotten, abused, neglected and manipulated by an establishment all of whose traditions came from their European origins. I began to write about their appalling social conditions, but soon gave it up when I realized that this was not what these people were essentially interested in.

They had been through many years in which this establishment, acting, as it seemed to me, out of arrogance and ignorance, had done everything they could to destroy the essence of these people whom they found lying in the path of the triumphant settlement of the nation.

I found that only a handful of native people in Canada had ever reached high school, with the result that in many parts of the country their leaders were lacking in the education that would have allowed them to confront effectively this moloch with which they had to deal --- the Canadian government.

This is not to denigrate the leaders who had kept the flame of their traditions alive during the most desperate decades: but it nevertheless was a fact that in 1969 the government held all the controls they needed to keep the native people in submission, and the struggle to get free of such control was a bitter, and usually a losing one.

One of my early conclusions was something I drew from my socialist background in New Zealand and Britain: it has always been believed by the left that aid to the poor can only be effective if it is seen by them as their right, not as a charitable donation to a worthy but impoverished people. Similarly, it became clear to me that the first step in the revival of the native spirit in Canada had to be a revival of the ancient traditions in which they were brought up and to which they remained attached. In other words, they were a proud people, however poor in the eyes of outsiders, and when they began to revive their culture, take care of their languages and observances, their rituals and traditions, their history and stories, then --- along with the improvement of their educational levels --- only then they were ready to step forward to take their place on an equal basis with other people in the country.

At that time, after being exposed for generations to policies that Widdowson and Howard say were good for them, I met dozens of native people who had concluded they were ashamed to be native, ashamed of their families, ashamed of their race and their way of life. That shame was one of the first things that had to be overcome.

At that time, after being exposed for generations to policies that Widdowson and Howard say were good for them, I met dozens of native people who had concluded they were ashamed to be native, ashamed of their families, ashamed of their race and their way of life. That shame was one of the first things that had to be overcome.

I discovered a strange thing, right off the top. The government had just finished an immense consultation with Indians across the country, the results of which were written up a dozens of red-covered books. I asked for and was given copies of these books by a sceptical civil servant who later admitted he didn't believe I would ever read them. But I did read them, and found that nowhere in them had Indians asked for the policies of the White Paper that had just been issued by the government, proposing to abandon its responsibility for Indian Affairs, disband the reserves, hand over responsibility to the provinces, and make various other dramatic changes.

The Indians, not unexpectedly, were outraged by this: they produced a Red Paper to confute the White Paper.

Widdowson and Howard basically express some admiration for most of the things that had been done to Indians in the previous century. That their "atavistic cultural features" had to be obliterated was no more than inevitable, they write. Thus they dispose of the planned destruction of all native observances, carried out with ruthless and methodical determination by the Canadian government over the years.

The Indians would have been worse off without the residential schools (leaving aside, they write airily, the sexual abuse). "Many of the activities held as destructive to aboriginal peoples – the teaching of English, the discouraging of animistic superstitions, and encouraging of self-discipline – were positive measures intended to overcome the social isolation and economic dependency that was (and continues to be) so debilitating to the native population," they write. Intended, of course: have these guys never heard that the road to hell is paved with good intentions? And why do they have no criticism of the superstitions of Christianity, which we substituted for their own?

They actually leave aside, along with the sexual abuse, the question of the stealing of the Indian land. They deal with that by saying that English legal attitudes as described in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, for example, quickly became obsolete in face of the facts of Canadian life, as it developed, but unfortunately native people continued to believe that they had relevance.

Similarly, the treaties were the method used by the spreading colonists to get rid of the people who were already there, using the land in their atavistic way, incapable of competing with the superior technologies that came from Europe. The hunting life quickly became irrelevant, but because the army of helpers --- in the early days these were mostly missionaries --- believed the Indians should pursue their traditional cultures, the people themselves were prevented by their backwardness from competing or taking part as equals in Canadian life.

These authors are somewhat critical of the missionaries, not because they undermined the psychological bases of Indian life (as Bruce Trigger so clearly shows in his book on the Hurons before 1660), but because, like all other helpers, they were self-interestedly pursuing their objectives, in their case,

their Christian beliefs.

They write that the many settlements that have been made with native people in recent years have resulted in the enrichment of this “Aboriginal industry” of consultants, etc., many of whom are apparently so besotted that they are “not even aware that they are part of it. There is no conspiracy being perpetrated by the lawyers, consultants, and anthropologists working for aboriginal organizations. What exists is a natural impulsion to follow material interests, to veer ultimately toward self-interest.”

So, Widdowson and Howard have spotted that these people are part of an industry that they themselves are not even aware of. This has a paranoid ring about it. It fits nicely into the veritable onslaught from right-wing commentators in recent years who have begun to propagate “assimilation” as the only possible way forward for native people.

They add: “These advocates continue to be the major players in the Aboriginal Industry’s ‘Great Game’ and, along with the comprador leadership that they have created, are the major beneficiaries of the legal and bureaucratic initiatives that maintain native dependency and the funding it generates.”

This is a pretty bold claim: these peripheral advocates hired by native bands to assist them in their dealings with government, are the main beneficiaries? That must be news to the Grand Council of the Crees, for example, who recently have accepted a cheque from the Federal government for more than a billion dollars, disposition of which has already been planned in the building of community objectives.

Now I can’t deny that huge amounts of money have been wasted in these endless negotiations with native bands about their land claims ---there is a good case to be made that the BC treaty process is a waste of time and money ---- but I would tend to blame the government for spreading their tentacles around these processes in such a way as to bring them to a virtual halt.

The furthest I can go along this road is to admit that there is a paradox at the centre of the native path forward. That paradox is that the more they get of a Western, or modern-style education, the more their prospective leaders are detached from their traditions and fundamental beliefs, which are so different from those of the society in which they now find themselves, beliefs that seem to me to be the bedrock on which their advancements must rest. The young people who led the Cree opposition to the James Bay hydro project took their direction from their elders, none of whom spoke English or French, and few of whom had even been to school. The young people recognized the profound wisdom of their elders, and depended on their guidance.

Down the road more than quarter of a century, these elders are dying off, and the young people, while still expressing that spiritual connection to the land at which Widdowson and Howard scoff, are trying to adjust their way of life to the modern world that has arrived among them with such a crash.

That billion dollar cheque, and similar payments from the Quebec government, have been offered so that the Crees themselves might undertake to fulfil various responsibilities accepted by the governments in the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement in 1974, but that they just never bothered to fulfil.

Ah, well, as Widdowson and Howard might write, leaving aside this governmental perfidy (as they left aside the sexual abuse in the residential schools) what could the Crees possibly have to complain of? And after all, what's a billion dollars, as C.D. Howe might have said, to the federal government? Cheap at the price.

It may be true that aboriginal communities are ridden with dreadful pathologies, but to suggest that these are all caused by some malevolent "Aboriginal industry" that even its members don't know they belong to, is ridiculous beyond belief.