

A nation built on shifting sand

Brock's Banter

By Brock Weir

This past week was, for some, if I can borrow a phrase from former U.S. Vice President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Al Gore, one of inconvenient truths.

As expected, the United States Senate, thanks to the usual suspects, moved to block an independent and bi-partisan commission into what lead up to the January 6 riots in Washington D.C.

Most of us plainly know what led up to the outright assault on a bastion of worldwide democracy. After all, we saw it unfold in front of our very eyes. But to take politics out of the equation and lay bare a backgrounder would, of course, put truth out there in black and white and certain quarters simply can't allow that to happen.

But, closer to home, a horrible punch in the gut.

The very same week, reports out of Kamloops, BC, confirmed the discovery of the bodies of at least 215 children, some as young as three, unmarked and forgotten in the grounds of a former residential school in the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation.

“This past weekend, with the help of a ground penetrating radar specialist, the stark truth of the preliminary findings came to light – the confirmation of the remains of 215 children who were students at the Kamloops Indian Residential School,” said the office of Chief Roseanne Casimir in a statement.

Said Casimir: “We had a knowing in our community that we were able to verify. To our knowledge, the missing children were undocumented deaths. Some were as young as three years old. We sought a way to confirm that knowing out of deepest respect and love for those lost children and their families, understanding that Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc is the final resting place of these children.

“Given the size of the school with up to 500 students registered and attending at any one time, we understand that this confirmed loss affects the First Nations communities across British Columbia and beyond. We wish to ensure that our community members, as well as all home communities for the children who attended are duly informed. This is the beginning, but given the nature of this news, we felt it important to share immediately. At this time, we have more questions than answers.”

The reaction to this horrifying announcement was swift, striking a chord with Canadians of all backgrounds from coast to coast.

“To honour the 215 children whose lives were taken at the former Kamloops residential school and all Indigenous children who never made it home, the survivors, and their families, I have asked that the Peace Tower flag and flags on all Federal buildings be flown at half-mast,” announced Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on May 30, with leaders from all levels of government, including mayors from across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, announcing their intentions to follow suit.

But what comes after the flags are hoisted once again?

What actions will be spurred in memory of the 215+ children in this instance and so many more who have been brought back into the public's consciousness after being consciously and methodically erased?

“This is the beginning,” said Casimir, and there is no doubt about that.

The discovery announced last week only underscores what I suspect most of us have known all along: that we – the “we” being

Canada writ large ? are only at the tip of an unimaginable and bloody iceberg in knowing the full catalogue of horrors associated with the residential school system, not to mention the sheer number of children whose lives were irrevocably harmed.

Perhaps it will give Canadians concerned about the removal of Sir John A. Macdonald from our nation's \$10 banknote a moment to pause and consider our first Prime Minister's legacy in a larger context, beyond just the great strides he helped facilitate on our road to nationhood.

The same goes for those bemoaning the fact that celebrating the legacy of Egerton Ryerson, a prominent architect of the Residential School system, might not be considered as appropriate as it once seemed at the Toronto university that now bears his name.

Maybe, just maybe, it will spur our nation to collectively sit up and recognize truths ? inconvenient or otherwise ? that bely our fabled reputation as another bastion of freedom, justice and equality, and challenge some of the convenient not-quite-truths that were spoon-fed to us in public school as part of another nation-building exercise.

?Our history in Canada is horrifying and until we acknowledge that and recognize the truth, we will continue upholding systems built on a foundation of racism, violence and harm without question,? said the grassroots On Canada Project on Saturday. ?That residential school only closed in 1978. The last residential school closed in 1996. This isn't some distant history that we are talking about. And Indigenous people continue to be oppressed in this country, the effects are very much felt in present day. We should be collectively grieving this atrocity as a country.?

It certainly isn't some distant history. Some of those who lived under the yoke of this horror are still with us to share their stories. Some of those who were privy to the true extent of what was going on behind those walls are still living with the reality of their own truth in not stepping in to do something ? if at all.

The architects of the residential school system might be long gone, but their actions, and the wounds they caused, are still living, breathing, present, in ways that continue to be revealed.

The most adamant against having a eyes-wide-open re-appraisal of our nation-builders and the systems they created still insist that looking back with the knowledge we have today is somehow an attack on our history and our achievements as a country.

They fail ? and deliberately so, in my opinion ? to recognize and acknowledge that history is a constantly evolving field and each new piece of information is a catalyst for reassessment.

For those individuals, the most uncomfortable truth of all might be the realization that we have placed many of our heroes on pedestals built on sand with very select blocks. One block not fitting the image can cause the whole thing to come crashing down.

I'm not in this camp. If you are, your idea of what makes up Canada ? whether as a nation of individuals or a nation of nations ? might be built on as tentative ground as those pedestals.

We're stronger than that.

We are strong enough for some serious and difficult introspection and we will come out stronger on the other side.

It's not new, but it's an issue that keeps getting shoved to the backburner. We didn't need 215 more reasons to give the issue the attention it deserves, but now that we have them, how will we address it?