

Bossy Little Old Lady

By Brock Weir

The 24-hour news cycle is a funny thing.

There are some stories that come out that do indeed warrant coverage which might, on the surface, receive excessive hour-after-hour coverage; but, over the course of each 60-minute interval, new nuggets of information are found, new perspectives are offered by new experts, and, given any tidbit, the news landscape can drastically change.

This, of course, will start the cycle all over again with people either glued to it every minute or quickly looking elsewhere to find out what else is going on around the world or, at worst, seeking out a distraction from the harsh realities that are around us.

This past week, I had the chance to speak to an Anishinaabe elder for a story in another newspaper.

The purpose of the interview was to discuss an upcoming story circle at a local park where, just a few short months ago, she led the community in a show of solidarity following the discovery of the remains of 215 Indigenous children in the grounds of the former Kamloops residential school.

It was, as we all know, the first of many such discoveries around the country, leading to some tough questions on the darker parts of our past.

The next discovery of a like number of remains at another site continued to capture the attention of Canadians still reeling from Kamloops. The further uncovering of more than 700 further graves near a former residential school in Saskatchewan was a further gut punch to a still tender bruise.

Despite sure knowledge that what has been uncovered so far is just the tip of the iceberg, the results of further work of First Nations communities with ground-penetrating radar appears to be hitting the general population a bit differently.

Perhaps because the individual numbers of graves in each batch haven't crossed the tragically staggering threshold of 700, that it somehow seems less impactful might be a sad reality for many. But it doesn't need to be.

?It is such a horrible time for us and they are not even talking about it anymore on the news and still more bodies have been discovered,? said elder Kim Wheatley of Turtle Clan. ?[Shows of solidarity] planted a seed of hope because I feel Canadians have not done their best in this instance. These are babies. There should be no fatigue in this instance.

?Every child matters and we can't let this become a fatigue news item. We need to do our best to help protect the rights of children in this country ? all children, but specifically Indigenous children and women. We're the most vulnerable in this country and the ones still experiencing the most harm.?

The solution? ?Do your best to learn about it and offer meaningful support where possible, whether with dollars or actions, or petitions, and be in your own community spreading the word, doing something collectively that is really powerful and change-making.?

This change, it is often said, comes from the top, and I hope Canadians ? Indigenous and settler alike ? feel the pride that so many, including myself, felt last Monday morning when Mary Simon became Canada's first Indigenous Governor General.

Some might still question the relevancy of the Governor General's office in this day and age; after all, the powers they hold on behalf of the sovereign are largely ceremonial. But therein, in my view, lies its true power. It is influence, however symbolic, that is

designed to represent the Canadian people without being beholden to divisive party politics, a specific mandate that could make the office holder beholden to other interests. When it functions best ? and, admittedly, the aborted term of Julie Payette is a perfect example of the office not functioning at its optimum level ? the Governor General is beholden to two parties: the sovereign they represent and the citizens of this country.

This time around, however, responsibility to the latter group is particularly stronger given the crossroads we find ourselves as a nation.

?Where we gather today is of enormous significance to me,? said the newly-minted Governor General in her first speech in the position from the temporary Senate chamber across the street from Parliament Hill. ?39 years ago, when this was the Government Conference Centre, I worked with other Indigenous leaders and First Ministers to have our rights affirmed in the Constitution of Canada. That moment made this one possible.?

The daughter of an Inuk mother and a father she describes as ?from the south?, she said her upbringing helped she and her siblings live in two worlds: ?the Inuit world and the non-Inuit southern world.?

?This foundation of core values has both served and shaped me through my life, and I believe helped me get to an important turning point as a young girl, when I stopped being afraid,? she said. ?It took time before I gained the self-confidence to assert myself and my beliefs in the non-Indigenous world. But when I came to understand that my voice has power and that others were looking to me to be their voice, I was able to let go of my fear.?

A further guiding force, she says, is the ?importance of promoting healing and wellness through all forms of education, from creating public policy, to legislative reform, to improving school curricula, to advocating for human rights.?

?Since the publication of the Truth & Reconciliation report six years ago, we have learned as a country that we need to learn the real history of Canada. Embracing this truth makes us stronger as a nation, unites Canadian society and teaches our kids that we must do our best, especially when it is hard.

?The discoveries of unmarked graves on the grounds of residential schools in recent weeks has horrified me, along with all Canadians. A lot of people think that reconciliation will be completed through projects and services. All Canadians deserve access to services. My view is that reconciliation is a way of life and requires work every day. Reconciliation is getting to know one another.?

As a Canadian, I look forward to getting to know Mary Simon more as she settles into her new role. Turning to the Prime Minister in a tongue-in-cheek moment during her installation ceremony, Her Excellency said her Inuk name translates to ?Bossy Little Old Lady? in English and I, for one, welcome this. To paraphrase Tina Fey and Amy Poehler ? and to sanitize it a little bit because this is a family newspaper, after all ? ?Bossy little old ladies get stuff done,? and Ms. Simon comes to the table with an unparalleled wealth of insight and experience to do just that.

We need somebody like her to ensure the momentum we have as a country to confront our past doesn't slow, doesn't become a subject of fatigue, and ultimately results in action.