

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? An unjustified attack

In the popular movie A Few Good Men, actor Jack Nicholson, as Marine Col. Nathan R. Jessup, is being cross-examined about a scandal at Guantanamo, when, in a dramatic scene he rages: ?You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!?

Your humble correspondent is reminded of that Nicholson response when reading about the ongoing campaign against Conservative Senator Lynn Beyak, who had the temerity to deviate from the only acceptable ?truth? regarding the failed residential schools program by arguing that not all the people involved in that social experiment were bad people.

Some of them, she suggested, actually had good intentions, even though, as she clearly pointed out, the overall cultural results were disastrous.

Early last month, Beyak ? then a member of the Senate's Aboriginal committee ? stood in the Senate and, after openly acknowledging the horrible side of the residential schools, added that, ?I speak partly for the record, but mostly in memory of the kindly and well-intentioned men and women and their descendants ? perhaps some of us here in this chamber ? whose remarkable works, good deeds and historical tales in the residential schools go unacknowledged for the most part and overshadowed by negative reports.?

Cue the outrage! She had barely taken her seat when charges of racism and demands for her resignation were flying from everywhere and indeed, last week Beyak was booted off the Aboriginal committee by interim Tory Leader Rona Ambrose, on the grounds that the senator's views ?do not reflect the Conservative party's position on residential schools.?

Fellow Senator Sandra Lovelace Nicholas said she was ?shocked and dismayed? by Beyak's remarks and said she'd boycott the committee as long as Beyak sat on it.

And it didn't take long for the Hitler comparisons. B.C. NDP MP Nathan Cullen called her comments ?blatantly ignorant and racist.? He said she should be booted from the Tory caucus. ?What else could disqualify you from sitting in the Senate of Canada? Is she going to jump up and defend Nazi Germany next, and say that it's free speech??

And so it goes. Beyak made the mistake of not completely swallowing the accepted ?truth? about the whole issue and, by God, she was made to pay for it.

?Political correctness is stifling opinion and thoughtful conversation that we must be allowed to have if we are to truly improve our great country,? says Beyak.

?For me to lose my position . . . for complimenting the work of nurses, teachers, foster families and legions of other decent, caring Canadians ? along with high-lighting inspiring stories spoken by Aboriginal people themselves ? is a serious threat to freedom of speech.?

?Too often, on a broad range of issues, a vocal minority cries foul and offence whenever a point of view is raised that does not align with their own,? she said.

So is it really outrageous and racist to say that many of those involved in operating the residential schools were decent people with good intentions? Is it wrong ? and Hitlerian ? to acknowledge the bad things but suggest there were some good things as well?

Well, Senator Murray Sinclair, who led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's investigation of the residential schools ? an appointment made by former prime minister Stephen Harper following Harper's apology to native Canadians on behalf of the government ? was in the Senate during Beyak's speech.

I haven't found any published references to his comments after her speech, but it is worth noting that one section of his report says the following:

?For the most part, the school staff members were not responsible for the policies that separated children from their parents and lodged them in inadequate and underfunded facilities. In fact, many staff members spent much of their time and energy attempting to humanize a harsh and often destructive system. Along with the children's own resilience, such staff members share credit for any positive results of the schools.?

Isn't that all Beyak was saying too? How is it perfectly fine for the commissioner to complement the work of teachers and nurses and others who attempted to make the best of a bad situation, but for Beyak to offer the same message makes her a racist and unfit to sit on the Aboriginal committee?

It is not defending residential schools per se simply to point out that some of those involved were good people with kind hearts.

In hindsight ? which, as we know, is always 20-20 ? it is obvious that the system was a terrible injustice. But at the time it began, and however misguided its authors may have been, the intention was at least worthy.

Beyak is not a hater for stating the obvious. But many of those attacking her for it are.

