

Oh?Canada?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

The title of today's article is not so much the loud and cheerful start of our national anthem but rather a lament. A lament for a nation that sounds good on paper, that welcomes an average of 250,000 to 300,000 immigrants each year and that spends a great deal of time promoting the benefits of multiculturalism but which has never welcomed the First Nations/Indigenous people here before us to be equal and active participants in the Canadian 'success' story.

It's a lament for a nation that ignored, re-settled and demonized the inhabitants already here when our descendants first climbed off the boats from Europe. It's also a lament for a culture we attempted to assimilate in the most brutal way possible, by robbing them of their identity, their language and their children.

Oh Canada? Do I think we should cancel Canada Day today? No. Do we have work to do? Yes. We have a significant amount of work to do before we once again might proudly sing 'O Canada.'

This is a difficult and divisive topic. It shouldn't be. Surely we must all agree that the abhorrent treatment of Indigenous, Metis and Inuit peoples in residential schools was a cruel and particular kind of genocide, targeting children and destroying generations of families.

What we are bearing witness to now is a past we must be ashamed of and for which we must make amends.

Perhaps you think genocide is too strong a word. Defined as 'the deliberate killing of a large number of people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group,' there really is no other word suitable when the leaders of our nation created the Indian Act in 1876 with the express purpose of wiping out First Nations culture.

The Indian Act forcibly removed children, making it mandatory for every Indigenous child to attend a residential school and illegal for them to attend any other educational institution. Think about that. Someone comes to your door today, takes your child, threatens you with arrest if you resist and sends them to a school you've never seen and had no choice about whether they would attend.

It sounds unimaginable but these graves we are discovering today are the proof of what Indigenous people have been telling us for generations. We MUST bear witness. We must learn from our mistakes and educate ourselves and collectively take responsibility for change. That's what should be happening this Canada Day.

It is, in fact, not just our past we must take accountability for but present injustices too.

The lack of clean water has been discussed over and over again without resolution. Think about it. Water 'it's a basic human right, denied a portion of our population in a developed country. Unequal treatment in the health care system has been discussed over and over again and yet less than a year after the passing of Joyce Echaquan, we hear that a young Cree teenager who sought care from a hospital for feeling unwell, became delirious while waiting to be seen and instead of receiving treatment, was removed from the ER for 'intoxication.'

According to reports, he died later of septicemia, without a vital sign having ever been taken.

Our health care workers are heroes and particularly so during this past two years of pandemic health care but it's glaringly obvious that in some areas, work remains to be done. The list of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls only gets longer despite 231 specific Calls to Justice published in a final report dated June of 2019. So, while it might be nice to say, 'that was then, this is now' and congratulate ourselves on being better (a topic I wrote about just last week) we're quite clearly not better yet.

Despite this, I'm not a proponent of the 'Cancel Culture' response.

We can't just 'cancel' what we don't like and we can't 'cancel' an entire country's existence.

Canada is a result of everything that happened in the past, is happening now and what will happen in our future. It's a relatively young nation compared to the rest of the world. A developed nation where the freedom to vote, to rally, to express a dissenting opinion, to work and to play freely exists because we are a democracy. We have systems in place that are the envy of other nations including while flawed our access to health care without fees. We are still a land of opportunity for many, the one to which the aforementioned 300,000 people eagerly apply each year to become citizens of.

So, while there is work to be done, let's not cancel Canada Day and all the good that is associated with being Canadian, but rather, do the hard work instead. History is the guide from which we learn. It can't be erased. It shouldn't be erased. We can be ashamed of it and we can resolve to do better and to me, Canada is a place where doing better IS possible. But we all must bear some of the responsibility for doing so.

Celebrate Canada for the good it offers, for our contributions to the world including important initiatives like the original creation of the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces (the brainchild of Lester B. Pearson) but also take the time this Canada Day to begin your understanding of the full impact of the trauma of the residential school system and the current state of Indigenous, Metis and Inuit peoples.

Begin by reading the 94 recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission readily available for anyone to review. The Act is about so much more than making amends for the past. It's a blueprint for the future but only if we act upon it.

Resolve this Canada Day to stand together with our First Nations fellow citizens in demanding that we do. When we learn from history rather than erasing history we'll one day be able to proudly sing O Canada once again.