

A step backwards in Aboriginal affairs

By Tabitha Wells

Both federally and locally, there has been a push in recent years to make amends for the horrors done to our aboriginal communities. With the creation of the Dufferin County Cultural Resource Circle and the many events they have hosted and participated in, efforts continue to be made to make their presence a part of our modern culture. Not only that, but to educate on the history and culture that should already be a predominant part of our Canadian history.

Which is why I was both shocked and appalled to see both our mayor and our MPP stand up and proudly proclaim they want Orangeville to have the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald that is being taken down in Victoria, claiming it's to 'celebrate history?' instead of 'washing it under the rug.'

The mayor claimed in a council meeting that he is not anti-aboriginal, nor does he believe that celebrating Sir John A. and the 'good things?' is anti-aboriginal.

In a way, he is correct. Much like saying 'we should celebrate the good things Adolf Hitler did?' wouldn't be directly anti-Jewish. But that's the thing about bigotry -- it's not often direct. And what this says isn't 'I'm anti-aboriginal?'. Whether the mayor and our MPP intended it that way or not, what they are really saying is, 'White European accomplishments are far more important than the near genocide of the people we stole from, raped, pillaged, plundered, and eventually moved towards eradication of.'

You may think that sounds harsh, but regardless of harshness, that's exactly what it is saying. Sir John A. Macdonald was a racist determined to destroy all that was left of the aboriginals who inhabited this great land before we stole it. He gave them two options: literal genocide, or cultural genocide.

This choice he forced upon them is still being felt today.

We don't learn about just how deep this genocidal behaviour went in our schools. Though there were plans to change that, Doug Ford and his Conservatives have reversed the curriculum that would have finally taught of the horrors of our history -- horrors that we need to learn because we are already moving towards repeating them. Maybe not to the same depth, but our desire to eradicate culture that does not reflect 'Canadian?' (whatever that exactly means) is moving at a faster pace as anti-Muslim and anti-brown sentiments continue to rise.

The removal of statues of Macdonald and other racist supporters of the residential schools isn't about burying history or forgetting about it. Quite the opposite, actually. It's about acknowledging that this romanticized history of our 'great country?' is a facade, and that much as we refer to the horrors of other cultures, our history is filled with nightmares too. Nightmares that celebration statues, like Macdonald's, bury to make it seem like we were always the good guys.

Statues of evil people (and yes, someone who fought for the eradication of an entire people is evil) don't deserve to be celebrated. Should they continue to exist? Sure. But in museums and history books, where we teach that although evil people can do good, it does not mean the good is worth more than the bad.

To take this statue, one that the City of Victoria has chosen to remove, is to literally say to the rest of Canada 'we couldn't care less about the evils he committed. We don't think it was serious enough.'

The current state of aboriginal communities across Canada is our fault. We attempted to eradicate, silence, and destroy, while stealing from them. Stealing land, lives, and children. And while individually each of us may never have contributed, as a whole, our country continues to allow life to get worse for them. I remember growing up believing that the people who lived on reserves were poor because they were lazy drunks, that they just didn't want to do anything for themselves. This is the racism we have running through our blood. We scoff when they want reparations for the destruction of their people, saying they need to get over it. This is the systemic racism that boils in the blood of Canadians.

It's simply not possible to argue that celebrating Macdonald isn't harmful. Not when this man, whom so many want to roll out the red carpet for, said the following in May 1883:

'When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write ? [T]he Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.' (source: The Star, August 2017).

This is a man who both believed and promoted the ideology that aboriginals were less than us. Less human, less deserving of having their cultures preserved. Too 'savage?' to be allowed to raise their own children.

If we bring this statue here, forget the progress the town and county have made with our local groups. Because if we bring that statue

here, the statement being made is ?there's nothing wrong with thinking you're savages, because the white man did great things for the white people.?

Think I'm wrong about the statement? Review what Debbie and Gil, members of the Dufferin County Cultural Resource Centre, had to say about it at the last council meeting. Because their voices are the ones who have precedent in this case. They are the people who are being put down by the support of this statue. They are the ones who should be listened to, not the people who had nothing to lose from this man.