



World Indigenous Broadcaster's Network Gala Dinner Keynote Speech  
Delivered by The Right Honourable Paul Martin on June 19, 2014  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Thank you Valerie Creighton, President and CEO of the Canada Media Fund for your kind introduction.

To begin, let me acknowledge the Ojibway and Cree Peoples of Treaty 1 and the Métis Nation as we are visitors on their traditional territory.

And most importantly let me thank the World Indigenous Broadcasters network, APTN, and each broadcaster and media representative here for giving me this opportunity to be with you this evening.

I was asked to speak tonight on the importance of Indigenous broadcasting, I would begin however, by speaking to the importance of Indigenous people, and you will forgive me if I focus on the Indigenous people in Canada, who are those I know best—except perhaps for my Irish ancestors whom I understand are well represented here tonight.

The history of the Indigenous populations of the world is a book most people have never read. This is certainly true of Canada. And unfortunately when we do read the book of the First Nations, Métis Nation and Inuit, it begins with the European explorers who after they figured out this wasn't India or China, believed they had discovered a new continent where no one of any consequence lived.

What is not understandable is that to this day, North American children continue to be fed this version of history when in fact, the only thing the Europeans discovered was that there had been vibrant societies living here, educating, trading and sharing amongst themselves since time immemorial.

From the start, the newcomer's message to North America's First Peoples was the mantra used by colonial powers the world over. We told them, and we told ourselves that all that we believed was good and that all they believed— their history, their traditions— was irrelevant.

And over time and because we imported disease and had bigger guns, the ability of the First Peoples to resist was weakened, as was their ability to reconcile our methods of teaching with their identity and their way of life!

However, they were stubborn these Indigenous people and because of their strength of will, our attempts to eradicate their culture failed. That being said, what we did came at great cost.

The price paid by the First Peoples can be seen today in the United Nations ranking in which Canada ranks 11<sup>th</sup> on the Human Development Index, but were the Indigenous populations of this country to be ranked separately, they would be in close to 66<sup>th</sup> place.

The cost can be seen even more graphically in the tragedy of so many Indigenous children, 50% of whom live below the poverty line in this, one of the world's richest countries.

Why has this happened, you ask? It has happened because Canadian government policy down through the ages has been one of discrimination and assimilation, and there have been few bringing pressure to bear to act otherwise.

It is for this reason that the importance of the Indigenous media cannot be stressed enough. Back in 1922, Dr. Peter Bryce, founder of the Canadian Public Health Association published a study of residential school students, all of whom were Indigenous, and most of whom had been taken away from their parents at a very young age, and he found that 24% of those children died each year from treatable diseases, yet the Government of Canada did very little to help them<sup>1</sup>.

He then went on to note that of this tragedy, the public knew nothing, and he hoped his report would not only make the press, but that it would stir public outrage and force the Government into reform. Needless to say, the media of the day did not pick up on the report, and 74 years later, the same disregard towards Indigenous concerns was documented in the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. To quote the Commission,

“Canada’s Indigenous People are, in general, badly served by national and local media... The country’s large newspapers, TV and radio news shows often contain misinformation, sweeping generalisations, and galling stereotypes about Natives and Native affairs... the result is that most Canadians have little real knowledge of the country’s native peoples, or of the issues which affect them.”<sup>2</sup>

Now I suspect you have heard this citation before, but the truth is none of us can hear it enough. This is not to say, the mainstream media hasn’t improved in the past 25 years– they have– indeed even more so in the past couple of years, but this is not the time to ease up.

The road ahead is still very steep, and the Indigenous media must continue to show the way.

Quite simply, if Canadians are not given the Indigenous perspective on major issues then there will be no pressure on governments to look ahead and deal fairly. You have only to look at the current government’s position on the underfunding of Indigenous education. A plan that tells First Nation’s “it’s our plan or no plan” and negates any possibility for meaningful discussion.

This sells because what Canadians are told is that Indigenous leaders are blocking progress when in fact what they are saying is: we love our children, and we want them to have a better education than what you’re offering.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryce, Peter Henderson. *The Story of a National Crime*. Ottawa: James Hope & Sons ,Limited, 1922.

<sup>2</sup> *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996.

The fundamental issue in Canada is a lack of background, of both historical and contemporary understanding by too many of us. This was especially evident during the recent Truth and Reconciliation hearings, where the common refrain of Canadians was that they had never heard of Residential schools prior to the survivors telling their stories.

The fact is Indigenous people, their concerns, and communities do not make the news because they are not considered news. Circumstances that would dominate the national headlines if they occurred in non-Indigenous communities, such as boil water advisories, delayed emergency relief, nonexistent infrastructure, and schools built on toxic dumps are so commonplace on reserve they are not considered 'newsworthy'.

And the problem does not end there. When there are stories about Government neglect, the news reports tend to express only sympathy rather than accompanying it with analysis and a demand for action.

Sympathy is important, however without background context and the consequent pressure to act it does nothing to change things, and thus, for example, right now almost 100 First Nations communities do not have water clean enough to drink.

Furthermore, sympathy without analysis simply builds upon the false stereotypes of Native people and their cultures, and does nothing to change the system that created those false stereotypes in the first place.

For instance, the powerful tie that Indigenous Canadians have to the land which is a good thing, is too often portrayed as a refusal to get on with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is the line the current government uses when the First Nations insist on proper environmental analysis of new projects.

Well, let me tell you, if my water was contaminated by mercury due to industrial runoff for the last 100 years, I certainly wouldn't regard the call for environmental analysis as a refusal to get on with the 21<sup>st</sup> century— quite the opposite!

This is why Indigenous broadcasting has such a crucial role to play for too often the mainstream media accepts the stereotypes, rather than questioning them.

Expanding on that point, a Master's thesis I recently read by Chloë Ferguson in my office, found that when expert opinion is used in the reporting of Indigenous concerns, it is rarely Aboriginal expertise that is called upon, let alone that is decisive. This clearly reinforces the false notion that there are few Indigenous professionals capable of providing expert opinion, leaving the impression that those who haven't lived the issue are more knowledgeable than those who have.

The same paper pointed out that when Indigenous leaders raise issues, the media most often challenges their point of view, but the government's response is taken and presented as fact.<sup>3</sup>

For example, a number of years after the current government axed the Kelowna accord, which would have eliminated the huge funding gap in on-reserve education, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs announced that his department had completed an extensive study which had concluded that there was no such gap.

The counter response from First Nations educators was immediate, but was not picked up by the mainstream media and the government's denial of reality was accepted as a truth. Then to add insult to injury, a couple of months ago, when the government backpedalled and admitted there was a gap, incredibly the fact that the government had misled the public was barely raised in the mainstream media.

Nor was there an outcry when it was pointed out that a child who entered grade one in 2006, the year of the Kelowna Accord, will now leave primary school eight years later without the despicable discrimination in funding ever having been addressed.

Another example of the same problem occurred when the Chief of the Attawapiskat First Nation declared a housing emergency in her community. The government's response was to ignore the call for help and to appoint a third-party manager implying either incompetence or worse on her part, this in order to shift the public's attention from the government's lack of response to the emergency to the so called shortcomings of the Chief.

And it worked. The media gave the allegation against the chief most of their attention, with the result that the actual emergency was forgotten. All of which of course played right into the government's hands.

Nor is that the end of the story. The First Nation then took the government to court to annul the appointment of the third party manager. However when the hearing was finally held much much later and the emergency was no longer in the public eye, the government withdrew the third party manager and then said the hearing should be cancelled as it was no longer necessary.

They did this so the story would be buried, and the government's attempt to shift the blame from itself would not become public knowledge. Fortunately, Mr. Justice Michael Phelan saw through the government's manoeuvre and insisted the hearing be held.

And surprise, surprise, when the facts came out he found in the community's favour, because nowhere in the government's legal case did they ever make any allegations against the Chief. It was all just government spin. But when this was made public, did this despicable manoeuvre receive the press attention it should have? Not a bit!

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<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, Chloe. *How Come We Don't Know? The social construction of Aboriginal protest in the mainstream Canadian print media*. Thesis, submitted for a Masters of Journalism, London College of Communication, London, 2013.

In short, the government's blame game worked when it had to, and when the government's spin was found out by the court to be false, the general media simply ignored it.

This is why these meetings of the world's Indigenous broadcasters are so important, because while my stories are Canadian,

I have spent enough time in indigenous communities abroad to know that we will find their equivalents in too many of the countries represented here. And this takes me to the next level of the debate. Why is the Indigenous side of the story so rarely told?

The answer isn't very pleasant. It is to be found in one of the most telling questions asked by too many non-Indigenous people, both in Canada and around the world. That question is "why can't they be more like us?" My response to that generally is, "Why in God's name should they be?" But there is another answer as well, and in Canada it goes deeply into our history.

It starts with Canada's beginnings when the European settlers believing that native culture had no value, made no attempt to understand it, because they assumed its people had nothing to say. Thus began the tradition of the dismissing Indigenous knowledge in order to impose the European settler's mono-cultural point of view, on everything they saw, touched or heard in the so-called New World.

This cultural blindness has repeated itself time and time again throughout our history and indeed continues unto today, its consequences having permeated every level of North American thought.

Dr. Marie Battiste, a Mi'kmaq scholar teaching at the University of Saskatchewan has pointed this out in a remarkable new book entitled "Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit". She writes, and I quote: "Indigenous knowledge needs to be interpreted...as the Indigenous people themselves understand it..." The problem being she goes on to say: "every university has been structured to see the world through the lens of Eurocentric vision which opposes Indigenous perspectives..."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed the philosopher Charles Taylor has said the same thing in a different way, pointing out that non-recognition—the fact of simply not being there in the minds of the majority—, is one of the major issues facing the Indigenous identity.

This, the phenomenon of not being there – of being unseen as the majority go about their business is not simply abstract theory. It can be seen for instance in the 1200 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada.

Staggering as it may sound, until the number reached such a grotesque level that it couldn't be ignored, the lives of these women were considered inconsequential. Hidden in low income housing, isolated reserves, urban shelters and the like, in the eyes and

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<sup>4</sup> Battiste, Marie. *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*. Saskatoon: Purich Press, 2013.

minds of the majority, Indigenous women have been invisible. It is for this reason that an official inquiry into the murders is so important. It is also why the government's refusal to order one is so insidious.

Canadians must be made aware of the reasons behind the poverty, domestic violence, prostitution and other causes that have led to the murders, and to the indifference that has typified the lethargy of the government's response.

This is why telling the stories of Indigenous people on a sustained basis is so important, and it is here that I would mention our hosts, APTN. For 15 years APTN has served the First Nations, the Métis Nation and Inuit by providing culturally relevant programming and also providing all Canadians with Aboriginal-based news, documentaries, television series and films.

It also provides the mainstream media with the incentive to follow up on stories of national importance with the people who actually live them. For instance, "APTN Investigates" is a weekly program, which I would recommend to anyone who wants to increase their understanding of the issues of concern, to Indigenous Canada.

Similarly, the WITBN is to be congratulated for putting together a global system on behalf of Indigenous people everywhere, and it couldn't be happening at a better time in terms of the media landscape, for with the internet, the world is now at the fingertips of all the Indigenous networks.

This means as many people can access the Indigenous broadcasters of the world as can access CNN, thus creating a potential audience as big as any major network. And on that optimistic note, given that I stand between you and dinner and I don't want to push my luck, let me close these already too long remarks, by recognizing that there is a revolution underway, and its presence is being felt by all Indigenous people.

Many of the countries represented here are much further ahead than Canada in their recognition of the Indigenous people of their land. Many are also unfortunately far behind us, but one thing is clear.

The Indigenous people of the world are becoming increasingly strong in the demand that their rights be respected. The UN resolution is not the last step, it is the first of many to come.

The challenge now is to ensure that Indigenous cultures in all of their facets, are validated not only in the minds of Indigenous thinkers, but that they are also validated in the minds of the public at large.

The challenge is to tell stories that tell the whole story. This is true in Canada, it is true around the world, and that the Indigenous broadcasters of the globe are gathered here today, is I believe, the strongest sign possible that the battle is there to be won!

Thank you!