

# OPINION & EDITORIALS



## The CENTRAL NEWSPAPER

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### We Have Ways of Making You Talk: The Tyranny of Land Acknowledgements and Other Compelled Speech

George Ramsay

Indigenous land acknowledgements have become so common that many Canadians no longer give them a second thought – simply accepting a kind of tuneless new national anthem before events of all sorts. And that's why they're so dangerous. The enforced conformity and compelled speech they depend on are not just threats to individual freedom, writes George Ramsay, they also create a divisive moral hierarchy based on race. In this originally reported story, Ramsay delves into the dangers posed by Canada's broader shift to enforced verbal compliance, reveals the inspiring stories of a few brave souls who have dared to challenge this social tyranny and offers practical tips on how the rest of us can fight back too.

While censorship is often the focus of discussions about free speech, there's a related phenomenon that can do just as much damage to a free society. Not in preventing people from saying things they believe in, but in forcing them to say things they do not. Compelled speech requires people to use certain words or phrases, or to partake in upholding certain ideological beliefs. It is just as dangerous to free expression as overt censorship.

When someone is told what to say, how to say it and when to say it, not only is personal autonomy contradicted, but a false group consensus is manufactured. The famous Asch conformity experiments of the early 1950s demonstrated this phenomenon, revealing that many people will knowingly answer a simple question incorrectly if they see other people doing likewise. If everyone says  $2 + 2 = 5$ , it takes psychological fortitude to stand by your own judgement and state the truth, that  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

Sadly, Canadians have grown accustomed to changing how they speak on many controversial topics to fit societal expectations. What then occurs is not free discourse, but enforced obedience. Something needs to be done.

#### Indigenous Land Acknowledgements

The constant recitation of Indigenous "land acknowledgements" embodies and illustrates Canada's shift towards enforced mass-compliance. These statements have become ubiquitous in Canadian public life: at schools, workplaces, government functions, ceremonies and sporting events. Institutions display them in written formats on websites, documents, email signatures and on social media. A busy person in Canada may come across dozens of land acknowledgements per day in various contexts.

Although originally framed as optional gestures of respect, many organizations have policies mandating land acknowledgements. In other circumstances social pressure can make them seem mandatory even if they are not. In British Columbia, some people are so devoted to the idea that they've posted land acknowledgements in their front windows or engraved them in stone on their front yards. As an idea, land acknowledgements were first mooted in Australia in the 1970s. In Canada land acknowledgements were popularized following the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report. Although the report did not specifically demand them, they were widely promoted as a tool of "Indigenous reconciliation". But this seemingly laudable concept has since degenerated into shorthand for a symbolic and indefinitely-ongoing statement of regret for Canada's historical treatment of Indigenous people. In this way, "land acknowledgements" gained the air of a public apology.

These proclamations have evolved far beyond the simple sharing of history and morphed into a reinforcement of racialized identity politics. Among innumerable current examples, any customer of Telus checking their bill online will find a cloying land acknowledgement at the bottom of the page that's longer and more detailed than many of the explanations for the firm's actual products and services. The company falls all over itself thanking "Knowledge Keepers and Elders" and to "express gratitude to those whose territory we reside on, work on or are visiting." NHL fans in Edmonton, meanwhile, are bombarded by an unctuous land acknowledgement – or, in this case, a land assertion – by Cree chief Wilton Littlechild dressed in full traditional regalia projected over an enormous screen proclaiming that all of us are inhabitants of "Turtle Island". A lawyer, former MP and Senator, Littlechild obviously knows that North America doesn't literally float atop an enormous reptile, but the point is made: shut up and take it, no matter how ludicrous it sounds. The "Turtle Island" myth, incidentally, isn't even a Cree belief but stems from eastern Indian tribes. Which in turn points to the fact that the lands which later became Canada have shifted countless times between the various migrating and warring native tribes. The "Turtle Island" example illustrates how land acknowledgements, whether intentionally or not, often imply a sort of spiritual ownership that people with Indigenous heritage hold over the land. Once this position becomes the dominant viewpoint, discussion moves away from facts and verifiable history into the realm of philosophy, theology, claimed collective memory or sheer mysticism. Indeed, lawyers representing some Indigenous groups advancing claims cheerfully put "evidence" comprised of mystical claims before the courts – and the courts sometimes accept these arguments at face value.

If one is compelled to participate in something, it no longer exists as a genuine expression of interest or concern. This is a paradox of respect: how can words be respectful if they're required? For many practitioners, land acknowledgements appear to have become a form of "performative activism", i.e., inauthentic and/or self-serving superficial support for a popular cause. And those subjected to the mandate engage in the more familiar concept of virtue-signalling, outwardly displaying their allegiance to a required position on the issue. For all but the most committed zealots, land acknowledgements are probably just another box-checking ritual. Such thinking extends into the strangest corners; magazine articles about skiing now describe various B.C. resorts as sitting on the "unceded" territory of local First Nations.

More sinister is that these practices increasingly presume inherited moral responsibilities based on race, dividing Canadians between "settlers/colonizers" and those with Indigenous lineage as the rightful inhabitants, often deemed "stewards" or "caretakers" of the land. The more extreme practitioners now accuse Canada – and all Canadians – of occupying "stolen land". Why should Indigenous land acknowledgements be considered a form of compelled speech? As a result, many people now feel compelled to signal that they occupy the correct side of this collective conscience. Refusing to participate – or worse, asking critical questions – can invite accusations of insensitivity, moral failure or racism. But if one is compelled to participate in something, it no longer exists as a genuine expression of interest or concern. This is a paradox of respect: how can words be respectful if they're required?

#### Higher Education Succumbs to Compelled Speech

While land acknowledgements do not all read the same, they follow a general lexicon and theme. They rely on terms like "unceded," "stolen," "traditional," "colonized," "uninvited," "settler" and similar ideologically loaded, sometimes outright hostile and generally inaccurate expressions. Often they reverse or redefine key concepts to accentuate narratives of victimization and entitlement. For example, the numbered treaties of the late 1800s that enabled the peaceful settlement of the Prairies and much of the Far North are increasingly described as vague "land sharing" arrangements, which facilitates open-ended modern-day Indigenous claims extending far beyond the specific wording and intent of the treaties themselves. This is false. The University of British Columbia goes even further. The school's Department of English Language and Literatures (sic), for example, claims to be located on "unsurrendered traditional and ancestral territories". This seems to imply some ongoing conflict. (Ukraine's claim to the Donbas, perhaps?). The statement also describes the entire discipline of English as being informed by "colonizing violence". The department concludes by asserting a commitment to "do better" and "think better". Jargon like this does not merely acknowledge history; it advances moral judgments and prescribes approved modes of thought.

## Letters To The Editor:

WHAT IS ON YOUR MIND? Send letters to [newspaper@ocentral.com](mailto:newspaper@ocentral.com)

#### Dear Editor:

This matter was never resolved and staff continues to badger, harass and target certain residents locally, especially those that seem to be the most vocal or the most active that clearly have memberships.

Council members literally did nothing on this but ignore and cover this up.

Personally, it is beyond evident that I am being targeted seemingly the most and being blunt, it is pissing others off that are members. We talk, they see what is going on and since you have done nothing to mediate or resolve this matter and the nonsense going on at the City facilities that WE PAY FOR AND PAY YOUR SALARIES -- the residents are now organizing against you, and your weird behaviors and (political) targeting of a few -- all of which is caught on cameras while you with STATE funded checks look after one another being the bootlickers that you are.

We are tired of the lies, the nonsense, the targeting and SELECTIVE ENFORCEMENT you are CHOOSING to engage in, along with your various forms of mis / mal and nonfeasance you are engaging in, at our expense and letting each other with STATE sponsored paychecks get off and support each other with. --- and on behalf of TAXPAYERS who have expressed concerns with these and related matters. All you had to do was leave us alone, and actually do something productive with your overpaid jobs --- like fix the problems that can be done literally within minutes in most cases.

Instead you harass us, threaten us who have memberships paid for and in good standing and also threaten us with TRESPASS orders and "security" --- for pushing back and questioning things and giving you solutions..... Maybe you all should find other jobs. Because all of you here clearly have no desire in doing them or SERVING THE PUBLIC WHO PAYS YOU.

We don't answer to you. You work for us. And you hide under fake statutes, the color of "law" and all kinds of union protected lies - fraud and nonsense.

You have all been put on notice and your various staff members by proxy will not be protected and will be held accountable and likely publicly shamed.

If we are being prejudiced against as the stakeholders and bill payers -- sure as shit you are going to be. Maybe it is time for me to make a political comeback and ensure a lawful, proper government is put in place instead of this LEGAL CORPORATE DEFACTO FRAUD -- that has been in place for decades.

\*\* STAFF member now copied in who caused and escalated this matter. Then tried to play victim. Nearly a week has gone by on this matter where city staff have TRESPASSED against me, ignored me, with no evidence, no follow up, Councillor Derek Giberson no reply, no further contact by anyone in the CITY / CORPORATION of Oshawa, my peaceful and lawful ideas and suggestions were completely ignored, my health issues are ignored wilfully as such because of a fraudulent bunch of claims against me by (as stated) another terrible STATE employee where you all at the CITY seem to look after one another at the exclusion of the resident concerns and what is moral and what is right ... -- while my extorted tax dollars fund all of this and your large paychecks, while my rights, and the rights of residents are eroded, and our taxes go up, like your paychecks. All while you have damaged me, without cause, without proof, without follow up and hoping the clock just runs out on this and I go away.

My reputation has been damaged by a terrible employee, the trend continues as I said, with overpaid, entitled, rude, woke, unaccountable publicly funded STAFF. Who never seem to respect the residents. There is no price in dollars you can place on such things.

I was nice about this, fair and tried to respect HR basic protocols. Never named the STAFF member who acted in bad faith, did not launch into all the specifics other than what I saw, witnessed and believed to be true, while the witnesses around the incident all are on the record, and as stated earlier, tons of camera footage.

Now, I am copying that employee into this thread. I did not want to have to do this, you all forced me by ignoring my peaceful but firm complaint and pushback. Christine Edwards, the culprit -- this is directed at you, I suggest you read this thread. You are being held accountable by me now, since all of you coddle each other with your lack of best practices, morality, decency and look out for each other going along to get along. At the expense of my rights, my reputation, my membership and tax dollars.

Barry Dutton, Oshawa

#### Dear Editor:

It was a matter of time. I read the Central's article on the closing of Fazio's. Once a great place and much like downtown gone to the dogs. I attended there after the original Fazio's sold the building.... it was not the same. The quality of service was not there. The new owners changed the menu and the prices out of range for the food served. The last time I was there the atmosphere was bad. Outside, some guy stopped middle of the sidewalk and took a piss in the doorway. Disgusting. A little further up some woman shooting up. I almost had to jog to my car as I did not know what to expect next.

Sorry to see them go. Sorry to see downtown Oshawa in such a poor state of affairs.

Leo McKarry, Oshawa

#### Dear Editor:

I like to begin this letter by expressing my gratitude to you the editor of this newspaper. You have come a long way in your 30 years plus. Have heard many of the tales of the many people you have helped. Including me. I am a downtown business. I read about the closure of Fazio's.

What a shame. But not so much so. I been in the core for the past 9 years. I do not want to disclose my business in fear of reprisal. We use to have a beautiful downtown. Now we have nothing. We have no municipal representation. Our Chamber of Commerce is a joke and that other group Downtown Oshawa is just as bad. In their literature one would think Oshawa downtown is some L.A. for the rich town full of opportunity. Far from it. We the merchants are struggling and it shows. Look at all the businesses that open up and close.

Someone has to be asking why?

I know I wake up every morning. Come to work. Clean the front of my business of drug paraphernalia, used condoms and feces. I should not have to do that. The other day I drove by the Local Legion on Simcoe. I was disgusted. People urinating right on the front door.

Where are the cops? I do not want to close my doors. I am a hard working Canadian. I expect my municipal government to take care of the quality of life. I know I can't count on the Province or the Feds. We need you Mr. Ingino running our city. At the least you have a proven record of success in Oshawa and always available. Thank you. **Anonymous Oshawa merchant**

SEND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



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or

mail to 136 Simcoe St. North Suite 4 Oshawa