

Covid-19 Pandemic and Racism

Although COVID-19 has been on the world stage for over ten months, it became personal for the Tla'amin Nation on September 4, 2020. To date, at least 36 Tla'amin band members have tested positive for the virus. Tla'amin's exposure to the pandemic was shocking, but the response was quick, decisive, and honourable. In addition to declaring a state of emergency, Tla'amin leadership self-imposed three consecutive 72-hour lockdowns, along with a 9:00 pm to 6:00 am curfew.

Shortly after Tla'amin voluntarily publicized its COVID-19 outbreak, two Powell River businesses were reported to be refusing Indigenous people entry into their establishments. These actions are not easily defensible considering that many Tla'amin members live off-reserve, there are non-Indigenous people that live on-reserve, and not all Indigenous people are Tla'amin. Simply put, there is no logical reasoning behind the assumption that every Indigenous person potentially encountered COVID-positive Tla'amin people by virtue of sharing a skin tone.

Reaction on social media to these incidents was swift, with the intention of making clear to these establishments that there are now consequences to discrimination. Many people, including myself, have made purposeful decisions on where our money will now be spent.

These incidents demonstrate that racism has not been eradicated, even in a city known for its progressive government-to-government relationship with the Nation whose land it occupies (Google the 2003 Community Accord if you haven't looked into that landmark testament to Powell River and Tla'amin's partnership). This is not surprising.

In 2014, the rate of homicide of Indigenous women and girls in Canada was almost 6 times higher than that of non-Indigenous women, a shocking 17% of which occurred on a street, road, or highway (compared to the 1% for non-Indigenous women).

In 2016, 52.5% of children in Canadian foster care were Indigenous, even though they accounted for only 7.7% of the child population, as a result of the intentional disruption of the Indigenous family unit through tools such as residential schooling, the 60s Scoop, and the 1876 Indian Act.

From 2011 to 2016, the suicide rate of First Nations people was 2 times higher than the rate of non-Indigenous people. If we are talking about youth, that number jumps to 10 times higher in the case of males, and 22 times higher in the case of females. Again, studies claim that this is a result of Canada's legacy of brutality and imposed inequality.

There is nothing that can be done about the past or the fact that Canada was built on the exploitation of Indigenous peoples. There is nothing that can be done about the fact that, up until very recently, relationships and agreements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities have been defined by deceit, violence, and theft on the part of the colonizer. Despite our inability to turn back the clock, we can instead look to the future.

At the beginning of our COVID-19 outbreak, I witnessed a side of Powell River that I hadn't had to see for a very long time. Regardless, the City of Powell River has done more any other municipality or city in Canada that I can think of (be proud of this!) by way of educating itself on Tla'amin culture and creating a leadership partnership that is truly impressive. During Tla'amin's lockdown, we received an outpouring of support from our non-Indigenous population much louder than the negativity. That is the Powell River I am happy to be familiar with.

(Credit for this article must also be given to Ace Harry and Castilleja DeMarco)