

# Trapped in the aboriginal narrative



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Across the land, native leaders are beating the drums for tomorrow's National Day of Action. The point of the protests, they claim, is to "educate" the rest of us about the terrible conditions endured by aboriginals. "Poverty among Canada's first nations peoples rivals Third World conditions," explains Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations. "It's this country's dirty little secret."

If so, it's the worst-kept secret in the world. You'd have to be brain dead not to be aware of the poverty of the reserves, the awful housing, the bad water, the sickness, the suicides, the hopelessness. People have grown weary of this story because it never changes. Kashechewan and Davis Inlet and Pikangikum all blur together. Those poor children, they say. And then they change the channel.

Everyone is trapped in the narrative we've constructed to explain it. The Europeans arrived, wiped out most of the natives, stole their land and tried to stamp out their culture. All the dysfunction of aboriginal communities stems from the original sins of the conquerors. Only the restoration of their land and culture (plus more money) will restore their dignity and fortunes.

We now have a vast Indian industry of chiefs, government bureaucrats, lawyers, consultants and academics that is heavily invested in this narrative. Many of these

people are well-meaning. They are also the chief obstacles to change, because their remedies make the problems worse.

"Dependency spending programs don't work," says Clarence Louie, chief of the Osoyoos band in B.C. "The only real solution is the economy, stupid." Chief Louie is a rare voice of dissent. Instead of talking about tradition and spirituality, he talks about economic development. The Osoyoos band used to be like the others - dependent on government handouts, crippled by social problems and nepotism. Today, it owns nine businesses, including the award-winning winery Nk'Mip Cellars.

Calvin Helin, from the Tsimshian Nation in B.C., is another unpopular guy. He wrote *Dances with Dependency*, a call for native self-reliance. Aboriginal communities don't need ancient wisdom and more handouts, he says. They need entrepreneurs. "We don't live in a bubble, and we have to become economically integrated into the system to look after ourselves."

Unfortunately, these voices of reason are all but drowned out by those who insist that participating in the free-market economy is a sellout to the white man's ways. Nowhere is this "sellout" message stronger than among the academic elites who peddle fuzzy visions of a communal, egalitarian, back-to-the-land utopia where first nations peoples will be healed and once again live in harmony with the land and each other.

Whether you're in Canada, Australia or New Zealand, the dominant narrative is always the same - and so is the dysfunction and degradation of aboriginal communities. Last month, a Maori named Alan Duff came to Canada to blow up that narrative. He wrote the book that formed the basis for

*Once Were Warriors*, the heart-breaking movie about the dark side of modern Maori life.

"Political correctness is your enemy! White academic liberals are your enemy!" he told a Winnipeg audience. "They tell us indigenous people that we ought to go back and live as our ancestors lived. They want you to return to your past. But they're not going to do that. They're teaching their children your ceremonies. They're teaching them the modern tools of technology, and how to get mortgages."

The so-called wisdom of the elders is another problem. "Our elders often suggest we go back to how things were. They have no notion or concept of what the modern world is about, nor of what young peoples' aspirations are."

Mr. Duff knows that native kids are doomed unless they acquire the two essential keys to modern life: literacy and an education. That's why he founded the program Books in Homes, which has placed millions of books in the hands of Maori children. He also refuses to soft-pedal, excuse or explain away the familiar pathologies that afflict many of his people - the drunkenness, the wife-beating, the child abuse. To the men, he says: Stop strutting! Stop giving us endless speeches about yourselves! Start doing something for your families and your children!

It's called self-empowerment. And nobody can give it to you.

## MORE COMMENT

### DEFYING THE ODDS

Native graduates must overcome historic obstacles, United Church moderator David Giuliano says.

### LIVE DISCUSSION

AFN national chief Phil Fontaine takes questions at 1:30 pm EDT  
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