

Commentary



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How identity politics prolongs racism

Chris Sankey

A reconciliation transformation is underway in Canada. Although the process is generally positive, the effort to create new styles of partnership with Indigenous peoples have been messy, frustrating, and, at times angering. Whatever its flaws, this process brought our communities out from the background and into the forefront of public affairs in Canada.

Conversations of reconciliation invariably deal with the themes of ignorance, racism, and “identity politics.” We can all agree that ignorance and racism should be confronted and addressed. Yet as an Indigenous Canadian concerned about these issues, I ask myself everyday: Is identity politics the right remedy?

In my opinion, the answer is no. I don’t agree with it. While I am a big supporter of Indigenous reconciliation, the painful reality is that this effort is being ruined by identity politics.

Confronting racism in Canada

To understand how to confront racism, we must first define what it is and is not. Most simply, racism is judgment or prejudice on the basis of race. It can exist in systems (e.g., a system that allows different rights based on race) or in people’s minds (e.g., someone who looks down on another racial group

or thinks of their own group as ‘superior’). Both forms of racism need to be confronted and addressed.

What is distinct from racism, and often confused with it, is the concept of ignorance. This can include insensitivity, a lack of knowledge, poor intercultural communications skills and the like. Ignorance is best addressed with a gentle hand of encouragement and education, correcting people rather than confronting them.

Identity politics lumps in ignorance and racism into one category, attacking both aggressively without much consideration for how to improve how people think and how our systems work. This alienating approach also paints communities with incredibly broad strokes, assigning collective experiences to individuals and communities, thereby erasing any nuance or ideological diversity. Already we can see some of the issues with identity politics.

But let’s be clear: While Canadians are by and large not racist, racism is real and persistent in this country. For instance, many Canadians see one of our people homeless in their communities and automatically make a judgment call about all of us. Such collective judgments contribute to the very problem of Indigenous social and economic alienation.



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But with this and other issues, no policies, no matter how “woke,” will suddenly purge this country of racism. Individuals have to change the way they think about Indigenous peoples or any other race. Nobody is born a racist. Racism is taught. I detest it just as much as the next person. Anyone who feels the need to look down on a specific race to feel good or to develop a sense of racial superiority needs to take long look in the mirror.

This is a terrible way to live. Ask yourself: Do I want my children to look down on others? Of course not. We need, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, to figure out how to get along. After all, none of us are going anywhere, especially Indigenous people.

If you learned racism you can unlearn it. To unlearn it requires those flawed ideas to be replaced with truth.

What does that mean in practical terms? We do not need governments or outside groups to tell us who we are or speak on our behalf. I am tired of being labelled as nothing more than an Indigenous person, a Native, or a First Nations. I am these things, but they do not define me or my experience. Within those blanket categories is a diversity and nuance that is completely lost when people try to discuss racism.

If you want to use a label for me, I am Tsimshian. That is all that matters to me and my family.

If Canadians want to reduce their ignorance and come to know who I am, they can ask. Or better yet they can do their own research and learn about our centuries-long time on this land. But read carefully; there are many inaccurate descriptions and assumptions surrounding Indigenous peoples.

Why identity politics prolongs racism

Both racism and ignorance need to be confronted and reduced through dialogue and education, but neither can be corrected with identity politics. Simply put, I do not agree with identity politics, largely because it prolongs racism.

Identity politics reduces all people to little more than their race or clique. It is deeply disrespectful to assume that I must uphold a certain set of ideas – often ideas imposed by people outside my community – just by the nature of being Indigenous. It’s incredibly patronizing to reduce all issues to matters of race when our communities have dynamic and important needs like all Canadians. And it’s amazingly naïve to assume this combative approach will somehow change the hearts and minds of those who are ignorant or hold racist sentiments.

Given that we cannot control the way one thinks of another person of colour or race, why do we think identity politics will eliminate racism? Rather than changing how people think, identity politics forces people to look through a racial lens on every issue, inadvertently reinforcing attitudes that establish the harmful notions about inherent normative differences between racial groups.

We have also seen how this ideology is weaponized to “cancel” people who engage in wrongthink while simultaneously shielding from fair criticism anyone with the supposedly “right” ideas. Are we not a nation committed to fairness? What happened to treating each other with respect and dignity, regardless of race?

Identity politics and paternalism

I can appreciate that many people who claim to engage in identity politics on behalf of people like me earnestly believe that they are making the world better. They are wrong; they are entrenching that outsider paternalism that has kept generations of Indigenous people down.

For instance, consider the failed policies of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. This outdated and paternalistic agency fails because it effectively

serves no purpose to me, our people, and all Canadians. It merely entrenches race-based identity politics that have no place in Canada, treating us differently because of our race without tangibly improving our outcomes.

Also consider the big mistake environmental activists make by using First Nations to push for an aggressive climate change strategy. A systematic effort is being made to connect Indigenous people to the radical environmental agenda, without any real effort to listen to our views and priorities. Slapping labels on complex issues and reducing an entire people to an argumentative stereotype is the worst form of identity politics.

Clearly, we do not need identity politics to advance reconciliation. It is an impediment to the process. What we need is the ability to act upon our rights so that we may determine our own political and economic futures, free from dependence and paternalism.

True reconciliation

The first step is for Indigenous communities to focus on the commercial opportunities in their territories. Canada, for its part, needs to respect the rights and title of Canada's first peoples.

My advice is to work with First Nations to settle treaties; where there are existing treaties, they need to be honoured. Indigenous people need to respect the communities who wish to explore economic development for their region. Communities cannot speak on one another's behalf; Indigenous peoples cannot be seen as a monolith.

Having the power to make our own decisions for our own communities is key. Only then will we understand our true value when we decide to engage or not engage in development. It's only then First Nations who exercise true sovereignty will get the opportunity to manage wealth for our people.

We need to focus on industries like oil and gas, understanding what it really means for our communities to transition. If the oil and gas sector were to shut down, it would be Indigenous people who pay the highest price. After generations of fighting for our rights and the ability to meaningfully participate in the economy on our terms, it would be a sad irony if yet another misguided act of paternalism threw us back under the yolk of dependency.

This whole "build back better" and "green new deal" paints a misleading picture wherein destroying these industries has no adverse effects. This unrealistic vision, I fear, is setting up our impressionable youth for failure. They have a misguided view of how the country provides energy to the metropolitan regions. This will be catastrophic to our country's wellbeing if we do not stop with the false and defamatory messages about our energy sector.

For reconciliation to occur, Indigenous peoples need local economies. We have an abundance of natural resources. Let's be proactive and develop them responsibly. Let's not forget tourism, fishing, aquaculture, agriculture, forestry, farming, tech and sustainable development, to name a few. And without the energy sector none of those industries are possible.

We need to change our focus away from a recovery built upon central government control and instead unleash Indigenous talent and entrepreneurship. That is how Indigenous peoples contribute to building Canada. Our country needs to focus on capacity building so we can raise the level of competition, competency, self-assessments, mentorships, and job shadowing. Our people need to buy into these opportunities.

Non-Indigenous and Indigenous Canadians must stop feeling threatened or worry that their jobs are at stake. We are merely trying to build much-needed capacity. These collective commitments are revitalizing our economies, creating real wealth, and ensuring that Indigenous peoples will be competitive in our own lands.

We need all Canadians to stop reducing us to some destitute peoples in need of saviors. Focus instead on our rich and vibrant cultures that have been doing business for thousands of years. When we talk about the social well-being of our people, I would rather Canada just commit to providing equal service to our people rather than always focusing on race-based policies to identify and compartmentalize us. Our people are tired of feeling divided from other Canadians. Identity politics carries the power to force us apart.

If you continue to poke at a wound, it will never heal. The more you leave it open, people stay hurt and angry. Remember something: Hurt people hurt other people.

Please stop trying to save Indigenous people. That has never worked for us. We want – and deserve – equal opportunities. And we desperately need non-Indigenous people to stop describing us in ways that meet their needs and not ours. Identity politics objectifies and constrains us. Stop speaking for us, and instead, let us get our society and economy moving forward together.

About the author



Chris Sankey is President/Chief Executive Officer for Blackfish Enterprises, Chairman of Blackfish Industries, a Heavy Civil Construction company and Director/VP of BitCrude Energy, a company moving solid energy by rail. Currently, Chris provides advice, direction and strategic planning to the Energy Sector on engagement with communities in British Columbia. Chris is a member of the Coast Tsimshian community of Lax Kw'Alaams near Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Chris is a former elected Councillor for the Lax Kw'alaams Band where he served his community for six and a half years. Chris use to Chair the Economic Development Committee for the Governing Council.

Chris was instrumental in leading and implementing the new DevCorp for his community and Council, where he separated the politics from business. Furthermore; he sat as Board of Directors for Lax Kw' Alaams Business Development Ltd, Chaired the Human Resources Committee, was Chair for the Finance and Audit Committee and also sat on 2 other local community based business boards. Chris was effective in starting and implementing the first ever Emergency Response and Marine Safety table in the Coast Tsimshian territory. Chris was part of a team that helped negotiate and facilitate the \$36 billion dollar Pacific Northwest LNG agreement and was one of two negotiators for Lax Kw'Alaams Band that reached the first ever Environmental Monitoring Agreement between the Coast Tsimshian and Provincial and Federal Governments of Canada.

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The Honourable Irwin Cotler

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