

It's always scary and threatening to take a hard look at ourselves. When we are faced with facts or someone's opinion we don't like, we naturally become defensive and react. Sometimes in ways that help the conversation as well as help ourselves look at the situation and ourselves. But too often our first impulse to last impulse is to raise up our barriers even more and pull out as many counter facts and arguments we possibly can. Just like one of my news feeds occasionally asks me which posts and sources they should not send on to me. I always refuse this because that stops learning.

Truth is never convenient or safe or welcomed. When I was called a racist by a white man I didn't know well, my first reaction was, "You really don't have a clue of the real world you interviewed for!" He was considering taking over my job in a multi-cultural setting, of at least 6 different cultures. But I was able to slow myself down and read and reread the letter. There was a level of him not understanding the work situation and cultures and the many barriers and difficulties of fairness and meshing the different parts of the work. But after a few days I considered this a wake up call – to at least be clearer in my language and thinking and attitudes. I hope you do the same with this article. And please don't let the author's language distract you from his message.

**Title: Canada's National Disgrace February 2, 2015 MacLeans Magazine By Dave Schurman**  
Two weeks ago, *MacLeans*, Canada's only national news magazine, published [an article](#) that caused quite the uproar. Written by a former diplomat, Scott Gilmore, and entitled, "Canada's Racism Problem? It's Even Worse Than America's," it's not hard to see why this upset people. Even better was the subtitle, "For a country so self-satisfied with its image of progressive tolerance, how is this not a national crisis?" I wish I had written this article, it says what I've been saying for a long, long time.

Aboriginal peoples in Canada get screwed. Have been since the first Europeans arrived, and still do today. And that's not going to change any time soon unless Canadians do something about it. But, in my experience, they don't care. Last year, I wrote [a post](#) about a funny sweatshirt that an aboriginal man, Jeff Menard, in Winnipeg (which *MacLeans* also called out as Canada's [most racist city](#)) created that said: "Got Land? Thank an Indian." I wrote this post in response to a response I got to a tweet stating that if you thought this hoodie racist, you're an idiot. This response tweet said "I'm offended because they used the word Indian. My grandfather was from India. He worked for a living."

How to unpack that? This tweet was anti-historical and offensive on so many levels. Starting with being upset at the use of the word "Indian," the term applied to aboriginal peoples by Euro-Canadians historically. But the real kicker is "He worked for a living." Many of the comments on Gilmore's article, and a lot of the vituperative, racist tweets I saw complained that aboriginal peoples in Canada survive on handouts from the government and don't work for a living. No mention of imperialism, the taking of land, the systematic attempts by the Canadian government to steal away aboriginal languages, cultures, religions, and names, of the residential schools designed to also take the children of aboriginals away from them (to say nothing of the horrific sexual abuse therein).

Gilmore pointed just how badly aboriginal peoples get screwed in Canada, by comparing them to African-Americans in the United States, in easy table format, which I produce here (and hope that *MacLeans* doesn't mind). Look at those statistics and just try not to be offended, saddened, and, if you are Canadian, embarrassed. Hell, even if you're American, you should be embarrassed by these stats. But, Gilmore's right. Canadians are a smug lot. My Twitter feed is usually full of all kinds of anti-American comments, the implicit meaning is "Well, the US is a mess, thank god I live in Canada." Information such as this should end such discussions and puncture our smugness forever.

# A national disgrace

*By almost every measurable indicator, Canada's Aboriginal population suffers a worse fate and more hardship than the African-American population in the U.S.*

	<b>Aboriginal Canadians</b>	<b>African- Americans</b>
Unemployment rate	<b>14%</b>	11%
Unemployment rate vs. the national rate	<b>2.1 times</b>	1.9 times
Median income	<b>\$22,344</b>	\$23,738
Median income vs. the national average	<b>60%</b>	74%
Incarceration rate (per 100,000 population)	1,400	<b>2,207</b>
Incarceration vs. the national rate	<b>10 times</b>	3 times
Homicide rate (per 100,000 population)	8.8	<b>17.3</b>
Homicide rate vs. the national rate	<b>6.1 times</b>	3.7 times
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	11.7	<b>12.4</b>
Infant mortality rate vs. the national rate	<b>2.3 times</b>	2 times
Life expectancy (in years)	<b>72.8</b>	74.9
Life expectancy vs. the national average	<b>91%</b>	95%
Dropout rate*	<b>23%</b>	8%
Dropout rate vs. the national average	<b>2.7 times</b>	1.1 times

\*20- to 24-year-olds without a high school diploma, and not in school

**MACLEAN'S**

**Sources:** Statistics Canada; Office of the Correctional Investigator; The Lancet; Health Canada; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Department of Justice; U.S. Department of Health; Centers of Disease Control; National Center for Education Statistics

At the same time the furor over Gilmore's article was raging, another debate was happening over the death of Makayla Sault, an 11-year old from the New Credit First Nation in Ontario. Makayla died of leukemia. When she was first diagnosed last year, she underwent chemotherapy in Hamilton, ON. But the side-effects were too great. And so she refused further treatment, preferring instead traditional medicine. Obviously, it didn't work.

This raises interesting questions, starting with who has the right to control the lives of children who have cancer. But. Ultimately, we have to respect her decision. Why? Because it was *her* life.

But, then the *enfant terrible* of Quebec journalism, Denise Bombardier, had to get involved. Bombardier is perhaps most famous outside of Quebec for having been fired by Radio-Canada for having participated in a debate on marriage equality, taking the position against it. At any rate, this is Bombardier's comments on Makayla Sault – an image of the comments in French. (thanks to Mikayla Cartwright for the image) are not displayed for reasons of space and many of us not great at French.

For those who cannot read French, a few of the highlights: After complaining about the cost of political correctness, she states that Makayla made the choice to be treated according to traditional medicine, encouraged, perhaps, by her parents and other members of her First Nation. Then the kicker, "A white child wouldn't have to make this choice. This is where we see the delusional ancestral rights of the aboriginals open the door to quackery. This child died because she was the sacrificial victim of a deadly, anti-scientific culture that is killing aboriginal people."

It took me all of about 0.33 seconds to find a Euro-American child who faced this dilemma. Daniel Hauser, a 13-year old boy who was refusing treatment in 2009, for religious reasons. Daniel Hauser, I might add, is white. My Google search turned up other kids faced with this same awful dilemma (the same search also turned up other children in the same position). So, Bombardier is factually wrong.

But she is also morally, ethically wrong. Bombardier's screed reads like far too many documents I read in the records of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, the government agency (which has had many names) in charge of carrying out the responsibility that the Government of Canada has to aboriginals, according to treaties that both pre- and ante- date Confederation in 1867, as well as Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution. In many of the documents I read during my days working in the field of aboriginal law and litigation in Ottawa, various employees of Aboriginal Affairs, from lowly agents in the field to the directors of the department in Ottawa, referred to the need to civilize the aboriginals, and how white people knew what was right for them. In academia, we call this imperialism.

Bombardier says the same thing. She dismisses aboriginal culture as "anti-scientific" and "deadly." She refers to traditional ways of life as "quackery." In short, Canada needs to civilize the aboriginals for their own good, just as Aboriginal Affairs agents and employees argued a century ago.

In short, Gilmore is bang-on correct. Canada's treatment of its aboriginal population is a national disgrace and tragedy, made worse by the fact that most Canadians don't know or don't care, and a good number of them are part of the problem, as Bombardier shows. Gilmore writes:

*We are distracted by the stories of corrupt band councils, or flooded reserves, or another missing Aboriginal woman. Some of us wring our hands, and a handful of activists protest. There are a couple of unread op-eds, and maybe a Twitter hashtag will skip around for a few days. But nothing changes. Yes, we admit there is a governance problem on the reserves. We might agree that "something" should be done about the missing and murdered women. In Ottawa a few policy wonks write fretful memos on land claims and pipelines. But collectively, we don't say it out loud: "Canada has a race problem."*

And until we do, nothing is going to change.

## Here are a few of the comments in response to this article.

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Excellent post again. The situation is indeed a disgrace. I am a scientist at heart and do believe that science has come up with important cures in the realm of medicine but the traditional ways cannot simply be thrown out. Just finished reading *The Orenda* by the fantastic native writer Boyden. It leaves you wondering if the new ways brought over to this continent in the 1700s were that favourable to the native people. Their ways were not perfect but they were THEIRS!

It's of interest that the dialogue surrounding marginalized populations is nearly the same, no matter what country. We constantly hear that "they" don't work, live off handouts, are primitive – as if there were a global script for bigotry. This post was elucidating. Thank you.

Very true. I think what struck me the most about a lot of what I read around the issue of Canada's aboriginal peoples is the direct comparison to African Americans. The discourse is the same.

The United States has a worse record when it comes to treatment of natives than African Americans in my opinion. One of many examples would be the infamous Trail of Tears.

Indeed. I can't say if one is worse than the other, but they're both bad. The Trail of Tears is a national disgrace, though, I do have to say that 90% of my students know about it by the time they get to my class, Canadian students don't have that kind of knowledge of aboriginal issues. As I like to say to my students, in the US, the natives were just shot, in Canada, we were much more nefarious, we handed out small-pox blankets with impunity, engaged in ethnocide, and various other dirty tricks.

I feel racism is a global problem and exists in every day life. It's also one that has been handed down from generation to generation and hence, most people have come to treat it as the status quo.

We might live in the age of social media where it is easier to create awareness and start a change but we have also very short memories and what is started today is forgotten tomorrow. Ferguson is a good example. We all get bogged down by the routine of daily life and our own little problems.

I am aware of racism, but I don't know if it will end. Boys nor girls are born racist it's taught to them... And I can't seem to think of something that delivers equalism inside any family unless they chose to.

Thank you for your thoughtful post. I just discovered a secret my grandmother carried through her life — and to her grave. She was Ojibwe. She was light-skinned and when she came of age around 1920, she began to pass herself off as white. I discovered her secret only by uncovering old birth records and census forms for her and her family. After the initial surprise wore off, I was saddened ... first, because she was ashamed of her heritage and to ensure a better life she had to become someone that she was not. And, second, that, if she were at that same point in today's world, she would probably make the same choice again today. So much for progress.

I can only imagine, I had a friend years ago who was aboriginal, and she also began to pass herself as white, for the same reasons. Just made her life easier. She felt horrible about it, though.

I can understand why she did it. It must have been better to say she was white than to admit that she wasn't but looked white. People like that usually had it worse because they had to fight both sides of the coin.

And I'd add that social media is also a way in which the racists respond. I got some static when I initially published this post from racists, and I saw a LOT of that in response to Ferguson, or Eric Garner, etc, on Twitter.

Yes! Definitely! The relative anonymity on the internet gives a lot of freedom to people to say things they wouldn't otherwise. In that way it's a double edged sword.

Would you consider Aboriginals segregated? If so, why or / and why not?

Very well put. Here, in the U.S., the elephant's in our room, too. Racism is pervasive in many ways, so much so that the color of the President's skin gets in the way of debate, and that isn't even acknowledged. That's just the tip of the iceberg, given the backlog of racism with every wave of immigrants and the ongoing discrimination towards the people that were here before the Europeans arrived. Mother Earth has seen many peoples cross her surface and we still don't know how to exist together.

Tell me about it. I live in Boston, a city with a long, inglorious past with racism. But, the discourse surrounding Obama depresses me. I'd estimate that about 65-70% of the opposition to him is due to his skin colour. Not his policies, his politics, or anything else. Just simply too many white people cannot handle having a black president.

Such a great read! Very informative. I feel on one side, it makes me feel better that as an black American, other ppl of brown skin know how I feel. On the other hand, I'm sad that we are still, as humans, fighting with each other for the full God given freedom we should all share.

In the 1970s, there was a pretty good linkage between black power movements and the Native American power movement, especially in the USA, but also, to some extent, in Canada. But that fizzled out by the end of the decade.

Irish history was brief in my studies of colonization around the world. The book "How the Irish Became White" was the book we used in class. It dealt with more on the social interaction of the Irish when they came to America. However, I found it intriguing when they mentioned the treatment of the indigenous Irish people and how they were placed in the hierarchy.

Thanks. I teach Irish History, amongst other things. Ireland was the first overseas colony of England, going back 800 years. The simple point about Irish History I try my best to convey is that imperialism is founded upon an act of violence, the entire process of imperialism, the imposition of a foreign system on an indigenous one, is an act of violence. It's no different here, the governments of Canada and the States are founded upon violence. The problem in the US is that no one would disagree with that statement, thinking about the War of Independence, but that's not the key act of violence.

Yes, exactly, though that book is a bit of a joke amongst Irish scholars. Ignatiev massively overstates his case in that book. But the basic premise holds. The Irish were really the dogs of the British Empire, even as late as the early 20th century, British politicians dismissed them in the kinds of terms that became more familiar in the face of decolonisation movements in India and Africa.

I find all forms of oppression and racism depressing. But I think what has galled me the most is the treatment of the indigenous population of North America, not just historically, but today. Out of sight, out of mind is how Euro-North America operates vis-à-vis the indigenous populations, even in Canada.

I'm curious. How is the statistics showing racism? I do get that it's imperialism to think we should civilize anyone. But that's not what the statistics are showing.

The statistics are only showing factors that is actually a person's own responsibility. It's not mine nor the government's responsibility to make a good life for someone else. In fact, there are laws / rights / freedoms giving these statistic holders a chance to make the life they want? What does the statistics really show? Racism or personally drive/determination for a better life?

Wow! Reading this as an annoyed american who is constantly wishing she lived in Canada, thus gives a whole new, much needed perspective. No where one goes is perfect – but it is so important to recognize different cultures within a society when rationalizing decisions a group of people makes. You cannot label everyone crazy who doesn't agree with you (a problem I feel many intellectuals as ourselves deal with in a daily basis). I am so sad about this. Thanks so much for bringing this to light!!

How does this list show that the government or a group of people are discriminating against the aboriginals? The factors in the list shown are things that every person faces. Keep going to school or dropout? Keep making minimum wage or work my way up? Commit murder or forgive that person? Those are decisions that every person living must decide.

That's not how it works. We live in a society, we are not atomistic individuals. Our range of options for choice are limited. At any rate, countless study shows that the justice system is biased towards non-white people in both Canada and the US, non-white people get longer sentences for crimes than white people do, etc.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see racism and discrimination against aboriginal peoples in Canada. Some things are choices we all face, yes. But, I was a white suburban kid. The option to drop out of school wasn't there, everything was structured to keep me in school, even if I grew up poor. It doesn't work that way for other people.

I see that someone people are racist. I have never said that it doesn't happen. And it's wrong when it does, but to lay blame on everybody that's white, is just crap. I see that even if I don't care for social conscience, I still have to follow the social norms up to a point. I refuse to follow all just because others think I need to. The hardest thing for me is that we don't hold people personally responsible for their actions. For example, break the laws pay the time. If they don't want to be punished then stop doing things that are getting you punished. And yes, harder punishment for the enforcers if they lie or break the rules to get someone behind bars. Until we hold individuals responsible for their choices and actions then racism will never go away.

Racism doesn't exist because black people or aboriginal people or whomever commits crime. Racism exists simply because people are afraid of people who are not like them, and then they hang their bigotry on things like incarceration rates for aboriginal people.

If you have never spent any time on a First Nation's reserve – worked with the people, played with them, done business with them – then you really don't know what you are talking about. Racism goes two ways; aboriginal beliefs, values and tribal practices can be discriminatory and self limiting. The 'colonists' are easy scapegoats in a system that is equally broken on both sides.