

BROCK'S BANTER: Palate Cleansers?

By Brock Weir

It is a natural reaction to avoid uncomfortable situations.

Even though we might be reluctant to say so, we all do it. There is indeed something to be said about the path of least resistance but, of course, the easiest course of action isn't always the best path to take.

We have been seeing that a lot this year, particularly as the Canada 150 celebrations reached its crescendo.

Previous column inches in this space were devoted prior to Canada Day on whether this significant national milestone should indeed be considered celebration in addition to its obvious significance as a national anniversary from the very basest Constitutional standpoint.

By the time those paragraphs were published, however, Indigenous activists were yet to set up their teepee on Parliament Hill with just days to go before the big party, National Indigenous Peoples Day had yet to take place, and voices of these Indigenous Peoples ? really the only voices that rightly carry significant weight in these debates ? had not quite reached a full Canadian audience.

Despite that relative short window of time, much has transpired.

The erecting of the teepee kick-started a firestorm of controversy from all angles, finally facilitating national dialogue on issues that had merely been bubbling away on the backburner.

The Prime Minister, for instance, announced on National Indigenous Peoples Day, that the traditional bricks-and-mortar office of the Prime Minister and Privy Council, formally known as the Langevin Block after Hector-Louis Langevin, one of the men considered to be a ?Father of Confederation? would drop its historical association and be named for its function.

The decision followed a campaign led by the Assembly of First Nations, the reason being the significant role Langevin played in the establishment of the Residential School System.

In tandem with this, similar campaigns, now organized with some enthusiasm by a number of students and outside activists at Ryerson University are urging that the name of Egerton Ryerson, one of the key players in the formation of the devastating Residential School system be dropped from the university all together.

As a white male, I do not have the authority or life experience to be adequately equipped for an argument for or against either of these moves, but I have been voraciously reading the opinions ? decidedly mixed ? of those who have.

A recent editorial published in a Nova Scotia newspaper by author John Boileau caught my eye over the weekend.

In his piece, the writer is responding the Province's own controversy on what do with their historic statue of the former colony's governor Edward Cornwallis for his role in colonialization.

Entitled, ?Scapegoating Cornwallis: Who are we to judge him?? Boileau discusses the topic in the context of ?presentism? which, in short, is inserting our contemporary values and projecting our collective morals onto issues of the past, generally decisions that, examined in the lens of the present, are seen as morally bankrupt.

?Thomas Jefferson was an American founding father, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, the third president and one of the most intelligent men of his time and perhaps all time,? he writes. ?Yet the man who coined the phrase 'all men are created equal' believed that blacks were racially inferior and 'as incapable as children.' In his lifetime, he owned more than 600 slaves and even fathered six children to one of them, Sally Hemming. They remained slaves until they came of age. Do we condemn him??

Do we condemn him? Well, in my observation, yes, we do, frequently ? but I digress.

?What Cornwallis did would be wrong today, but it was certainly accepted practice in 18th century colonial and other warfare,? he continues. ?Atrocities were not just perpetrated against natives, but against white enemies as well, such as the English fighting the Scots.?

When looking at the legacies of Edward Cornwallis, Egerton Ryerson, or Hector-Louis Langevin, and why they are even being considered today, I think it has less to do with condemning the actions of the individuals themselves, as they are undeniably ? for better or worse ? part of our Canadian history.

And that is the point ? they are part of our history; they are not going anywhere ? and there is an argument that these efforts are indeed efforts to ensure that is where they stay, rather than living on, even emblematically, in landmarks, pieces of public art, and institutes of higher learning.

From my own background, I can accept that as a valid point, but, at the same time, I wonder if it might be counterintuitive to the end goal.

Renaming the Langevin Block, rebranding Ryerson University and taking down the statue of Cornwallis will ensure that these men will not be celebrated in an enduring public platform, but by confining them and their legacies to the musty pages of history, it takes away some of the most potent symbols that serve to keep dialogue and education on the issues alive for many generations to come so the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

Renaming, rebranding, and removing might be a nice palate cleanser, but will it make a difference? Maybe, maybe not, but I'd like to know your thoughts: brock@auroran.com.