

## Colonialism at the Root of the Disconnection

By Brian Thom

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[photo] courtesy Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group

*Colonial attitudes dating back to the early days of European settlement are at the core of current problems relating to First Nations, a Ladysmith anthropologist says.*

I would like to write with a modest suggestion for Aaron Bichard's filing problem for First Nations news stories (Pictorial, Dec. 31).

The problem he pointed out was that 'First Nations' issues tend to be set aside, given a different treatment, reflecting the deep social and political divides [...] at the root of much of the inequality we see around us in the Cowichan Valley.

May I suggest you have a file labelled 'on-going colonialism', along with your folders on "labour disputes" "forestry" and "accidents." This folder would still likely be a thick one of stories of local First Nations concerns, but it would allow for the kind of 'lumping' of other issues — where First Nations are indeed participating as equal citizens — in with your other files.

Th[e] on-going and ever-present effects of colonialism [make] your First Nations news stories your thickest file. It is the effects of colonialism which are at the core of the distinctive pattern of social malaise that is entrenched in First Nations communities and other indigenous communities around the world.

The colonialism I am speaking of is rooted in the suite of state-supported policies and practices that have worked over the past 150 years to rip the vast lands and resources from Aboriginal ownership and control, providing the basis for wealth on which our nation relies. Locally, the tour-de-force of this colonial action occurred in two seminal events.

The first was in 1884 with the granting in fee simple of the entire east coast of Vancouver Island to Dunsmuir for the E&N railway — an issue of exchange of

aboriginal title for a fee simple grant that is still, in spite of protests to the King of England in the early 20th century and over 13 years of treaty talks, totally unresolved.

The second was the establishment in 1890 of the Kuper Island residential school, an institution which until 1975 ripped children away from their families, attempting to 'civilize the Natives' through striking at the core of their family, community and cultural lives.

Though countless other colonial practices can be enumerated — no First Nations vote until 1960, the infamous 'scoop' of aboriginal children from their families by social workers in the '60s, the decades of laws banning First Nations cultural gatherings, religious practice, even hiring of legal counsel — it is perhaps the insidious racism and segregation faced by individual First Nations people growing up in a settler-dominated community that may have been the hardest for First Nations people to bear.

It is colonialism nestled in personal relationships, that sprouts ignorant and uninformed responses prodding "those Natives to just get to work and make use of all they are handed out," cynically rejoicing in "all the great technology and freedom we have given them" that makes the divide so deep.

Those same relationships — either between communities or between individuals — continue to be strained when efforts towards a so-called post-colonial world push back. When the erasure of aboriginal history through the destruction of archaeological sites and desecration of ancestral burial grounds is put through the grinding bureaucratic process provided through the Heritage Conservation Act, land development slows and the costs of business significantly increase.

When big-money investment in B.C. hesitates because of the political and economic uncertainty that the spectre of unsettled land claims generates, the jobs and wealth that such investment brings take pause.

I've heard it called "the Indian problem." I've also heard it called "leverage for justice."

It is when we finally achieve reconciliation of our colonial past (and present), through, in part, settled treaty negotiations, that Aaron Bichard's large and complicated First Nations news file may finally be archived and a new era of cultural diversity in a community of social, economic and political equality may be the kind of thing that will make for a new kind of good-news stories.

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