RURAL CANADA: A CIRCLE OF DIVERSITY, A VIBRANT FUTURE

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The Canadian Coalition of Municipalities against Racism and Discrimination (CCMARD) can play an important role in promoting diversity in and across rural Canada. Rural Canada is declining both in absolute and relative terms. Population levels are in decline as a result of migration and the settlement of few immigrants to the areas. Aboriginal peoples, who are the fastest growing segment of the population in Canada, are much more likely to experience child poverty, lower per capita education allocations, higher dropout rates, and live in sub-standard housing. How can rural Canada build an inclusive and vibrant future? CCMARD can help address these challenges and lead us towards a future that is worthy of our children.

MILESTONES

Established in partnership with UNESCO and Canadian partners, CCMARD has enjoyed a productive decade marked by a few key milestones. These milestones help us to understand not only what the Coalition has done, but what potential it holds for the future.

- CCMARD was launched at the 2005 Annual Conference of the Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies (CASHRA) 2005 AGM in Saskatoon.

- The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (of which I was a Board member and national Rural Forum Chair at the time) published a members' advisory report on CCMARD in September of 2005, encouraging municipalities to join. Two CCMARD national meetings were held in conjunction with FCM Annual Conferences in 2007 and 2010.

- At the provincial level, the Union of Municipalities of Quebec, the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities and the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association also passed resolutions in support of CCMARD.

- The Canadian Race Relations Foundation, a founding partner of CCMARD, and other partners including the federal government have contributed to this grass roots effort at the municipal level.

The tenth anniversary of CCMARD is a moment to understand the importance of equity and inclusion in our communities. It is a time when we can, and should, reflect on ways to make its impacts even greater. In order to cultivate communities that commit to the difficult, but critically important job of healing and building resiliency from the destructive forces of racism and discrimination, we should keep two goals in mind:

- "Strengthen the ability to protect and promote human rights through coordinating and shared responsibility among local governments, civil society organizations and other democratic institutions"; and

- Ensure the Ten Common Commitments are embraced and used by municipalities to "inform and guide their work."[1]

WHAT IS THE RURAL CHALLENGE?

Rural Canada needs CCMARD even more than urban Canada. This need is even greater in regions where there are Aboriginal communities. Below are some important statistics to frame this statement:

- Rural Canada has a higher birth rate than urban Canada, thereby heightening the effects of demographic changes.

- Even though trends of urbanization are drawing an increasing number of Aboriginal peoples into urban centres, nearly two thirds of the Aboriginal reserve population continues to live in rural Canada.

- The Aboriginal birth rate is significantly higher than that of any other group in Canada.

Despite all these upward trends, rural Canada is largely declining in population while urban Canada is growing. In Ontario, for example, the urban population grew over 15% between 2001 and 2011 while rural and small town populations declined by over 7%[2].Factors explaining this shift include a rapid outward migration of rural people between the ages of twenty to thirty seeking better education and employment. It is also worth noting that rural Ontario's share of immigration has been less than 3%, thereby contributing to diminished human capacity to reverse the decline.

Young people, including a rapidly growing Aboriginal population, are leaving for the big cities and immigrants are almost exclusively settling in urban Canada. Is it all due to educational and economic opportunity, or are there other factors at play? To begin to understand the changes taking place in rural Canada, we must consider the fact that the social and cultural fabric in rural Canada is far less reflective of the cultural and ethnic diversity than can be found in urban Canada more broadly. Within this discussion we must be sure to make space to talk about the experiences and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES FACING ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

As many Canadians and Aboriginal communities know all too well, Canada continues to be a country in which not all individuals and groups share the same advantages. The realities in both rural and urban Canada are that we live a society in which racism and other forms of discrimination are wielded to maintain systems of inequality. In a recent article, *Canadians Shouldn't Be Smug About Inequality*,Terry Glavin states (November 28, 2014):

> *"The conditions that torment aboriginal Canadians to this day are no less a disgrace than the dead-end impoundments so many African-Americans find themselves within today."* (Opinion, page C5)

Higher rates of disease, suicide, spousal abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism, and fetal alcohol syndrome are present among Aboriginal communities. Incarceration rates are ten times higher and there are lower probabilities of parole for the same crime for Aboriginal people. These trends are symptomatic of a collective problem well known in Indian country: colonialism. The legacies of residential schools, policies of assimilation both overt and covert, and a dismally low level of education about Aboriginal issues at all levels of the Canadian education system contribute to the attitude (captured in national surveys) that Aboriginal peoples of this great land enjoy little respect.

The divide in quality of life between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples was not the shared vision we expressed in wampum belts. The wampun belts declare a commitment to respect our cultures: French and English, with Indigenous peoples in the centre to provide leadership for a sustainable relationship to the land and to include all those who are newcomers to it[3].

Futhermore, too few Canadans understand the fact that not everyone in Canada has the same rights. At a recent workshop conducted by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation everyone was asked if all Canadians have the same rights. The majority of the participants raised their hands to indicate yes. The presenter then pointed out they were wrong and cited various legal instruments. The first example he gave was section 35 of the Canadian Constitution which protects Aboriginal rights (Indian, Metis and Inuit).

In Rural communities too few decision makers understand this fundamental fact associated with the governance of

Canada. The contributions of Indigenous peoples to Canada's survival are little understood in rural Canada, including their influence in the War of 1812 and the relationship to the land that, from a deep spiritual place, allowed from an Indigenous perspective a sharing of the land held with great responsibility for future generations.

BRIDGING THE PAST AND FUTURE: CCMARD AND THE PROMOTION OF DIVERSITY WITHIN RURAL CANADA

Less than three percent of immigrants to Canada settle in rural communities, despite a rural Canadian population that represents a significant (29 percent) portion of the total Canadian population (see Ray Bollman, Stats Can)[4].There is a clear need to promote diversity within rural Canada as a way to bridge the past and future. Building a more inclusive rural landscape will promote social well-being in these areas and in turn, strengthen the communities that live within them.

CCMARD can help address many of the challenges that I have mentioned above:

- Through the ten Common Commitments, rural municipalities can develop plans to address the growing inequalities experienced by aboriginal communities.

- By working with police services, capacities can be built to more appropriately support and respond to the needs of rural populations.

- Important work can also be done to raise awareness of the histories of Canada's First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples in the school system, but also within the wider public.

- Mutual understanding can be built by inviting different cultures to share their traditions and stories in a way that is genuine and meaningful.

- Municipalities can also work with local employers to eliminate barriers to employment by challenging stereotypes and "workplace cultures" and by providing appropriate cultural training.

- Finally, efforts can be made to create a safe space for Aboriginal voices on City Councils, among city staff, on advisory committees and Boards, and local organizations. By raising the voice of those most disadvantaged in rural areas, we can ensure that their needs are identified and that steps are taken to create real change.

LESSONS FROM MY EXPERIENCE

Personal, intimate stories of perseverance, passion, or endurance often touch the spirit and move people to think or act in a different way. For this reason, I would like to share my journey working in this field, informed by my own life and the graduate research I undertook, to shed light on challenges and opportunities.

In a research paper I produced, entitled *Knowing the Past - Building the Future*, I completed a review of local history. As I prepared it, I came across several stories of early settlers to eastern Ontario who attributed their survival to the assistance given to them by Aboriginal peoples. Except for a supercilious attitude toward Indigenous spirituality and indifference toward Indigenous relationships to the land, they expressed great respect for Aboriginal Peoples. Unfortunately, these important accounts of our shared history are too often eclipsed by modern stories that reinforce negative stereo-types. These stories tend to make the headlines and frame Canada's First Peoples as a problem in need of a solution. Negative characterizations also provide fodder for excuses for government inaction, or even worse, harmful action. The United Nations refers to the state of Canada's relationship with its Aboriginals peoples as a crisis. Our international reputation as a country of defenders of human rights is in question.

I spent several years at County Council dealing with the issue of an inadequate accounting procedure to manage a budget of nearly 50 million dollars. As a result, we overspent by hundreds of thousands of dollars. We were also placing our money in the wrong kinds of accounts and, as a result, lost additional large sums. We were unable to integrate all of the financial records of our public works with the rest of our spending. As a result, County Council could not see a complete picture of the accounting reports until our audit was received months too late. This went on for years. Only by spending a lot of personal time coaxing County Council to accept an administrative review did our substantial problems get addressed. Even then, the resistance from the professional and political hierarchy was fierce and prolonged. Yet only a bit of the outward signs of political acrimony ever made even the local news.

I share this account because the Attiwapiskat story and others like it, which continue to make headlines, are minor compared to my County's experience. The main difference is that many of the same services provided by municipalities are provided by a federal order of government on reserve. Much to the detriment of reserve communities, the status-quo denies challenging the specious notion that Indigenous peoples are racially inferior both in moral and intellectual terms. This feeds our national appetite to continue to grease the wheels of colonialism which is harming minorities, women, and all of our childrens' futures.

In my nearly three decades of municipal life, I experienced objections to celebrating National Aboriginal Day because "I don't want to celebrate a day for Pagans." In many cases this sentiment was shared by someone who knew I was Aboriginal and even while I was chairing the meeting. If we cannot come to a place of mutual respect in which we are open to learn about one another, how can we begin to take on the complex and deeply rooted issues facing us today?

As a member of my trappers Council I have seen communications from provincial associations that border on hate campaigns. Permeated with warnings that if the Algonquins gain control (of a small portion of unceded lands) their greed will result in the complete destruction of fish and game. It perplexes me why some non-aboriginal individuals and groups insist on the destructiveness of Aboriginal ways of life. Land is of primary importance in Aboriginal culture and ways of knowing and Aboriginal histories show that we have lived in harmony with the land for thousands of years. Erroneous assumptions that land, if left to Aboriginal peoples, will be misused continue to plague our communities and dampen progress to settle claims (more accurately in my view honourable land sharing arrangements rigidly defined within natural law - the true definition of sustainability) in a fair and timely manner.

This brings up another point fundamental to this crisis. Education, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission so rightly points out, got us into this mess (residential schools), but it will also get us out. Canadians simply do not know our shared history and think Canada was formed by the French and English. Mainstream society has conveniently forgotten the wampum belts, the Proclamation of 1763 (enshrined in our Constitution), the Treaty of Niagara (250 years ago), the war of 1812, and many other events that have contributed to a way of life with so much potential. Our school curriculums must reflect an accurate account of our shared history and prepare Canadians for an honourable, shared future if our children are to live in peace, by cultivating a culture of full respect for human rights realizing the human potential for dynamic community development.

Let me also speak to those who fear living in rural Canada, partly because it is often perceived – rightly or wrongly – as being filled with "narrow minded people." For example, I have not heard of a Pride walk taking place in rural Canada and I know many gay people who have expressed a fear of living in rural areas for fear of being judged and stigmatized. The lack of respect for their human rights is real, though I am proud to see some positive change in places like Lanark County, which received recognition by the Ontario Human Rights Commission for efforts to improve respect for human rights on the grounds of sexual orientation. As we forge a common and peaceful future we must not forget to include all forms of diversity in our actions. This is the view shared by Aboriginal peoples.

It is only natural for immigrants to want to find the comfort of a community where their differences are not a source of discrimination. As part of Plenty Canada, an organization that has brought people from all over the world to our rural community, I know how hard it is hard for people labeled as "visual minorities" to fit into a society that demands cultural hegemony the way rural communities do. Rural communities have a lot to gain by accepting newcomers and welcoming them into the fabric of rural life.

Fortunately, I have had experiences that have given me hope, and continue to do so. I was one of the only rural members of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Anti-Racism committee before it was amalgamated. I was a member of the Board and the Executive Committee when we approved and celebrated the birth of the Canadian Coalition for Municipalities against Racism and Discrimination (CCMARD). I currently serve on the Natural, Social and Human Sectoral Commission of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, under which fall CCMARD-related matters. I also serve as a Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), a partner of CCMARD. Recently, I had the opportunity to deliver the opening ceremony and welcome to Algonquin territory at the 2014 Annual Conference of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation (CRRF). The conference worked to bridge the realities of Aboriginal Peoples and those of newcomers to show that both groups face challenges and everyone would greatly benefit from increased collaboration to achieve common goals of equity, respect, and inclusion.

Opportunities to collectively address this pressing need have also taken place through the network of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, recognized as model and learning areas of sustainability through the engagement of Indigenous peoples and local stakeholders. Considering the weak level of engagement of Indigenous Peoples in the Canadian network, I have worked with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO to enable and offer recommendations, training and ongoing dialogue to rethink the approach and to learn from existing successes and challenges. The advice of indigenous representatives to enhance inclusion of indigenous peoples in Canadian Biosphere Reserves has been expressed both through a set of written recommendations for on-going engagement and in events such as the CCUNESCO Annual General Meeting. However, because such progress also takes place through personalized discussions, direct contact and experiential learning, an excursion to Clayoquot Sound Biosphere Reserve was also organized in May 2013 to provide firsthand experience and inspiration from an area deeply committed to recognizing the rights and vision for the region of Nuu-Chal-Nulth peoples. The direct involvement of Tofino mayor Josie Osborne to these discussions was a testimony of the priority given to strengthening the bridges by a municipal leader. So far, such discussions have further illuminated the lack of progress by most Biosphere Reserves, including their managers, to satisfactorily open the dialogue with First

Nations and to consider their specific needs and aspirations, much less developing meaningful partnerships that reflect the standards set for the minimum survival of Indigenous peoples (see Article 43 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

If there is a hope to be found among all of the challenges I have described, it is among the many people in this community of partners who dedicate their lives to bring about change for an inclusive Canada.

BUILDING A CIRCLE OF DIVERSITY, BUILDING A FUTURE IN RURAL CANADA

Rural municipalities are part of national per capita funding systems (that I was involved in building) that ignore the disparity in commercial assessments, even the difference in access to non-government funding in the non-profit sector that deal with the social and cultural sector. Per capita systems that are in place to maintain or build infrastructure overlook the fact rural municipalities are often responsible for large, open spaces that provide recreation opportunities and other resources for all. The financial burden is disproportionately carried on the back of those who live in rural areas. This means that building communities in rural areas that embrace diversity, invest in education, partnership development, and collaboration, doesn't happen as often as we like. There are some excellent examples of citizens making efforts to promote with inclusion and in my home county. Even though there are a number of these efforts underway, they are not well supported or even understood by the municipal sector.

CCMARD can be a useful resource to solve municipal issues since it provides a unique opportunity for rural and urban municipalities to see the mutual benefit of building an inclusive Canada. If one part of the country is falling behind in terms of social inclusivity and the impacts on other pillars of sustainability, it is only a matter of time before it impacts negatively other regions.

Rural municipalities can start by joining CCMARD either directly at the local level or, where there is a two-tiered system, at the shared level such as the county or district. The 2014 Canadian Race Relations Foundation Award of Excellence was awarded to the Alberta Urban Municipal Association and the Alberta Human Rights Commission for their joint work building diverse communities. It shows the important role of provincial municipal associations in building capacity for all municipalities, including small and rural ones.

Rural municipalities should reach out to their federal, provincial, and territorial human rights commissions for training and other support. For example, the Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies (CASHRA) has established a committee for the implementation of the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Article 43 of the Declaration states that, "The rights recognized herein constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world."

Could CCMARD be part of the solution to achieve those standards in Canada by, for example, helping to build a network of Aboriginal communities into the network? I think so but only after considering cultural accommodations that will make it work cross-culturally. Developing a mechanism where real learning occurs would build hope, respect and understanding worth more to vibrant, healthy, rural communities than anything else. We should consider the contemporary value of Aboriginal teachings and instruments of peace, such as the wampum belts. The cross-cultural teachings they offer are incredible and can bridge the divide that cuts across our country.

The Ten Common Commitments accepted by signatory municipalities to CCMARD have the potential to transform the rural municipal landscape when it comes to cultivating a culture of respect for human rights and cultural diversity. In order to make the commitment as rural members of CCMARD, it is even more important to engage citizens through non-profit organizations in order to achieve the vision. We must demand as citizens that the goals of CCMARD be embraced by all municipalities in Canada as a key mechanism for the change we need. In doing so, we can ensure that all who share this great land we know as Canada are warmly embraced, and not just tolerated. CCMARD can help us see that cultural diversity is a great gift, not a threat. Such a revelation can lead us towards a future that is worthy of our children.

NOTES

[1] Canadian Commission for UNESCO, Call for a Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination, 2005

[2] Strengthening Rural Canada – Fewer and Older: The Coming Demographic Crisis in Rural Ontario, table 2.1, pg. 15, 2014

[3] The word wampum is derived from the Algonquin word wampumpeage. They are made from strings of shells. I have been taught by Elder, Officer of the Order of Canada and Doctor William Commanda that wampum belts are a living record of spiritual relationships and obligations, the historical record of agreements, prophecies and other documentation. They provide an in-depth cultural and cross-cultural link to the ancestors who inspired their development and often carry the solemn commitments or prayers expressed by each succeeding generation of people who share in expressing their commitments to the guiding principles and values expressed by the belts and their keepers. See Learning from a kindergarten dropout – Cultural Sharings and Reflections by Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo with William Commanda, 2005, Circle of All Nations.

[4] Bollman, Ray D. and Alessandro, Alasia. Statistics Canada, updated 2013. A profile of self-employment in rural and small town Canada: Is there an impending retirement of self-employed business operators?

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