INTERVIEW

Jean Teillet

WHO YOU ARE?

My name is Jean Teillet. I am probably best known as the great grandniece of Louis Riel. I'm Métis from the Métis Nation of the Northwest of Canada. I am a lawyer, but I used to be a dancer. I'm also a writer and a law professor and an advocate for Aboriginal people. I'm a treaty negotiator and I write, speak, and talk a lot about charter rights, Aboriginal rights, human rights, access to justice, with a big focus on the Métis.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT CANADA THAT MAKES YOU MOST PROUD?

I think that Canada is one of the better countries in the world for embracing a wide diversity of people. We're not perfect, but having travelled fairly widely around the world I think we're a lot better. I don't mean that we're better than they are, I mean that we've walked farther down a path of inclusivity and what I would call a horizontal society than maybe the majority of other countries have.

HOW CAN WE MAKE SURE THERE'S DIALOGUE BETWEEN INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS CANADIANS?

Well, first of all, we have to let them talk. We don't have actual dialogue for the most part right now. We talk at Aboriginal people, but we don't really listen to what they say. We don't understand what they say and we certainly don't implement what they say, so we have a long way to go in that regard. Right now we consult with them which means we go and we talk at them. They say things, we tick off boxes saying oh, we talked to them and then we walk away and think we've done our job and it's completely inadequate, so we have to incorporate Aboriginal people talking Aboriginal people ideas, Aboriginal people much more into our dialogue. Right now we're still talking at them and down to them. It's got to change.

WHAT SHOULD WE AS A SOCIETY LEARN FROM THE CULTURE AND HISTORY OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA?

Aboriginal people have a lot to teach us that we could learn very – we could be a better place, so Aboriginal people have what I call a horizontal society, most of them do. That's not to say some Aboriginal peoples didn't have slaves and things like that, but most Aboriginal people had a much more horizontal concept of society. That means that people were not perceived to be superior to one another. We could benefit from that kind of discussion. We still work very much in a hierarchical way...

...The other thing that we need to start doing in this country and that we could learn from them is about sharing. We're bad at that, we're really bad at sharing. We're very, very, very possessive. You can tell it in our language, we've got a lot of possessive pronouns. Aboriginal languages don't have possessive pronouns in them. We're so interested in dividing things up. We divide things up by gender. Most Aboriginal languages don't do that.