

## **Ending Settler Colonialism will Cause Us Some Discomfort - Let's Embrace It**

As non-Indigenous settler Canadians we must not allow ourselves to be comfortable with the results of the Gerald Stanley jury trial. The circumstances that led to Colten Bushie driving onto Gerald Stanley's farm in a state of intoxication, the context that made Gerald Stanley think it was appropriate to try and use a semi-automatic handgun to resolve the situation, and the indignant reaction by many non-Indigenous Canadians to the anger expressed by Indigenous people following Stanley's acquittal all point to one thing -- that the system of Canadian settler colonialism must be changed.

**Settler colonialism – that distinct form of colonialism where colonists seek to displace Indigenous people from their land and resources – is our system that we created, and so we must take responsibility for dismantling it.**

I believe we must accept the need to be discomforted; then embrace the opportunities that will emerge. Indigenous people need land, need meaningful say in resources, need support to preserve their cultural traditions and need to be able to chart their own economic future. To accomplish these things, we non-Indigenous settler Canadians must accept that we will be discomforted.

Part of this is to accept that our white comfort and our white privilege must be dismantled. Part of this is to recognize that the original people of this country deserve to be the wealthiest citizens not the poorest subjects. Part of this is to recognize that the judicial system is complicit in supporting the displacement and marginalization of Indigenous people. Part of this is to recognize that handguns are killing tools that must be banned so they cannot be used in either intentional or accidental deaths. Part of this is to recognize that our own Constitution and Common Law recognize and protect Indigenous rights – and so it is up to us as settler Canadians to ensure that the systems and processes that will turn these principals into lived realities are in place and functioning.

**Indigenous people have every right to be angry, indignant, exasperated, and suspicious. Let's give them reasons for hope; reasons for trusting us one last time. Let's accept the need to dismantle settler colonialism and accept that this will cause all non-Indigenous people some discomfort. And then let's step back and allow Indigenous people to chart their own course within a re-designed (co-designed) Canada where their Indigenous rights are not only recognized but actually exercised on terms that they themselves define and find acceptable.** That is the Canada I aspire to.

Keith Thor Carlson

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## **Reconciliation Can Never Be About Merely 'Starting Fresh' Unless It Also Involves Making Right:**

The Indigenous anger following the acquittal of Gerald Stanley in the Colten Boushie Murder trial, and the indignation of many non-Indigenous people to that anger, must be seen within the larger context of Canadian settler colonialism — a system of ongoing colonial displacement that continues to negatively impact Indigenous people.

When I talk with non-Indigenous people about the historical injustices that Indigenous people have endured I am often told “well, we can't change the past.” As a historian, I always agree. **But we**

**must never allow this to equate with telling Indigenous people “to get over it.” In my view, what we need to do is create the circumstances in the present that will enable us to change the future. And in my opinion an understanding of the past so that we can make corrections and restitution is absolutely necessary to that process.**

Settler colonialism is sustained by a whole host of privileges, and they cut across one another in interesting ways. Our collective past involved circumstances that empowered certain groups and disempowered others; that provided control of resources to some people and economically marginalized others; that enabled some to negotiate pathways to educational success and discouraged others from even participating, etc....

Within the settler colonial Canadian state there are layers of comfort that different people enjoy, all linked to various forms of privilege. Two obvious sources of privilege are race/ethnicity and gender. Historically and today Canadian men of British descent have ethnic and racial privilege over males of Italian and African descent as well as over women of British decent. Further complicating things is the issue of class. Canadian men of Swedish and German descent have enjoyed some of the racial privilege associated with being ‘white’, even if they have been of the working class. This gave them a level of comfort that they enjoyed and were reluctant to let go of. Chinese and Nigerian capitalist who immigrated to Canada have not had racial privilege, but have had wealth and class privilege which gave them certain levels of comfort that they too have been reluctant to let go of vis a vis working and middle-class whites of both genders. Middle-class women of European descent have had certain racial and class privileges that transcend the gender privileges of working class Middle Eastern and South Asian men. Working class men of European descent have gender and race privilege over middle-class Sikh men, and gender privilege over middle class white women, etc.

But the one that privilege all non-Indigenous Canadians continue to enjoy is their role as settler colonists. This is a privilege we inherit through the systems and structures of the Canadian state which today sustain historic policies that continue to displace Indigenous people from their lands and alienate them from control of natural resources. This means that Indigenous people are doubly disadvantaged. As people with darker skin colour they face all the racism and prejudice of other ethnic/racial minorities in Canada; as Indigenous people they carry the burden of settler colonialism on their shoulders (they are members of the communities from whom the Canadian state has alienated resources and lands, and who were the targets of state assimilation policies, etc.).

Our Common Law tradition recognizes that Indigenous people have special collective rights based on their prior occupation of the land currently known as Canada. These are rights that no other Canadian has. Our Constitution says that the Crown has a fiduciary responsibility to ensure that Indigenous people’s rights are not violated by the settler majority. Yet, we have seen these rights violated, and violated repeatedly.

So, as I see it, this all creates a conundrum. In the past we as non-Indigenous Canadians have failed to live up to our legal traditions and our constitution. **We have created and instituted social, legal, economic, and education systems that we knew and understood would harm and disadvantage Indigenous people.** As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (1996) as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) have clearly documented, the **Canadian state and the Canadian people have failed Indigenous people.**

Recently, as a country and a society we have expressed our commitment to building reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Indigenous people have cautiously accepted this gesture on our part and are **waiting to see what action we will take to make reconciliation meaningful**. The term reconciliation is anchored in Canada's Judaeo-Christian heritage and tradition. It is a concept that at its centre requires atonement on the part of the one who has done the wrong. So, from my perspective, **reconciliation between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous Canada can never be about merely 'starting fresh' unless it also involves making right**. What exactly reconciliation will look like, I can't say. It will be up to Indigenous people, as the ones who have been injured, to determine when Canadian society and the Canadian state have made sufficient restitution. **Many settler Canadians tell me that they feel it is wrong that they should be held accountable for the wrongs done by their ancestors and predecessors. I agree. As individuals we are not responsible for the actions of our fathers, nor do we inherit their debts. But the Canadian state is both accountable for the actions of earlier governments, and responsible for government debts incurred in earlier generations. As such reconciliation will not in my assessment, ever be achieved so long as the economic, legal, and social systems that cause the on-going colonization are still largely in place. That is why, in my opinion, we need to cooperatively and collaboratively redesign and rebuild a new Canada in partnership with Indigenous people.**

Canadians have a great capacity for doing good. But, from my perspective, to do sufficient good the onus is on us non-Indigenous people to embrace the discomfort that accompanies letting go of certain privileges (privileges we often do not even recognize that we have), and then embrace the uncertainty, risks, and potential associated with building a new and better society.

Keith Thor Carlson