Canada's First Nations come last

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The Keewaywin community carried the lifeless body of a ten-year-old boy into Cathy Wright's small clinic early one evening in April. The boy had hanged himself, the first suicide in that community, but an all-too-common occurrence across Canada's First Nations.Despite working as a nurse in north- west Ontario among the First Nation and Inuit people for 16 years during her 38- year career, Wright had never experienced anything like this. The tragic nature of the boy's death galvanised the horrified Cree community, and everyone came together to support the family. Neighbouring communities sent crisis teams. Wright said that when they brought in the boy's body, it seemed that the entire community was there to bid him farewell.

Across the First Nation communities, the authorities are on suicide alert. That same month, in the nearby Attawapiskat First Nation, the federal government declared a state of emergency after 11 teenagers attempted suicide. In the previous month, there had been 28 attempts: almost one a day.

This spate of attempted suicides has reignited the festering debate about the problems stalking the First Nations and Canada, the crux of which is whether it is time to call time on the Native lands. This is as contentious an issue as you can find—akin, said Dr Matyas Hervieux, to asking everyone in Greece to leave because there are no jobs.

People who live and work on First Nation lands emphasise the very many positive aspects of life there, especially in the face of enormous hardships. "These people are resilient, kind, warm, and caring," says Hervieux, who has had ten years of experience working with First-Nation people in urban and northern-reserve settings. In north-western Ontario, many communities don't have drinkable water. In some areas the water is so bad it can't even be used for showers. There is also an enormous housing crisis with acute overcrowding: as many as 15 people live in one room. Many First Nation people experience racism, and there has been an epidemic over the past two decades of women and girls who have gone missing or been murdered. Corruption, lack of transparency, child abuse, violence, drug and alcohol dependency, unemployment, isolation and lack of purpose are also significant problems, as is the haunting legacy of residential schools.

Residential schooling began in the 19th century. Funded by Canada's federal government and administered by Christian churches, they took aboriginal children away from their parents to educate and "civilise" them in substandard conditions. A majority suffered sexual, mental and physical abuse. More than 3,200 children died in the care of the schools and the toll may be much higher. The last one closed in 1996.

While it is a polarising debate in Canada, it's important to remember that you shouldn't blame the victim. But how do you find a solution? For Jonathan Kay, one of Canada's most prominent (right-wing) political commentators and editor of the *Walrus*, a sort of Canadian *New Yorker*, "There is little hope for places like Attawapiskat, and the solution for this isolated community, and others like it, is to move south."

At the heart of Canada's official policy toward the First Nations, believes Kay, "sits a great institutionalised lie that we can put in place some bright, shiny plan of action that will transform all our Attawapaskats into healthy, vibrant productive communities". Last month, Jean Chretien, Canada's former prime minister, said to great opprobrium: "There is no economic base there for having jobs and so on, and sometimes they have to move, like anybody else."

'A spate of attempted suicides among teenagers has reignited the festering debate about the problems stalking the First Nations'

Others would say that these opinions fail to live up to Canada's responsibility to its First Nations and their culture. "It's too easy to default to eliminating a culture rather than supporting First Nation people," says Hervieux.

As Kay sees it, only politicians like Chretien, once Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, who are out of the game, can express these controversial views. "In most communities that have no jobs, people pack up and relocate. But the Indian Act created a system that perversely discourages residents from leaving even the most appallingly impoverished reserves, without actually giving them any of the capitalist tools (such as the right to own private property) necessary to prosper. This paradox lies at the heart of the cruelty we have inflicted on aboriginal peoples. And it is why places such as Attawapiskat are doomed to exist in a hellish limbo."

When Justin Trudeau became prime minister last year, he put the First Nation policy at the heart of his government vowing. "It is time for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with First Nations peoples, one that understands that the constitutionally guaranteed rights of First Nations in Canada are not an inconvenience but rather a sacred obligation," he said.

According to Kay, who worked on *Common Ground*, Trudeau's memoir, the prime minister campaigned "on an agenda of being more conciliatory to First Nations, which generally is expected to mean more generous funding, and less accountability in the way federal cash transfers are spent. This is problematic because almost all First Nations communities get the majority of their funding from what are in effect government welfare programmes."

What is that obligation and at what price? Some taxpayers feel their money is ill-spent, but it's the aboriginal people who pay the price. Cathy Wright, who ventured north after graduation at a time when jobs were scarce and her classmates were moving to the US, has seen the

First Nations, Inuit and Métis leaders after meeting Justin Trudeau earlier this year: The Prime Minister has said that "reconciliation is not an Aboriginal issue; it is a Canadian issue"

changes but hasn't lost hope. She remembers the grateful residents and patients of the ten-bed cottage hospital who took her duck hunting and welcomed her into their community in the late 1970s. "I see a lot less violence but more despondency, which has contributed to the rash of suicides." In the past, pow-wows, sweat lodges and story-telling were important parts of the community but today they seem less relevant to the young generation, not unique to the north. In the south, a myriad of programmes and resources exist to address those needs, which is not the case in the north.

Wright doesn't recognise the stories of drunkenness (some areas are dry) that have come to characterise the most troubled reserves, but what she does know is that "suicide is contagious, and it has to do with attention. People, including teenagers want and need help and the only way they can get it is by doing something drastic, but I'm sure they don't want to die. What they want is to find a way to talk to someone, which is very difficult in a community where there is no privacy and everyone knows everyone's business."

While Hervieux agrees that it may be difficult to feel safe talking about your problems in small communities, he sees the cause differently. "The notion that people knowing your business is an issue is a modern, liberal-individualist view and does not reflect how humans have interacted throughout most of their history. Instead, the problem is that there have been many generations of trauma and it is hard for any traumatised person to support those around them. So it is not the lack of privacy that is the issue but the effects of multigenerational trauma on the ability of many community members to effectively support those who are more vulnerable."

With the weight of historical baggage, it is no wonder why it is such a dangerous, polarising issue, although still startling to hear it defined in terms of "colonialism" and "the settler community," as Meghan Young, a passionate First Nation advocate and social worker, does. "Change needs to come from the First Nations in nation-to-nation discussions," she adds, questioning the appropriateness of making decisions for independent nations.

Much has to do with resources and personnel on the ground, and the shocking disparity between what is available in the territories of northern Canada as opposed to the federally-funded First Nations in the northern regions of the provinces. All First Nation communities shouldn't be lumped together. Some work well and prosper, but many others suffer from third world conditions and a very high cost of living which contribute to these intractable problems. Wright illustrated this by sending a picture of a small watermelon to her friends and family down south for which she paid $47 (£25).

In northern Ontario, 175 communities aren't connected to the electrical grid. "Many of these along the James Bay coast and in the north were forcibly relocated so they could be 'better serviced' by the barges," says Young. "They were placed there by the federal government of the time, and they are on a flood plain, which is the reason they experience extreme flooding every spring, and which is why historically they did not live in these locations." Thousands of well-intentioned people across Canada are acutely aware of these issues and have spent many hours thinking about how to make the situation better, but solutions are proving elusive. There are no easy answers to complex and nuanced problems, with questions about what is the end point and what is success?

Being politically correct might not necessarily be the wrong thing, allowing these communities have a right to self-determination. "We need to support this right, to ensure that generation after generation no longer needs to live in these conditions," says Hervieux. "It is only through First Nation-led initiatives that First Nation people will ever have the chance to heal. It is surprising to see the attitude of imperialism that continues to be imposed on the First Nation people."

One solution considered by Wright and some friends would be to invest in greenhouses which would also provide employment and provide cheap and nutritious food. Having chickens for eggs and meat, and goats and sheep would add protein to the diet when they can't hunt for moose or fish.

The people who Wright works with are caring, loving and concerned about their community. "They love and want the best for their children and want to work out a productive and sustainable answer to staying put," she says.

In the wake of the April events, Susan Bardy, a member of the Tyendinaga Mohawks of Bay of Quinte Territory, Ontario, wrote an opinion piece for the *Globe and Mail*, one of Canada's leading papers. She summed up the issues as seen from the First Nation perspective and the reasons First Nations don't want to "catch up with modernity", as Chretien said. These go beyond, but include, a connection to the land and culture, to traditions and places, to homes and people they love. To Bardy, moving south means leaving friends, family and a tranquil rural environment, where her mind is at ease, for the chaos of an unsettling urban landscape. Leaving isn't the answer, she says. "We need to better our situation—politically, financially, emotionally, mentally. We need to feel supported by our fellow Canadians." S