

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, February 2016

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La Loche needs help, not flawed analysis

I was in one of the airport newsstands in Toronto last week and the headlines 'A Small Town's Grief: A Nation's Shame' jumped out at me.

It was Maclean's magazine and so I picked it up. The story didn't disappoint me. It was as sensational and heart wrenching as all stories told about Indigenous people and communities in our country when a tragedy happens.

The language is the same. They are written so the privileged can feel guilty or defensive or just tut, tut, and go on about their business because after all "what can they do about it."

The sensational headlines sell newspapers, up the ratings and the tragic story helps people feel whatever emotion is reserved for us and then, as one young man in La Loche said in another interview, "Everybody will leave and nothing will change."

Oh yes, I know the premier came and laid his flowers, as did the prime minister and the National Chief and the National Métis President, but what is that really about and what will change for that young man and for all those beautiful young people.

In the same issue, another headline reads 'Time to Help People Escape the North'. The writer gives the usual information then writes, "The small remote community (La Loche) sits next to the Methye Portage, one of the most important links in the earliest European exploration of Canada. The journals of these paddlers, looking for new routes to the Pacific, record a state of constant fighting among the Aboriginal peoples. Disease and fur traders, plagues literal and figurative, followed the explorers close behind.

"After this came the missionaries, the reserves and the residential schools. As Canada kept moving forward, becoming one of the most prosperous nations in the world, the people of the north stayed isolated, economically and socially."

He goes on with a litany of statistics and ends with the statement "The North itself is violent and has been forever."

The same has been said and written over and over again about the North and about our country by Non Indigenous newspaper reporters, filmmakers, novelists, poets or travel writers for over 100 years, longer in the East.

They have described our land and landscape as "harsh, violent, dark, angry, bleak, depressing, evil, and brooding, empty of any kind of civilization and fine things."

He ends his wisdom with, "If we really want to end the violence and depravation that plagues Canada's remote communities, we need to help them (indigenous peoples) leave these communities, forever. And if we are still not ready to do that yet, then the least we can do to help is to send them a backhoe as they keep digging graves."

This man really believes that moving northerners to the south and plunking them down in clean, welcoming, rich cities which we all know have streets of gold, and crowds of people just waiting to welcome Indigenous people and where everyone will just integrate and live happily ever after, is the answer for what he calls the North's violence and deprivation.

I am so angry I could scream! It is hard to believe that a man who writes about national and international affairs knows nothing about the workings of colonization, never mind the mentality of mining and extracting resources and what that does to a people's lives and spirits.

Yes Mr. Gilmore, those old time journalists were right; we were fighting all over the North when those explorers came through looking not just for a route to the Pacific, but searching also for the rich resources of our lands.

Fighting is what people do any place in the world when they are dying from virgin soil diseases and plied with alcohol. In case, Mr. Gilmore you don't know, virgin soil means both European diseases and alcohol arrived in the North long before our people actually saw a white man. Google it, sir!

I grew up in the North, not as far as La Loche, but far enough that I can say it is my homeland. It's a beautiful place, the land is as gentle, if not more so, than those anywhere in Europe.

It has not been soaked with blood by centuries of war or by the burning at the stake or boiling in oil of its people or like in more recent times just bombing and destroying peoples and lands.

I am smart enough to know that the fighting is not for freedom but rather for its resources. The people in my North are kind hearted, generous and above all they are resilient. They love their land that is why they have not emigrated to anywhere else even as they watch their land and their people being destroyed, their resources hauled away, mined and clear-cut leaving everything, the land, water and creatures poisoned and polluted.

The people of La Loche are strong good people with kind and generous hearts who have been given, like all Indigenous peoples, a dirty deal.

Mr. Premier, you can lay your flowers down but it was only a couple of years ago when you said the North does not need social programs, it just needs Cameco!

La Loche, like hundreds of our communities all over our country, needs help. Surely if you meant something else you could have said it in a kinder and more generous way. After all, the people of the North have been generous with you.

All our kids can't wait for the big jobs you promise and sometimes give. They need help now.

If mining and hauling away uranium has to happen, then a good chunk of that money should go to communities and pay for the change that has to happen. Those resources, after all, belong to the people of the North.

To the people of La Loche, those of you who lost family members, to the shooter, I am sure I speak for many people when I say how full our hearts are and how much we feel for you and that seems so small compared to your grief and pain, but we send our love to all of you, and our strength.

We know how hard you all work to have a good community, from the teachers who work with children in the school, to the people who work with youth, the people who bring food home for families and the people who speak out against development or who speak for a fairer deal and more equal treatment by government and the multi nationals.

For all of you, kisahki itihnahn. And Mr. Gilmore you know what you can do with that backhoe!