

From Different Worlds

Recent immigrants and First Nations appear, at first, to share little in common, but a deeper look shows the two groups have many parallels

Many new immigrants see Canada as a land of opportunity, a place to live out their dreams. Some have fled oppressive or colonial regimes to reach this free and democratic country. Yet how many take a moment to recognize that the land they now call home is one with a rich ancient history and people who have suffered similar marginalization for centuries?

Not enough, thinks Bill Chu. Originally from Hong Kong, Chu notes, "I was an immigrant, and I knew nothing about aboriginal people."

One day, after being approached by an aboriginal man asking him for spare change in Vancouver's Chinatown, Chu offered to buy him dinner. When the man started to tell Chu about his troubled past and the unjust treatment of aboriginal people in Canada, Chu, a Christian, shared some of his religious views. Chu hadn't been aware of the way aboriginal people had been mistreated in Canada's residential schools, which aimed to assimilate them into English and Christian culture, stripping them of their own languages and traditions. So he was shocked when the man stood up and left the restaurant before he could eat his dinner, stating: "You're one of them."

That experience started Chu on a journey of discovery regarding the treatment of aboriginal people in Canada, which he today aligns to colonization. "A big reason why immigrants should think about this is because most of them are coming from former colonies, too. They should ask themselves did they have a good experience in a colony? Not quite," he says, adding, "Where did South Africa get the idea of apartheid? From good old B.C."

After the first European settlers started arriving in Kanata (a Huron-Iroquois word meaning "village" or "settlement"), some treaties were signed with aboriginal tribes, mostly in Eastern Canada. But the relationship between the First Nations and the new Canadian government soon became patriarchal. Sir John A. MacDonalld once stated that the government should: "wean [aboriginal people] by slow degrees, from their nomadic habits, which have almost become an instinct, and by slow degrees absorb them or settle them on the land. Meantime they must be fairly protected."

In 1876, a piece of legislation called the Indian Act essentially made aboriginal people wards of the state. They were pushed onto small parcels of land called reserves, often in isolated areas that didn't allow them to fully live by traditional means, but also prevented them from becoming part of the new mainstream society. Children were separated from parents and placed in the horrific residential schools, leading to a legacy of what's often called their "dispossession." Rates of alcoholism, suicide, unemployment and incarceration have become disproportionate in this community. (This June, the federal government offered an official apology for the harmful residential school legacy.)

In the past several decades, however, aboriginal people have been standing up to reclaim their heritage, language, culture and sovereignty. Some of the aboriginal bands in Canada are also involved in land claim and self-government negotiations with the federal and provincial governments, a fact that raises eyebrows among those Canadians, including many immigrants, who don't fully understand the history of aboriginal people in Canada.

Chu wants to help immigrants better understand where Canada's Aboriginal Peoples are coming from. He says the public school system does not do an adequate job, and "that's where the majority of people get their information, including immigrants."

So Chu, an engineer by day in Richmond, B.C., started taking matters into his own hands, and began organizing bus trips up to the Mount Currie reserve in the Pemberton Valley, where they could see the poverty in which First Nations live, and learn about their history and culture. He also organized a reconciliation dinner to bring together the Chinese and aboriginal communities.

“If we, too, take on an attitude of mainstream Canadians, based on the distorted history, and we look upon aboriginals as a stereotype, then obviously no aboriginal would be too happy with us,” Chu says. “Indeed there’s a deep need to reach out … There’s an important link here between aboriginals and all the immigrants.”

That link surfaces in many ways: in the way both groups’ contributions to this country’s history have been downplayed in the history books, in the way both groups face barriers to employment and systemic discrimination, and in the way both groups can feel like outsiders, or as Nepal-born entrepreneur Aditya Jha puts it, “underdogs.”

One evening in late 2001, Jha was at a black-tie dinner, rubbing shoulders with successful people. He was fairly new to the country and was extremely proud to be part of a cr me de la cr me group, until it was time for the evening’s speeches, when Grand Chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation spoke about the struggles his community was going through. Jha was shocked to learn that in a country that opened many doors for him as an immigrant, its aboriginals were rather neglected.

“I was touched by what I heard,” Jha recalls. “I could relate to it, being an immigrant, and how an underdog can feel.” With conviction reverberating in his voice, he adds, “I wanted to do something immediately. So I walked up to the chief right after the dinner and spontaneously offered to help his community.”

It wasn’t an empty promise. In 2002, Jha created POA Educational Foundation to “promote accessible and high-quality education, nurture entrepreneurship, and strengthen the global civil society and governance.”

Under POA, Jha, who heads companies including Osellus Inc. and Prego Della Piazza in Toronto, and Karma Candy in Hamilton, has set up a couple of endowments worth \$350,000 to nurture entrepreneurship among the First Nations members.

Doing business with First Nations people is an opportunity immigrants shouldn’t ignore, notes P. Dexter Quaw, executive director, Centre for Native Policy and Research (CNPR), a think tank on aboriginal issues based in Vancouver. A traditional chief with the Lheidli T’enneh band (which means “people from where the two rivers meet”) near Prince George, B.C., Quaw says he chose to move away from the reserve to “the bright lights” of the city.

“Most of our reserves are in an isolated environment, with few opportunities for employment or school,” says the MBA holder. “Fifty-four or 55 per cent [of aboriginal people] are living in urban environments,” he says.

He sees a parallel between aboriginal people and newcomers, particularly visible minority immigrants, in areas such as employment barriers and overall marginalization. “The parallel is striking,” he says. “Here in our own country, people are finding it hard [in both groups] … This has not been brought out yet, but it needs to be brought out. The government has segmented us. People who come in see us in a different light, as opposed to a part of them.”

But Quaw continues that a lot of potential exists between the two groups. "We get along much better with the visible minorities that come to Canada. We have good working relationships with Sikhs, Hindus, Chinese. We get along with immigrants."

He believes the two groups can help each other and do business with each other. And newcomers need not fear the ongoing treaty-making process and other land claim and self-government negotiations between First Nations and governments. "Contrary to popular belief, the treaty-making process does not stop business."

Asked for one thing immigrants should know about aboriginal people, Quaw says: "That we are coming back into our own. Who we are at present is not who we wish to be. Now we have the chance to become who we were before, and that's completely self-sufficient. That façade on the Downtown Eastside [in Vancouver, for example], those people have lost their way; it's not who we are."