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# The Racist Rhetoric Barbara Kay Champions As “Courageous”

I read the book by the academic who maintains that residential schools were a good idea.

OPINION BY MELANIE LEFEBVRE (HTTPS://WWW.CANADALANDSHOW.COM/AUTHOR/MELANIE-LEFEBVRE/) JUNE 2, 2017

BARBARA KAY (HTTPS://WWW.CANADALANDSHOW.COM/TAG/BARBARA-KAY/)

FRANCES WIDDOWSON (HTTPS://WWW.CANADALANDSHOW.COM/TAG/FRANCES-WIDDOWSON/)

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Barbara Kay has reared her head once again. In response to being “let go” from CBC’s *Because News* panel after a 19-month residency as its “token conservative” — apparently due to her views on the misappropriation of Indigenous cultures — she says she is now able to empathize with others in Canadian media who have “paid the same price for the same reason.”

In her May 23 column for the *National Post* (<http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/barbara-kay-a-lone-academic-dares-to-challenge-accepted-narratives-about-canadas-residential-school-system>), Kay sides with other like-minded “independent thinkers” — particularly Frances Widdowson, an associate professor at Calgary’s Mount Royal University and co-author of *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation* (<http://www.mqup.ca/disrobing-the-aboriginal-industry-products-9780773534216.php>).



silenced. Kay also dubs her “a courageous scholar who dares to poke a stick in the intelligentsia’s groupthink hive” and “the last of the Mohicans in her field.”

In the context in which Kay writes this (<http://www.canadalandshow.com/janet-rogers-cultural-appropriation-prize/>) — the heated Twitter debate over cultural appropriation that resulted in the rolling heads (<http://www.canadalandshow.com/cbc-executive-demoted-pledging-money-appropriation-prize/>) of Canadian media elites, including her son Jonathan (<http://www.canadalandshow.com/jonathan-kay-resigns-walrus/>), former editor-in-chief of *The Walrus* — I can only assume that by “intelligentsia,” she means outspoken Indigenous peoples (<http://www.canadalandshow.com/indigenous-resistance-tipping-point/>) and their supporters.

In her 2008 book, written with Albert Howard, Widdowson set out to prove that the hardships Indigenous peoples face today are due to the profiteering of lawyers and consultants and the development of the “aboriginal industry” — an argument that, from the get-go, dismisses the fact that profiting from Indigenous bodies, land, and culture has been going on for hundreds of years. Widdowson also claims that the real answer to Indigenous plight is assimilation, which as many of us know — and none more so than Indigenous peoples themselves — is not and has never been the answer. Widdowson purports to give a clear assessment of the current situation “so that all Canadians including aboriginal people can make informed decisions about the future direction of aboriginal policy.”

The introduction to the book retells Widdowson’s experience in Yellowknife in 1996, when she attended a Federal Environmental Assessment Review of Broken Hill Properties’ diamond mine proposal. She calls herself and her colleague(s) “disinterested observers,” but her intent quickly becomes clear: to deny and discredit Indigenous rights to land and self-governance, and to present Indigenous peoples as evolutionarily undeveloped.

During the hearing, Indigenous leaders were present to give information on traditional knowledge (TK) and its role in the environmental and social impact of the mine. Widdowson raises TK’s “buzzword” status in international Aboriginal and environmental policy circles, and proceeds to devalue it — as well as demean the Lutsel K’e Dene Council members who came forward to offer their insight.

She writes that she was “surprised when the technical session on traditional knowledge proved to be nothing more than a compilation of jejune platitudes interspersed with various intellectual dodges. Not only had the panel chosen to avoid establishing criteria and standards to evaluate traditional knowledge research, but no one at the session seemed to be able to identify what traditional knowledge was.”

If Widdowson was unable to understand TK through the lens of Eurocentric science, that is of course because it is not the system through which traditional knowledge was developed. Widdowson considers TK naïve and suspicious, and attempts to discredit those whose lives are built around this knowledge that is thousands of years old. According to Widdowson, TK’s intangibility means it cannot be counted with weights and measures and is therefore useless.

Widdowson compares the importance of Indigenous traditional knowledge in environmental assessments to Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, in which an Emperor and his citizenry are fooled by two weavers into believing in invisible silk and, ultimately, in a new suit for the Emperor that does not actually exist. That traditional knowledge would be compared to profit-driven deceit perpetuates the myth of the conniving Indians who should be viewed with suspicion for living traditional lives, and is not only misinformed and hurtful, but dangerous.

“In the case of traditional knowledge, a yarn of sophistic tactics, taboos, and testimony from designated ‘experts’ was being woven, the end result of which was to extract large sums of money from the government,” she writes in her introduction. “Until seeing for ourselves the ritual absurdity of the traditional knowledge session, we could not have understood this.”



, as in many other instances, Indigenous peoples are set up to fail; standing up to scientific scrutiny is how Widdowson deems (t)hing worthy, and so practices such as spiritualism, animism, speaking traditional languages, hunting, fishing, and gathering amount to “traditional quackery” and “artificial retention of an idealized past.”

Throughout the book, Widdowson chooses to place quotes around things like “traditional knowledge,” “cultural context,” “intellectual property,” and “knowledge systems,” as if they were unreal and lacking in any merit, credibility, or possibility pertaining to Indigenous peoples.

She refutes the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada by calling it “cultural change,” and compares the abuse at residential schools to character-building corporal punishment: “Aside from the horrors of physical and sexual abuse, the church is accused of destroying aboriginal culture by forcing aboriginal children to speak English and adopt Christianity. ... [But I]labelling missionaries’ efforts as ‘genocide’...obscures the fact that ‘obliterating’ various traditions is essential to human survival. ... Many of the activities held as destructive to aboriginal peoples — the teaching of English, the discouraging of animistic superstitions, and encouraging of self-discipline — were positive measures intended to overcome the social isolation and economic dependency that was (and continues to be) so debilitating to the native population.”

Widdowson goes on to wonder what Indigenous communities would be like without having had the “benefits” of residential schools. She disturbingly makes trauma and abuse secondary for the sake of her argument: “Leaving aside the tragedy of incidental sexual abuse, what would have been the result if aboriginal people had not been taught to read and write, to adopt a wider human consciousness, or to develop some degree of contemporary knowledge and disciplines?” But how does Widdowson think children can learn while being physically, mentally, and sexually abused, and in many cases, murdered? What sort of “wider human consciousness” does this treatment represent?

Widdowson suggests that subsequent land claims and self-governance to revitalize Indigenous communities and create economic independence need to be revised; that Indigenous peoples did not have sophisticated governing systems; and that they are “uneducated, unskilled, and socially dysfunctional.” Indigenous people wanting to be an integral part of, and gain from, the resource industries taking place on their land is interpreted by Widdowson as being opportunistic, some kind of money-grab — and viable Indigenous economies are written off as as impossible.

Aboriginal communities, in Widdowson’s world, are often “lawless” badlands where the gun trade thrives and black-market activities run rampant with illegal immigrants and biker gangs. Chiefs and leaders are connivers and fraudsters, women are regularly abused by their partners while remaining silent, men are pedophiles, and all Indigenous peoples are drunk and unreliable at best. This is due to Indigenous lives and culture being “obsolete,” neolithic, and undeveloped.; Widdowson essentially says that Indigenous peoples have not evolved — and cannot evolve — if they continue to practice traditional ways of life.

The book is riddled with myths and stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, including the assertion that Indigenous leaders make “hundreds of thousands of dollars each year” and squander it like others who win the land-claims jackpot: on “fancy trucks, gambling, and drugs.” The alternative she proposes is a government like that of Canada or the United States, where those in power are evidently neither corrupt nor buy trucks and drugs. But these chiefs and band councils were in fact constructed by the *Indian Act* — a piece of Canadian legislation — and so already *are* like these governments (<http://apihtawikosisan.com/2016/02/the-myth-of-the-corrupt-chief-and-band-council-part-i/>). These are not traditional Indigenous systems.

Widdowson posits that problems facing Indigenous peoples are misunderstood because the “aboriginal industry” is purposefully masking these issues in taboo in order to profit financially, but Indigenous peoples understand the issue very clearly: settler colonialism perpetuates myths and stereotypes that focus on Indigenous peoples being unable to govern their own affairs, like children needing to be told what to do and when and how to do it.



glowing light of Widdowson's advanced evolutionary state, for which Indigenous peoples should forsake their culture, she mentions the many issues facing Indigenous peoples because of it: systemic racism, police racism and violence, MMIWG2S, children aging out of the foster-care system without support, the lack of support and services for those who leave reserves for metropolitan cities, and so on.

In her article, Kay makes reference to Widdowson's claim that the land-reserve system only furthers Indigenous societal dysfunction, an incredibly and conveniently narrow view of a very broad topic. Although reserves were imposed by the Crown to control First Nations peoples by disrupting their traditional ways of life and kinship ties, the system, as Métis writer and lawyer Chelsea Vowel has noted, also enables Indigenous peoples to partake in their traditional practices. First Nations people can stay close to their families and continue to speak their own language; they are able to hunt on reserve, which offers some food security; and they can partake in ceremonies and cultural practices which would otherwise be absent if they moved away. Many reserves are hard-hit by tragedy, but the other side of that reality is that these places are First Nations peoples' culture and identity.

Widdowson suggests assimilation as a solution to Indigenous peoples' problems. I would argue that that has been tried and tried again, and it is still not working. And what does that mean exactly? What would that look like? Would Widdowson have all Indigenous peoples moved to the big city en masse? Would there be support and jobs and food and families and culture and freedom? This is what it looked like under John A. Macdonald, as explained by University of Regina professor James Daschuk in a 2013 *Globe and Mail* op-ed (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/when-canada-used-hunger-to-clear-the-west/article13316877/>):

Once on reserves, food placed in ration houses was withheld for so long that much of it rotted while the people it was intended to feed fell into a decades-long cycle of malnutrition, suppressed immunity, and sickness from tuberculosis and other diseases. Thousands died.

Sir John A. Macdonald, acting as both prime minister and minister of Indian Affairs during the darkest days of the famine, even boasted that the indigenous population was kept on the "verge of actual starvation," in an attempt to deflect criticism that he was squandering public funds.

Within a generation, aboriginal bison hunters went from being the "tallest in the world," due to the quality of their nutrition, to a population so sick, they were believed to be racially more susceptible to disease. With this belief that aboriginal people were inherently unwell, their marginalization from mainstream Canada was, in a sense, complete.

What Widdowson is proposing is yet another solution from the colonialist perspective, and a racist one at that. Her logic is disturbing and it is difficult to understand what her motivation is: Why does she appear so intent on controlling and harming Indigenous peoples? There seems to be something very sinister about her approach to human lives and liberties, under the guise of science and in defense of a twisted Darwinism.

I will close with a quote from Widdowson, as memorable as so many others, as she wonders in her book with much verve and nostalgia, how it must have been for Europeans when they arrived on these shores and had their first contact with Indigenous peoples: "Were they human beings fundamentally similar to the people encountered in the Old World, or sub-humans with a completely different place in the 'natural order' of things?"

I can assure both Barbara Kay and Frances Widdowson that we are in fact human and will not be assimilated. Nor will our traditions be voided by colonial, racist rhetoric.

Indigenous peoples have paid and continue to pay a price — a price that has nothing to do with losing a radio gig. Perhaps Kay can spare some of her newfound empathy for her fellow colleagues and shift it to those in need, who could use the help of someone in her position, with her privilege.



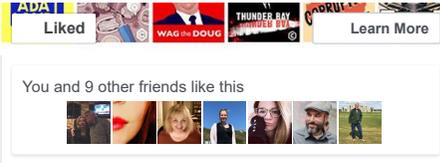
**Correction (6/13/2017, 8:47 p.m.):** Relying on incorrect information in Kay's column, this article originally stated that she had been let go from CBC Radio's Because News panels following "a seven-month residency." In fact, her appearances on the show started in the fall of 2015.

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