

As It Happens

with Carol Off and Jeff Douglas

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Debate over John A. Macdonald's name 'not what reconciliation is all about,' says Murray Sinclair

The former chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission says we should stop arguing about whether schools should be named after Sir John A. Macdonald, and start thinking about how to honour overlooked Indigenous heroes.

Sen. Murray Sinclair's remarks come after an Ontario teachers' union passed a controversial motion calling for the removal of Macdonald's name on buildings, accusing Canada's first prime minister of advocating Indigenous genocide.

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- **AS IT HAPPENS: Teacher says John A.'s should be stripped**

Sinclair, the first Indigenous judge to be appointed in Manitoba, spoke with *As It Happens* guest host Susan Bonner on Tuesday. Here is part of their conversation.

What bothers you about this debate over Sir John A. Macdonald?

As a person who spent so many years studying and discussing the importance of reconciliation, I'm concerned about the fact that we're really concentrating our efforts on doing something negative that doesn't really need to be. We could turn this into a positive.

The issue, of course, came to a head last week when [a] teachers' union in Ontario passed that controversial motion, which called for Sir John A.'s name to be removed from the schools, and which referred to him as an "architect of genocide" against Indigenous people. Can I ask you what you think about that characterization?

There's a lot of merit to it. I don't think we can get past that.

Keep in mind the fact that genocide was not a crime at the time that he was prime minister, and it wasn't a crime when Hitler was doing what he was doing in Europe during the Second World War, but that doesn't mean neither of them did things that were terribly wrong.

And incidentally, people talk about the fact that he didn't do anything different than what was acceptable in society. A lot of what he did was not acceptable in society and there were a lot of people that opposed him. But because Macdonald was the prime minister, he got his way.

Whether or not we now like it or are prepared to condone it or even continue to commemorate it, the reality is that's not what reconciliation is all about. Reconciliation is really about trying to find a balance in telling the history of this country.

The most important thing that I think we should be looking at is that there are a lot of Indigenous people who have made a positive contribution to this country, to their people and to the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who have largely been ignored by history and who deserve to be honoured and commemorated just as much, and we should be talking about what to do about them.

Are there divisions, though, within the Indigenous community about what reconciliation really means? Because the national chief [of the Assembly of First Nations], Perry Bellegarde, has said he supports the idea of removing Sir John A.'s name from the schools.

There are divisions within society. There are divisions within the non-Indigenous community, as well. So I'm not surprised by that. I think that people are still trying to come to terms with their own sense of what reconciliation means and what it should mean.

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Reconciliation is about establishing a relationship of mutual respect, and ensuring that we do not tolerate any more the fact that one society or one element of society believes that it is superior to another element of society.

Again, I go back to your comments about how this is a negative debate and about how this debate is actually "counterproductive" to reconciliation. Is there a productive side to it because people are engaging in this debate and having the conversation?

There is an equally controversial, perhaps, but more positive tack that can be taken, which is to identify those Indigenous individuals in Canadian society who have contributed as much to this country as Macdonald, if not more.

Give us a couple of examples of who you would like to see commemorated in this way?

One of the first ones, of course, is one in Manitoba with the Selkirk Treaty. When Lord Selkirk, on behalf of his people, came to what is now the Forks area in the southern part of Manitoba, to establish a settlement, he negotiated the presence and the ability to occupy land with Chief Peguis.

Chief Peguis not only protected the people, but agreed to give them land upon which they could establish their villages and also agreed to help them survive and took care of them.

- **Peguis-Selkirk Treaty remembered 200 years later**

In the West, Poundmaker and Big Bear, who were instrumental in keeping Indigenous people from joining the war against Canada during the Saskatchewan rebellion.

How would you like to see these men honoured or recognized? More statues? More school namings?

Exactly. I think they should be on our currency. I think they should be on the walls of public institutions, just like the portraits of speakers of the House and members of Parliament and prime ministers are hanging in our public buildings. We shouldn't be hiding them away in small buildings and dark places.

And they should be alongside some of these names that are controversial now, like Sir John. A?

In order to bring balance to the story, yes.

Where do you think we are on that effort?

Oh, we're stumbling at the starting line of reconciliation. There's no question of that. We haven't even started the race yet. There's a long way to go.

With files from Canadian Press. This interview has been edited for length and clarity. For more, listen to our interview with Sen. Murray Sinclair:

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