The Price of Doing Nothing About RCMP/Police Brutality and Racism Against First Nations Peoples

June 17, 2020

By Louis Harper, B.A., LL.B.

The truth is that there is a repeating history of violence and oppression by the RCMP, and other police forces, against First Nations citizens in Canada dating back to colonization. Something that repeats itself unabated can be called a pandemic, a plague. The plague of violence against our citizens has to be removed now. Some of the violence is hidden by the niceties of pro-forma, legalistic cop-outs – “…sorry, we can’t discuss this matter because it’s still before the courts.” This is a go-to-default for every single police shooting or violent incident between the police and First Nation citizens. This keeps the violent or lethal episodes perpetrated by the police hidden from public scrutiny. To some, this is seen as state-sponsored oppression, and to others, it’s outright genocide. Let us be reminded, United Nations describes genocide as a deliberate intent to destroy, in whole or in part a racial group. The slow, steady incidences of police brutality against our people has become normalized in a way because these incidents repeat daily or weekly in the media or in online forums like FB; and, nothing is done to change this.

For our citizens, this state-sponsored treachery must stop. The solution is clear in the eyes of First Nations citizens: it is time to change the way “Canada’s finest” – the RCMP, is administered and operated. I support a wholesale deconstruction and defunding of the RCMP in particular. The price of doing nothing about this state-sponsored police brutality and racism against First Nations peoples is too high a price to pay. If the police continue on this path it will lead to anarchy as we are witnessing in United States. I recall our famous leader, Dave Courchene Sr. repeat an old saying “If you kick a puppy long enough its going to bite you back eventually”. The voices of our ancestors, as spoken through our Chiefs today is strong and true, and that voice will prevail.

A quick refresher on the police-First Nations history: a friend, J.J. Harper was shot and killed by a Winnipeg Police officer in the early morning hours of March 9, 1988 after leaving a nightclub. He was shot in the heart. He was mistaken for an alleged car thief by the shooter officer who, as disclosed by the facts, had neither reasonable nor probable grounds to believe that Harper was the suspect the police were after. He was Chief of the Wasagamack First Nation in northern Manitoba and a leader of the Island Lake Tribal Council. He left a family in sorrow questioning why this happened. He left friends and colleagues in shock. Imagine if you can, how you would feel if the breadwinner in your family was killed in similar circumstances. No doubt you would be confused, shocked, and angry, demanding for justice. That is what...
one expects when the issue is one of justice. And especially when patterns of similar behaviour are so often exhibited by the police. The fact is that police brutality is more often combined with racism against Indigenous peoples. Racism is everywhere, and Canada, and Canadian police forces are no exception. More than one-third of people shot to death over a decade by RCMP officers were Indigenous peoples. This is the daily lived experience for our First Nations citizens. This must stop.

Fast forward to March 10, 2020 in Fort McMurray, Alberta: when during a purported routine traffic stop, the agitated Chief Allan Adam, from the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation in Alberta is pummeled and beaten by RCMP officers after he and his wife were leaving a casino in that community. After he raised questions with the police about why he was being stopped, and why the police were manhandling his wife, he was attacked and left bleeding and bruised at the hands of these RCMP officers. Looking at the dashcam video it looked like a SummerSlam Match, as I watched the RCMP officer taking a full-out run from across the casino parking lot, to knock Chief Adam to the ground. Like deceased Chief J.J. Harper, Chief Adam is a respected leader of his First Nation in Alberta. And as a citizen he warranted equal treatment from the police who are supposed to be there to protect and serve, not beat citizens, or overreact in fear, to legitimate civilian challenges such as is the case in this example.

At the risk of being accused of overkill I will mention one final story which involved me personally. It happened in my late teens in Winnipeg. I was picked up by the Winnipeg Police in wintertime and driven to the outskirts of the city where I was summarily dropped off and was told by the police to walk back to the city in the dead of winter. I am a First Nations and have physical features of an Indigenous person, including brown skin, black hair and brown eyes – a genuine “Nish”. Clearly, I was profiled by the police on that occasion. Upon reflection it reminded me of the infamous “Starlight Tours” practised by the Saskatoon police service in the 1990’s and 2000’s – another example of police brutality against Indigenous Peoples. Many young First Nations men were taken on long drives and then left on the outskirts of Saskatoon by the city police, and some froze to death overnight in the frigid temperatures. Fast forward to today: Here is a list of 8 names of First Nations citizens recently killed by the police in Canada: Eishia Hudson, Jason Collins, Steven Kevin Andrews, Everett Patrick, Abraham Natanine, Regis Korchinski Paquet, Chantel Moore, and Rodney Levi. We continue to see history repeating itself in the way the police in general exhibit a culture of systemic racism and brutality towards First Nations peoples across Canada. Systemic racism is a straightforward term; it means that the entire system is fraught with hatred and racism.

The rationale for providing these several examples of police brutality against First Nations is to shine the light on this despicable conduct of hate and oppression so that we do not forget. It is important that we speak up, and do not sit by and let it go, unnoticed. We must do something. I for one am scared for my teenage son in the event he is stopped by police. This racism and racial profiling needs to be exposed, much
like a wound has to be opened up in order to get to the poison. Things need to change now. The police harass and brutalize First Nations; that is the history. It’s part of the history of colonialism. There are lots of reasons for this most of which are founded in the different ways we view justice and oppression and hate. The Euro-Canadian justice system is based upon punishment and force. In Indigenous society our sense of justice is founded upon different values: harmony, balance, and respect.

It is true the escalation in killings by police of First Nations citizens has not abated. It has clearly escalated. The lives of First Nations peoples are not respected by the police. Otherwise you would think they would stop killing First Nations people. It has almost become normalized – the systematic killing by police of First Nations people. The lives of our people have been devalued by this police brutality becoming an accepted norm in society, and this must stop. The recent protests by Indigenous Peoples and the Black Lives Matter movement are calling out for justice for all of those people of colour who have been killed at the hands of the police. There is a worldwide revolution happening at the present time calling for the wholesale remaking of how the police operate in civil society. There is a call for the entire culture of the police to be changed from the bottom up. I support the revamping and remaking of the way that policing is done in Canada. New leadership is needed to change police culture. Retraining of police en masse is needed. New standards are required for the way police deal with our people. It begins with respect – RESPECT. The police have lost its moral center, its moral compass.

The police have become way too militarized. They use military equipment and tactics including the use of armoured personnel carriers, assault rifles, submachine guns, flashbang grenades, grenade launchers, sniper rifles, as well as, electric tasers, Special Weapons and Tactics teams. The PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences) state that the militarization of the police fails to enhance police safety or reduce crime but may harm police reputation. They tend to use all of this new equipment to harass Indigenous peoples and people of colour. Militarization of the police is not healthy in society since it makes citizens feel less safe, less protected, and less served with the exception of our First Nations who are already over-policed and over-charged throughout the criminal justice system. The RCMP need to be demilitarized. We have a military; we don’t need another one.

The policing of Indigenous peoples shows alarming statistics. In Winnipeg Indigenous peoples make up 10.6 per cent of the city’s population from 2000 to 2017 and more than 60 per cent of the people who died in police encounters were Indigenous. Similar data shows that the RCMP has similar statistics for all of the First Nations in which they do policing.

The policing in First Nations could be overseen by First Nations, given the proper resources. First Nations understand the First Nations people and their values are in keeping with the values of our people: harmony,
balance, and respect. Attention needs to be sensitive in this area however in terms of transferring such responsibilities without proper funding. To transfer this role to First Nations must occur with proper funding in order to avoid systemic failure. In the meantime, do we bar the RCMP from our First Nations until change has occurred?

If the police in Canada are to be rebuilt from top to bottom this truly has to be systemic change; change of the entire system. Both the administrative and operational parts of the RCMP must be changed. In like fashion, the role of the policing in cities across Canada for First Nations people too must change to ensure that the diversity in policing is honoured to the letter for First Nations peoples. Now is the time to make a move. There is no time like the present. The spotlight is shining upon the elimination of RCMP/police abuse. Let us honour our First Nations both past and present and move this movement forward with meaningful action. We cannot sit idle and let these brutalities continue and fester.

Bio: Louis Harper, B.A., LL.B. is a licensed Oji-Cree lawyer. He has worked for over twenty-five years as legal counsel for the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak and First Nation Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba. He lives in Winnipeg with his wife and children.