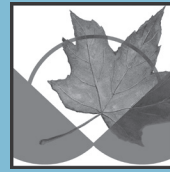


Election 2016 UNSPUN



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March 30, 2016

Mainstream media, reconciliation and Wab Kinew

Winnipeg Free Press columnist Gordon Sinclair's depiction of Wab Kinew is offensive with damaging implications that reach beyond the election (WFP March 12th and 26th, 2016). Sinclair uses his privileged position as a columnist to portray Kinew as a violent man who can't be trusted; a person with ulterior motives and someone to be feared. It's shocking that Sinclair, a powerful and intimidating man himself, describes feeling physically threatened by Kinew stating that he offered to shake Kinew's hand at a recent press conference because "walking up and offering my hand to him first was a good idea, because you know what they say. A man can't hit you when you're shaking his hand."

Having attended that event, we were taken aback by Sinclair's representation of events, especially in the context of a city and province struggling to deal with deep-rooted racism.

While there is no excuse for the misogynistic, homophobic words Kinew communicated in past years, there is a broader conversation that needs to take place and longer term implications to be considered.

Long before entering politics, Wab Kinew

took full responsibility for his past and now speaks out against misogyny, homophobia, racism and other acts of hate and abuses of power. He has been sober for six years, has advocated for an inquiry for missing and murdered women and girls, has led and participated in many initiatives focused on education about residential schools and reconciliation. He has become an important role model for Indigenous youth, teaching them to be strong, proud and to persevere in spite of challenges. For those that have taken a self-destructive path such as he once did, he demonstrates that life can get better. That change is possible.

Kinew openly shares his personal journey in his book *The Reason You Walk*. He describes his personal experiences with racism and the challenges growing up as the son of a residential school survivor. His story does not excuse past actions but it does shed light on the damaging effects of colonialism and racism.

These damaging effects are also described throughout the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*. Thousands of residential school survivors and their families shared painful stories describing the intergenerational impact that

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residential schools and racism has had on their families. Telling these stories cannot have been an easy thing to do. Many did so for their own healing, but also in hope that non-Indigenous people would understand the serious and long-term damage done and move beyond apology to action.

The TRC has brought us to an important crossroads. How we respond to the case of Wab Kinew is a reflection on what we understand our role to be in the process of reconciliation.

Gordon Sinclair's depiction of Wab Kinew is harmful because it moves in the opposite direction of reconciliation, inciting suspicion and distrust.

We can only hope that there are many others more reflective than Sinclair—not condoning Kinew's past behavior, but choosing to accept his apology and judge him on the work he has done in recent years.

We do not let Wab Kinew off the hook for what he has said and done in the past and we don't suggest that all residential school survivors are misogynist or homophobic; such views transcend race, class, culture and experience. However, we do suggest that reconciliation requires us to consider the context of colonialism that results in many Indigenous people experiencing deeply rooted feelings of shame, self-hatred and anger—anger that is sometimes projected toward others.

The TRC report asserts, "...reconciliation begins with each and every one of us." The fact that Kinew has taken responsibility for his misdirected anger suggests that he is on a path to reconciliation. We have a responsibility to support him and others on that journey.

This is important because as the TRC reminds us, the legacy of residential schools

continues. Racism is prevalent; the basic needs of many Indigenous people continue to be unmet and youth are dying by suicide at alarming rates. Wab Kinew and other young Indigenous leaders like him represent hope to many by persevering against personal obstacles and advocating for Indigenous rights and policy reforms.

By continuing on as the NDP candidate in Fort Rouge, in spite of the strangely obsessive attacks on his character, Wab Kinew sends an important message to Indigenous youth. That they mustn't give up. By failing to recognize Kinew as the person he has become, by not giving him an opportunity to lead, we send a different and damaging message to Indigenous youth—if we won't forgive Wab Kinew, then what hope do they have?

The oppressive colonial dynamic has affected all Canadian whether from places of dominance and privilege or as victims. As an Honorary Witness for the TRC, and as a recipient of traditional Indigenous knowledge in my family I (Tina) have learned that we must all take a stand against our dark history, and that we have the opportunity to create equity and justice for all citizens, unbinding future generations of Indigenous youth from colonialism.

Those of us who are not Indigenous must consider this: if we expect Indigenous people to forgive us for our past mistakes, should we not forgive Kinew for his?

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UNSPUN is the 2016 provincial election commentary from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba

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