

On Guard: The Discourse of Difference in Trudeau's Speech on National Unity

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Abstract

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's July 1, 2017 speech to commemorate 150 years of Canadian Confederation and its seemingly banal content and delivery ironically beckons for critical attention. Delivered to the Prince of Wales on Parliament Hill and millions via television and Internet, the address capped off the immense cultural spectacle of Canada's sesquicentennial with tributes to Canadian exceptionalism in battle and in sport. However, behind references to reconciliation and tolerance is a well-documented history of contestation that runs contrary to the international myth of Canadian unity. This essay deconstructs a consonance of perspectives on Indigenous relations, multiculturalism, and citizenship proposed by Prime Minister Trudeau in his Canada 150 address on Parliament Hill that is inconsistent with a defining decade of Canadian resistance. I analyze the speech's attempts to whitewash Canada's colonial origins and dispel numerous claims of peaceful coexistence between the nation-state and various minorities, fundamentally challenging perceptions of Canadian identity and national values.

Introduction: "Our Place on The World Stage"

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's July 1, 2017 speech to commemorate 150 years of Canadian Confederation and its seemingly banal content and delivery ironically beckons for critical attention. Delivered to the Prince of Wales on Parliament Hill and millions via television and Internet, the speech concluded Canada's most immense cultural spectacle since the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver with tributes to Canadian exceptionalism in battle and in sport. However, contemporary reactions failed to evaluate the extent to which the Prime Minister's remarks sincerely addressed Indigenous peoples' place in the festivities, represented by a teepee erected on Parliament Hill by "reoccup[ants]" of Algonquin territory that featured prominently on Canadian television (Wherry 2017).

Namely, characterizing the teepee as "a symbol of the unresolved grievances many Indigenous peoples have" largely overlooks a well-documented history of contestation in Canada (Tasker 2017). Charting a relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government that has sparked both "constitutional discussions" and "armed standoff[s]," Dr. Kiera Ladner (2008) asserts that political and social dissent "influenced by the state and opportunity structures ... [is] fundamentally grounded in and defined by issues of nationhood and (de)colonization" (245). With this context, the Parliament Hill teepee represents a fundamental challenge to Canada's espoused identity and national values by using "international domains to resolve domestic issues"

of oppression (Ladner 2008, 245). Rather than confronting this challenge, the Prime Minister's commentary portrays a consonance of perspectives on Indigenous relations and citizenship inconsistent with a defining decade of Canadian resistance.

This essay deconstructs the roots of Canada's colonial origins embedded in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Canada 150 address, dispelling numerous claims of peaceful coexistence between the nation-state and various minorities. The moral justification of Indigenous-settler relations and misconceptions of the organization of Indigenous peoples under Treaty Six are posited as explanations for the Canadian government's attitude on reconciliation and lack of reckoning with ongoing oppression. Then, "repressive tolerance" in both English and French Canada is demonstrated to preserve official Canadian multiculturalism as White-centric. Together, a failure to uplift traditional groups of social marginalization is concluded to establish a subclass of citizenship that runs contrary to the international notion of Canadian unity.

"A Lot Older Than 150 Years"

Alluding to, but not explicitly asserting a long-standing and continuous Indigenous presence, the speech conflates the settler experience of European pilgrims with established nationhood:

For thousands of years, in this place, people have met, traded, built, loved, lost, fought, grieved. They built strong communities, worked hard to build better lives for their kids, and learned to lean on their neighbours to get through our long cold winter nights, to thrive in the daunting landscapes that stretch across Turtle Island. (Trudeau quoted in PMO 2017)

The myth that Aboriginal communities lacked organization prior to European contact and the purpose of spreading this myth is debunked and explained in Dr. Sharon Venne's writings on Treaty Six. Although tribes such as the Plains Cree were "well-established and functioning" practitioners of popular sovereignty critical to settlers' survival, denying self-government to Indigenous communities provided European colonizers with the moral justification to freely claim unceded land as *terra nullius* (Venne 1997, 179). In promoting the *doctrine of discovery* that denied land claims from those not subject to European monarchs, Indigenous contributions to Canadian nation-building could more easily be erased from history (Venne 1997, 185). Therefore, speech observers recognizing the lack of specificity regarding Indigenous presence might reconsider the ongoing benefit of perpetuating outdated misconceptions to the Canadian government.

A Record "Far from Perfect"

The address then stops short of a claim of responsibility for ongoing oppression while attempting to acknowledge what the CBC calls a "willful failure" to respect Indigenous sovereignty (Wherry 2017). This decision is antithetical to the mandate of the government-established Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) to "reveal...the complex truth about the...ongoing legacy of...church-run residential schools" (27). The *Executive Summary* produced by the Commission two years before Canada's sesquicentennial describes crises in child-welfare, healthcare, and education responsible for Aboriginal children constituting 78 percent of Alberta foster care deaths (TRC 2015, 188). It also poses 94 Calls to Action to individuals, educational and religious institutions, and governments "to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance

reconciliation,” which was accepted by Prime Minister Trudeau on December 15, 2015 (Northern Affairs 2019). However, Trudeau’s speech subsequently calls for foresight of a “bright[er] future” unburdened by “past wrongs” (PMO 2017), seemingly denying culpability in the continued suffering of Indigenous peoples. To the extent that the Canada 150 event was a global spectacle, the dissonance surrounding Prime Minister Trudeau’s posturing on the international stage echoes former Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s claim to a 2009 G20 summit that Canada has “no history of colonialism” (Coulthard 2014, 105). Paralleling the timing of Prime Minister Harper’s apology to residential school survivors with Prime Minister Trudeau’s 2017 apology to survivors of residential schools in Newfoundland (Bartlett 2017), scholars would be remiss not to investigate similarly self-serving motives underlying the government’s role in reconciliation.

“The Canadian Way”

Dr. Glen Coulthard (2014) analyzes why Canadian political discourse so often dismissed the “righteous resentment” of Indigenous peoples in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (126). He cites a 1990 land dispute between the Mohawks of Kanesatake and the Canadian Armed Forces over a proposed golf course on sacred land as an example of the state responding to strategic resistance as a simple “law and order” issue (Coulthard 2014, 116). The effect on the Canadian psyche is to paint a portrait of *ressentiment*, an irrational and self-destructive failure to cease preoccupation with the past (Coulthard 2014, 126). This affords current and future government institutions a “long way” to reconciliation instead of an immediate timeline towards decisive change and characterizes concessions to systematic demands as a fulfillment of “the Canadian way” (Trudeau quoted in PMO 2017), rather than a necessary obligation for decolonization. The act of “mak[ing] things right with Indigenous Peoples” is framed to minimize discomfort amongst Canada’s non-Indigenous citizens (Trudeau quoted in PMO 2017), a framework that the University of Alberta’s own Chelsea Vowel (2016) writes in a blog post fails to provoke consciousness of the settler role of non-Indigenous citizens. Primarily focusing on repetitious land acknowledgements, Vowel (2016) suggests that reconciliation should promote acts of contrition as well as a reclamation of Indigeneity in otherwise unsafe spaces—in this way, an unwillingness to forgive is an appropriate response to a lack of change.

“The Very Core of Canada”

It can also be argued that the Prime Minister’s remarks preserve a White-centric model of multiculturalism widely adhered to, but increasingly recognized as problematic. Specifically, proclaiming that “diversity has always been at the very core of Canada for centuries” (Trudeau quoted in PMO 2017) dramatically underestimates the Anglo-Saxon character of post-Confederation institutions. For one, restrictions on immigration based on nationality or ethnic group were aggressively maintained as recently as 1952 (Smith 2003, 118). This usually meant the coexistence of the “other” with the British foundation of the country was tolerated so far as their contributions were deemed “worthy of a great nation,” as alluded to in subtext in Trudeau’s Canada 150 speech:

Canada has been blessed with leaders of all stripes who recognized how special this place is. Leaders who believed in the Canadian dream, who built railways and highways and

seaways to connect us to each other, and to the world. These projects became the backbone of Canada, infrastructure worthy of a great nation. (Trudeau quoted in PMO 2017)

However, commending belief in a common “Canadian dream” for establishing a “backbone” of Canadian society (Trudeau quoted in PMO 2017), the speech obfuscates historical conflict between Canada’s European founding nations and its role in imposing standards of ethnic and racial homogeneity that persist today. The province of Quebec for one has been criticized by Dr. Darryl Leroux (2013) for conflating perceived religious and cultural differences with ethnic and racial difference in debates surrounding reasonable accommodations. Attributed to a history of “double colonization,” where the Francophone population claimed dominance over racialized communities while still under subjugation to English Canada, Leroux (2013) suggests that various freedoms and equalities are proposed as values inherent to European whiteness that elevates the majority over the other (55). The effect of this “repressive tolerance,” establishing a model of normality while characterizing dissenting behaviour as anti-Canadian, leads to a broader recognition that not all citizens are coequal stakeholders in the Canadian dream posed by official conceptions of Canadian multiculturalism.

Conclusion: “*Be Proud of Our Accomplishments*”

Ultimately, multicultural discourse may be explained by the government’s vision of citizenship as articulated by the Prime Minister. Declaring Canada to be shaped by “ordinary people doing extraordinary things” corresponds to a “governance story” of citizenship articulated by Dr. Janine Brodie that emphasizes a body of individual contributors over what used to be a partnership in social welfare (Trudeau quoted in PMO 2017; Brodie 2002, 58). Here, the premise that modern citizenship is not inherently linked to specific legal institutions leads to a malleability of “citizenship regime[s]” that “prescribe the boundaries of state responsibilities” according to economic development (Brodie 2002, 55). Unfortunately resulting from neoliberal impressions of individual and collective strength, traditional groups of social marginalization are disadvantaged by a system that undervalues their worth and inhibits complete integration. The socially marginalized have long been shut out of nation-building narratives promoting infrastructural vision and military accomplishments as sources of “Canadian values.” As such, Prime Minister Trudeau’s assertion that Canadian citizenship is “one of the greatest gifts we’ve ever been given” (PMO 2017) fails to ring universally true.

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