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One man's debauchery...

Bob Tarantino, National Post

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May 20 passed this year, as it usually does, without fanfare. But the date is actually a noteworthy anniversary: On May 20, 1951, it became legal for aboriginals to dance in Canada.

The cultural war that was waged against Canadian aboriginals is generally thought of, to the extent it is acknowledged at all, in amorphous terms: European settlers came and, in some indeterminate sense, treated aboriginals in a dastardly fashion. Certainly, the abuses which took place in residential schools offer a particular (and gruesome) example of the wrongs, but there are other now largely forgotten chapters in the story of which we should remind ourselves.

When European settlers first engaged with aboriginal nations, they were witness to ceremonial celebrations which involved communal dancing and the granting and receiving of gifts. A demonstration of generosity and reciprocity, the gift-giving was a fundamental component of these occasions, which went by a variety of names among the different communities, including Potlatch and Tamanawas. Befuddled by activities which seemed so foreign to the wealth-maximizing sensibilities of the Victorian era, the federal government of the late-19th century decided it was having none of it.

Beginning in 1884, Parliament revised the Indian Act to outlaw aboriginal cultural practices which involved dancing and gift-giving. (It decried the ceremonies' "insane exuberance" and "debauchery.") Over the succeeding decades, the restrictions were drawn ever more tightly. By the 1920s, it was illegal for an aboriginal to participate in any Indian dance outside the bounds of his own reserve, or to wear aboriginal "costume" in any "show, exhibition, performance, stampede or pageant" without the prior permission of bureaucrats in the Department of Indian Affairs. Hundreds of people were charged and convicted of these "crimes" -- victims of a campaign of cultural chauvinism which sought to inculcate "proper" values. It was only in 1951, almost as an afterthought to an overhaul of the Indian Act, that the prohibitions were finally abolished. Canadians no longer faced fines or imprisonment for engaging in a fundamental component of cultural expression.

It might be objected that this reads simply as another installment in an ongoing cycle of self-flagellation: Have we not heard enough of this kind of history, which serves to highlight shameful episodes of our past while overlooking more positive elements?

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While the latter should certainly be celebrated, we impoverish our understanding if we shy away from stories such as the ban on aboriginal dancing. If there are lessons to be learned from history (and there are), those lessons will be drawn from both the high and the low points.

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Calls for history to be more widely taught are often simply coded demands for political agreement; they can be better understood as, "If only you knew more history, then you would agree with me." It is a call for the "correct" history to be taught. But there is no "correct" history, only raw material with which we should all become more familiar in order to learn from the wisdom buried therein.

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