

Indian culture and the classroom : text of a speech /

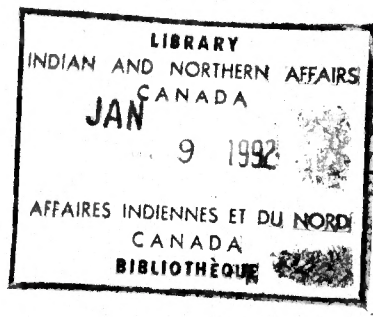
by Russell C. Honey, Parliamentary Secretary to
the Honourable Jean Chretien,
Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development,
to the Ontario Indian School Principals Association,
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"INDIAN CULTURE AND THE CLASSROOM"

TEXT OF SPEECH BY

RUSSELL C. HONEY, Q.C., M.P.

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE HONOURABLE JEAN CHRYTIEN

MINISTER OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

TO THE

ONTARIO INDIAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION

SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE

SUDBURY, ONTARIO

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Your program shows that you have had a busy two days. You have been engaged in a discussion of the future of the classrooms for which you are responsible. The word we are hearing more and more in every such discussion is "culture". Culture is the way an anthropologist uses the word is now recognized as the key to many a classroom situation.

We have come very late to this recognition. For many years the schools into which young Indian students were thrust, took no account of the differences between the Indian viewpoint and the dominant one around them. For many years, the schools took little notice of the differences between individual pupils. We are in a phase where we are outgrowing those attitudes, a phase in which education all across North America is groping for a new direction - a direction which will allow individual children to be themselves and to grow in their own way.

In this new milieu the Indian child comes to school. The school is one which operates in the world of today, not in the ideal world we all seek.

In the classroom is a teacher with all the imperfections common to humanity.

It may be that this particular teacher is sensitive, intelligent and well trained, and teaching the product of a previous teacher who was none of these things. One thing is certain, the classroom and the teacher will be no more the ideal of the theorists than any other classroom and teacher. They may be better than some or possibly worse. We know that both will be as good as we are able to get in this imperfect world.

We seek an ideal classroom climate in which each child is an individual. An ideal in which each will thrive and prosper. Within the classroom we can progress effectively toward our goal. We face a conflict of aims when we look to the more distant goal of an educated adult fitted to take a place in the world.

All educators face the dilemma that they are educating children to take a place in the world which cannot accurately be foreseen. Our forefathers were confident that the world of their grandchildren would be but little changed from the world they knew themselves. We have no such certainty. We can be sure that the world will be different, radically different. We share this problem with all educators.

We face another problem. The ultimate role of the Indian people in this

rapidly changing world is not only uncertain, but there is a conflict of views about it. This conflict is not between those who are Indians and those who are not. Indeed no, it is a difference of opinion which finds many Indians and non-Indians on each side. And of course there are more than two sides.

At a time when parents are more and more losing their direct control over the education of their children, we have a growing demand for an Indian voice in the education of theirs.

At a time when our own culture is suffering from an upheaval, we face a growing demand that the "Indian culture" be taught in the schoolroom.

At a time when we are striving to end paternalism in the Government-Indian relationship - we face demands which would lead to a different, but equally destructive paternalism.

From this welter of conflicting ideas and notions, we seek a classroom which will treat each child as an individual with all the manifold problems and capabilities with which every child is endowed.

Let us look for a moment at culture, at the world of the future and at the Indian community today and perhaps we can find some guidelines for our future.

Culture is defined by many authorities in many different sets of words, but Margaret Mead has said enough for our purposes. Culture, she says, is the abstraction used by anthropologists to apply to historically developed, shared, learned behaviour of members of a society.

Now there can be no argument that the historically developed, shared, learned behaviour of Indian children is going to be different in many ways from the other Canadian school children. The question is whether that difference can be accommodated in our schools as they now are, or as they might hopefully become. The extent to which the differences are accommodated in the schools will answer some of the questions which arise about the future society into which Indian children will emerge.

What I am saying is that if Indian children continue in separate, isolated school environments, and are not exposed to their non-Indian contemporaries, and in turn the generality of Canadian school children do not meet Indians, then the barriers of misunderstanding are going to be perpetuated and the cycle of separation and isolation - and of deprivation - cannot be ended.

Chief Dan George of the Burrard Indian people is a notable and noble Indian chief. He is a performer of great talent. Some of you have seen him on

television, some of you may have seen him in "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" the play by Vancouver Playwright, George Riga.

When asked how the two cultures can co-exist he said, "When the Indians of the West Coast wanted to make a canoe, they got a log of suitable length and size and hollowed it out. Then they took an appropriately shaped piece of wood to make a bow for their canoe. They brought the two pieces of wood together and rubbed them, one against the other, each yielding to the other until they had a perfect fit - a watertight joint. That is how it is with two cultures.

They must rub, one against the other until there is a perfect fit."

That rubbing must take place in school as well as in the working world.

School is the first place and it is essential for future relationships. But we are still left with the problem of how to structure a classroom situation which will enable the Indian child to develop as a child in the light of his own culture. I suggest to you that the first and major decision is to make certain that the teacher, the principal, the administrators, the system accepts that the child represents his own culture.

The child is the voice of the Indian culture of the future. How will the school respond to his needs? The school's role, I think, might very well be to

bring the Indian and the non-Indian child together so they can come to understand one another. Its major purpose however, is to teach the skills and knowledge needed for the widest of worlds, the world of the future. This will be a multi-culture world for the simple reason that nation-states are no longer separate but must rub, one against the other. Because the world is smaller, the nations must be amenable to different cultures. Within the nation's boundaries there will be room for multi-cultural expressions of self as a natural concomitant of this.

The Indian content of the child's culture must come from the Indian community or it will cease to be an Indian culture. To impose our conception of Indian culture would be to rob the child of his birthright - the right to be himself in his own terms. No school can teach Indian children to be Indian.

Indian children will learn their historically developed, shared, learned behaviour norms from the Indians around them. Their language, which is intrinsic to culture, must be taught in the community. The Indian tongues are many and various. They will, in the future, be stronger than they are today, for the Indian community is growing and the young are showing more and more interest in preserving the languages. This is a community endeavour and while government can and will help, it is the Indian people who must do.

We can begin to see a shadow of hope from this, I think. The child will absorb and reflect the Indian community of his parents, reinforced by cultural activities of other Indian communities. Communication between Indian communities will grow as the means of communication develop and grow and become available - something where government can and does help. The Indian people will strengthen and develop this Indian identity because no-one else can.

The school, accepting the Indian child as a child bringing his culture with him into the classroom, accepts the child and the culture. It does not blame the child because he sees things differently but seeks to have those around recognize the validity of these differences and the human right to display them and be proud of them. Thus all are enriched.

I return then, to the dilemma of the classroom. How to prepare children for an uncertain future? In this respect the future is not more uncertain for the Indian than for others. We can teach children basic skills, encourage their basic capabilities, show them how to make their own individual adaptations to the world as they find it. I see no difference between your classrooms and others in this respect.

The ultimate role of the Indian people in this rapidly changing world is one which they must determine, for they must regain control over their own lives, their own communities, their destinies. A program which gives them strong academic support, strong skill-development, allied to a community program of strong cultural identity will help to give them this essential control of their own lives.

Indian parents must be fully and actively in control of their children's cultural growth. This is their job and no-one else must attempt to control, direct or divert it. They must have the same voice as other parents in the over all school programs in their communities.

The heart of such a program is the necessary recognition by all Canadians, not just the teacher, but all Canadians, that the Indian has his own identity, is proud of it and justly so. This identity can prosper and grow and develop and become a great strength to individuals, to communities and to Canada.

You, as administrators, have a role to play, but it is not the role of creating cultural programs or carrying them out. It is to create an environment in the school, in the playground and in the community in which the Indians can grow and develop in their own way.

I wish you well in your task. It is not an easy one. The rewards may not
be material. But the sharing of a task which is so worthy is a reward of a
kind and one which you richly deserve.

