

Opinion



The Senate is explicitly responsible for minority populations and those not adequately represented in the House of Commons—First Nations being amongst those, writes Senator Mary Jane McCallum. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

No boneheads in my backyard

After seeing the damage from comments made during his broadcasting career, Senator Charles Adler has ample opportunity to do fulsome research and truly become a human rights champion for all.

Senator
Mary Jane
McCallum

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It was with a heavy heart that I read the numerous articles

regarding newly-appointed Senator Charles Adler's history of vitriolic comments against First Nations. Where did this anger, misinformation and oral violence originate?

As a Cree matriarch, I have the responsibility to speak truth, to challenge hatred and misinformation regarding First Nations, and to bridge relationships. First and foremost, I look to the teachings set by my ancestors. One teaching is that we, as humans, all have our unique earth journey in this world.

We all make mistakes, and those mistakes become our individual lessons. We learn from them and make reparation for any injustice/hatred we have sown. It is with this teaching in mind that I write this piece, one in which I will refer to Senator Adler as Mr. Adler, since he spoke his vitriol before his Senate appointment.

I know who I am. In my lifetime, I have had the government abduct me from my family and community and place me in residential school for 11 years in an effort towards assimilation; limit my life choices up to a time; and

dictate and attempt to reshape my strong Cree identity into a socially constructed and racially inferior one.

In the book, *Beneath the Surface of Things* by Wade Davis, he states: "Race is an utter fiction. Scientific research and the revelations of modern genetics have affirmed the essential connectedness of humanity. Skin color—exploited for generations as the cruelest of human conceits—is nothing more than basic adaptation ... Words such as 'primitive' and 'civilized' suggest a hierarchy of culture that has never existed, save in the minds of those who benefitted from such colonial and racial conceptions."

If Mr. Adler had done his homework, he would have realized that the reservation systems were not our natural way of governance, but were established by the federal government over many years, perpetuating ethnic injustices, inequalities, and marginalization. I know this as I have lived in the reserve system, one set up and maintained by Indian agents. As an intellectual, I have been forced to maneuver such

manmade obstacles and assert my sovereignty.

The social position I was forced into since birth was consciously created by an administrative design that culminated in the Indian Act of 1876 and its subsequent amendments. The Indian Act determined our land boundaries and governance structures, purposefully under-developing nations and peoples, and determined the legal concept of how Indians were to be recognized and the roles we could play. In the book entitled, *Canadian Society: Pluralism, Change and Conflict*, edited by Richard J. Ossenberr, author Peter Carstens states: "This social position has inevitably created a reduction of alternatives in decision-making processes at all levels within communities under the jurisdiction of the Indian Act."

Despite these intentional obstacles, our First Nations leadership have managed to make great progress over centuries, steering us back to the self-determining nations we once were. For that, I thank them.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has stated that, "throughout his

career, [Mr. Adler] has used his platform to champion human rights and Canadian democracy." How, though, can someone who, during his time in broadcasting called my people "uncivilized boneheads"; dishonest; lacking integrity; dictators; lacking moral discipline; not deserving of respect; and lacking accountability and responsibility be a champion of human rights? Furthermore, his remarks were never "fair political commentary," as the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council determined in dismissing a complaint against those remarks in 2000.

Despite all the work we have done to educate Canadians on our reality, commentary like that from Mr. Adler contributes to polarization and an increase in negative attitudes towards First Nations. Such polarization is never good for democracy.

An apology in this situation is insufficient because of the undeserving damage Mr. Adler's remarks have caused to so many people.

The Senate is explicitly responsible for minority populations and those not adequately represented in the House of Commons—First Nations being amongst those. It will thus be interesting to see how Senator Adler will steer his course. He has ample opportunity to do fulsome research and truly become a human rights champion, for all.

There are no boneheads in my backyard—one may have to look in their own.

Senator Mary Jane McCallum is non-affiliated Senator for Manitoba, appointed to the Upper Chamber in 2017.

The Hill Times