International rhetoric and diplomatic discourse: A South African / Canadian indigenous encounter

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Hypocrisy is the most difficult and nerve-racking vice that any man can pursue; it needs an unceasing vigilance and a rare detachment of spirit. It cannot, like adultery or gluttony, be practised at spare moments; it is a wholetime job.

— W. Somerset Maugham, *Cakes and Ale* \(^1\)

The twentieth century marked the apogee of man’s inhumanity to man with varied calculations of millions of deaths caused by Mao, Soviet Communism, Khmer Rouge, Castro, Indians and Pakistanis, Brazilians, Mengistu and Burundians.\(^2\) All of these gross violations of human rights were “a negation of the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations”. And the United Nations General Assembly is the conscience of the world.

Both the world at large and the States members of the General Assembly were all too aware of these abuses. Despite this knowledge, a researcher would be hard put to glean this information from a reading of the General Assembly Resolutions. One of the reasons for this paucity of action by the General Assembly lies in the fact that the violations of human rights took place *within the frontiers of the offending states*. It is only when actions of states cross frontiers that the General Assembly condemns the acts and even then in muted tones. The three resolutions about the invasion of Tibet do not mention China by name. The General Assembly deplores the Soviet invasion of Hungary,\(^3\) but does not the invasion of Czechoslovakia nor makes mention of the USSR in condemning the invasion of Afghanistan. Internal oppression within the frontiers usually does not stir the General Assembly to action. Thus, the Khmer Rouge, despite the acknowledged genocide, maintained their seat in the General Assembly until 1990 when the “Supreme National Council” took it over. There are several examples of the General Assembly passing over in silence internal human rights violations in China,\(^4\)


2 Stephen Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: The decline of violence in history and its causes* (New York: Allen Lane, 2011) in terms of proportional death toll puts the 8th Century Chinese Alushan Civil War at the top of the list – a sixth of the world’s population extinguished.

3 Resolution 1131/2 (XI).

USSR, Uganda, Cuba, Brazil and India. The General Assembly nevertheless suspended South Africa and Israel restricting their access to UN bodies.

The country sought out for the label of having a policy of "negation of the purposes and principles of the Charter" eventually falling into the category of a crime against humanity,\(^5\) was South Africa. Apartheid received the most reproof and condemnation (216 General Assembly Resolutions 1945 –1994 and South West Africa, administered by South Africa, merited 197).\(^6\) The policy was indeniably reprehensible, but the gamut of rhetorical uses of the case remain by and large unquestioned. The underlying question a career diplomat like myself — who served in ambassadorial posts before and after the installation of democracy — is bound to ask in retrospect is the following: if diplomats finger the internal human rights violations of other States, what do diplomats achieve? Usually the result is pre-empted by Charter of the United Nations in its Article 2.7 which forbids interference in the internal affairs of other states. What has often characterised the United Nations' declamatory rhetoric around horrors in the world is in essence a vague, indirect and allusive language, except on occasions where a State actually invades another — so China received three reprimands for Tibet without the word “China” ever appearing in the Resolutions.\(^7\) This essay deals with one example of diplomatic discourse cutting across the set rhetoric of the United Nations, that is how South Africa’s ostracism found itself at the heart of a “rhetorical situation” in Canada.

The specific background to this essay is a prise de conscience by leading Commonwealth ex-Dominions (setting aside the vexed case of India, which deserves a treatment on its own), Australia and Canada with regard to their treatment of “First Nations”. In plain, undiplomatic terms, they have both been let off the hook for a century until very recently, and certainly were when the other ex-Dominion, South Africa, was condemned for its official, racist policies.

Only as the aboriginal peoples in Australia took a hard-line stance and as their grievances were given a popular airing did the Australian government show a sense of shame.\(^8\) The aborigines became voters for the

\(^5\) Resolution 2786 (XXVI) Draft Resolution on the suppression and punishment of the “Crime of Apartheid.”

\(^6\) The Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the chairmanship of the Rt. Rev. Desmond Tutu found that at least 21 000 people had died directly or indirectly because of Apartheid and that the police and security forces were responsible for 518 of those. Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1, pp. 163, para. 18

\(^7\) GA Resolutions 1353 (1959), 1723 (1961) and 2079 (1965 — the last General Assembly Resolution) — the resolutions all deplore the violation of the human rights and the freedoms of the people of Tibet without once fingering China.

\(^8\) See the film “Rabbit-proof fence” (2002) directed by Philip Noyce depicting the
first time in 1962. Their numbers have grown to 2.8% of the population — they now number 458,000, and can get up a bit of critical mass for themselves. On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised in Parliament for the “lost generations” of aborigines removed from their homes to attend schools which squeezed out their aborigine character and language for over a hundred years from 1869 till 1969. Since the forming of the Australian Commonwealth the first aborigine to enter the House of Representatives was Ken Wyatt on 28 September 2010, in other words, 109 years after Australia had its first constitution. The Australians also did a belated job of window-dressing by incorporating aboriginals in the opening ceremony for the Olympic Games and had an aboriginal athlete carry the torch.

In Canada, Indians, or to use the pre-emptive cringe of the Dominions, the “First Nations”, remain subject to the Indian Act (1876) — or at least “status” or “registered” Indians do. There are other categories of Indians such as métis (the French for “half-cast”) and “non-status Indians”, those not registered on band rolls — of which there are 616. Canadians have hovered between assimilating the Indians and museumising them. In the assimilation phases, just as in Australia, Canada adopted an “Indian Residential School System” forcing children away from their tribes and clans to schools where only English could be spoken and Western ways learnt. It led to a total immersion and lasted from the 1840s until the last residential school closed in 1996. Belatedly, on 11 June 2011, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, following in his Australian counterpart’s footsteps, apologised for past governments’ policies of assimilation. Using the spin of having token First Nations representatives in Parliament he said the following mealy-mouthed words:

We now recognise that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow... You have

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9 And even in to the 1970s in some cases.
10 A term which includes the Eskimos who were then Inuit and later also First Nations — hard to see how you describe yourself: “I’m a First Nation”? Those I met had no quibble with the term “Indian”.
11 On the 50th anniversary of the city of Vancouver which was founded in the same year as Johannesburg, Vancouver donated a totem pole to Johannesburg which stood in the Library Gardens.
12 Some pretty telling Canadian legislation preceded this — note the titles of the Gradual Civilisation Act (1857) and the Gradual Enfranchisement Act (1869).
been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey.\textsuperscript{13}

However in 135 years only 27 self-identifying aboriginal people have entered the House of Commons out of a possible number of 10,345 seats. Status Indians only got the vote 50 years ago. Harper made no promise to improve the lot of the “First Nations” who still live under the authority of the Indian Act which, with its amendments, forbids religious ceremonies such as potlatches and dances, permits the removal of aboriginal people from reserves near towns, permits expropriation of Indian land by municipalities for public works and the removal of whole reserves if deemed “expedient”, requires Western Indians to get permission to wear “aboriginal costume” in pageants and allows Indian agents to attend band council meetings and to cast deciding votes in the event of a tied vote.\textsuperscript{14}

Both Australia and Canada have managed for centuries to airbrush out of the democratic narrative the lot of the indigenous peoples the whites displaced. The weasel words used by Rudd and Harper are seen for what they are: a necessary display of rhetoric to quieten the more vociferous purveyors of guilt. In Canada, the reason for the half-heartedness is explained by Harry Swain, former Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs: “Because no politician got his bread buttered by taking on the Indian issue”.\textsuperscript{15}

So, if rhetoric is a narrative which has an effect upon the audience, how much more effect has a deed which is intended to bring about an effect upon spectators of a rhetorical act? After the deeds, narrators and commentators describe them in words and pictures.\textsuperscript{16}

The deed

Twenty-five years ago exactly such a deed — literally a finger-pointing — brought the Canadians up short. In an interview in Vancouver, the most famous Canadian interviewer, Jack Webster, asked me, as South African ambassador to Ottawa: “If you were a man from Mars and came to earth, what would you think of all the torrent of criticism of South Africa?” My reply was: “If all the people in the village swept before their own door, the village would soon be clean”. It befell me to show in 1987 that Canada was not free from its own denialist rhetoric.

\textsuperscript{13} The Globe and Mail (12 June 2008).
\textsuperscript{14} “Update Notice to the Justice Laws site”; Indian Act Dept. of Justice Canada: http://laws.justice.gc.can.
\textsuperscript{15} The Star (Toronto: 30 October 2010).
\textsuperscript{16} See my soon-to-be published memoirs: In one era and out of the other.
In an article about South Africa for the *Influence* periodical, I quoted from the White Paper (1969) on Indians under Jean Chrétien, Minister of Indian Affairs and the Report “Indian Self-Government in Canada” of the Special Committee of the House of Commons, showing how Indians had the highest proportion of jail time, a death rate two to four times the rate of non-Indians, infant mortality 60% higher than the national rate, the highest proportion of alcoholism and the lowest income of any community in Canada. Moreover, I quoted startling statistics about the original native populations in Australia, South Africa, Canada and the USA on the arrival of the whites — all were less than a million — the only “native” population now to have risen above a million (tens of millions) is that of South Africa — the others stay well below the million mark.

It was a short citation but has caused long, continuing controversy to this very day. Prime Minister Mulroney who was visiting the Vatican at the time and was chastised by the Holy Father for the treatment of the Native Peoples, was shown a copy of the article and asked by a journalist how he would respond. “I will not dignify it with a response” was his reported retort — which resulted in a greater furore.

Contemporaneously with the deed, Minister of External Relations, Joe Clark, repaired to Zambia and waived that country’s debt to Canada of $96 million. Further furore.

One person who saw the possibilities resulting from the *Influence* article was Louis Stevenson, chief of the 3500-strong Peguis Indian Band, north of Winnipeg. “Ah”, he had thought to himself, “get the vilified South African ambassador to my reserve and that will wake the authorities from their torpor”. Real action-rhetoric. I had scrupulously avoided commenting on the internal politics of Canada since my arrival in Canada in 1985 — enough was enough. The Canadian Embassy in South Africa was acting as a conduit for all the disaffected parties in the land, the ambassador did not restrain himself on what he thought of the South African government: he and his wife participated in demonstrations, involved themselves in protests and channeled political demands by radical organisations to the government and the world at large, taking their cue from the Canadian permanent representative to the UN, Stephen Lewis, who labelled South Africa “the most heinous regime on earth”.

The Indian chief, Louis Stevenson, wanted my presence as a deed of rhetoric to make the Canadian government react. The Canadian government saw the potential embarrassment from the Apartheid ambassador being near one of its racial sores. It tried to get Stevenson to disinvite me. He responded

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17 Glenn R. W. Babb, “Blind spots I have observed in Canada”, *Influence* (February/March 1987).
18 October 1983.
saying he would disinvite the ambassador if Prime Minister Mulroney took my place, which was unlikely: his Tory erstwhile predecessor Prime Minister, Diefenbaker, had spearheaded the move to force South Africa out of the Commonwealth.

The media also saw the South African ambassador’s visit to an Indian reserve as potentially explosive. Dawned the day and eighty journalists and cameramen were there to record the event after the press had worked up a head of steam about it for weeks. Interestingly, none of the Canadian journalists whom I spoke to at the Peguis Indian Band had ever visited an Indian Reserve before.

It was therefore an eye-opener for them and their TV viewers to see how the Indians actually live in huts and tents at \(-20^\circ C\) without running water (water doesn’t run at \(-20^\circ C\)) just emphasising the fact revealed by the Commons’ report that 40% of Indian homes did not have sewerage. Chief Louis Stevenson was delighted by his action-rhetoric, as he should have been since he had a sense of humour: “Ambassador, would you like a twenty-one arrow salute?” he asked as I arrived.

What Chief Stevenson told the world was that of the 3,500 status Indians on the Peguis Reserve, only 57 had employment, the rest living off the $350 given monthly to them by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Territories. The roads were all gravel and the bridges had broken down. Although the Reserve flanks Lake Winnipeg, one of the largest extents of fresh water in the world, what fish the Indians caught had to be sold through the Fish Marketing Board and what wild rice they grew also had to do the Manitoba socialist round through a marketing board. The cameras showed the bored youth playing cards in a half-used clinic and children living in one roomed unheated huts.

Chief Stevenson got the publicity he needed from his invitation. Many journalists went away sorrowing. Stevenson asked me to submit a request to the South African government for aid equivalent to the Zambian debt to Canada which Joe Clarke, the Foreign Minister had recently waived.

**The reaction**

I was not the initiator of the visit to the Peguis Indian Band, but a willing participant and played the main part. Had I not been the so-called Apartheid government’s representative and had there not been the relentless attack on South Africa by Canada, the visit would have been another thing to airbrush out of the Canadian reality. But the rhetorical deed having thus been done, the Pandora’s Box could not be shut. Of course, the first reaction was: “pot calling the kettle black”, which was defensive rhetoric, then there was anger and counter-attack which used all the stereotypes of the white South African
government, the more reflective response showing a little guilt and recalling that in the 1950s Canada had exchanged information about reserves with South Africa at the time of Tomlinson Commission, which set the homeland policy in motion.\textsuperscript{19}

1. The first reaction evened the playing field a little—“pot calling the kettle black” was an admission of the misdeeds.

\textsuperscript{19} 1951.
\textsuperscript{20} Illustration by kind permission - Karnianisk, \textit{Winnipeg Sun} (10 March 1987).
\textsuperscript{21} Illustration by kind permission - Gireaud, \textit{La Presse} (Montreal: 13 March 1987).
2. The attack dogs were outraged that the “white racist” had dared to sully the good name of Canada.

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22 Illustration by kind permission - Susan Dewar, Calgary Sun (10 March 1987).
23 Illustration by kind permission - Vance Rodewalt, Calgary Herald (12 March 1987).
3. The reflective response granted the belief that Indians were at the bottom of the Canadian pile.

The flurry of media and official attention was like disturbing an ant’s nest, but the outward fuss died down in the mass of other news to épater les bourgeois. The underlying resentment and anger seethed on, however, especially in the groves of academe.

The long-term assessment of this diplomatic-rhetorical deed shows it is an effective tool in permanently demonstrating a link between Canada’s policy and South Africa’s racial structures. Sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists in universities could never forgive me for upstaging their writings and proposals on First Nations. In 2010 academics were still referring to the visit in pungent terms: John S. Saul, Professor Emeritus of Politics at York University Toronto, wrote: "...deeply unpleasant Glenn Babb’s aggressive tour... turned the occasion skilfully to his account pointing out the grim, if somewhat divergent, parallels between the practices of the two countries".  

24 Illustration by kind permission - Alan King, The Citizen (Ottawa: 24 February 1987).
25 Presentation to the South African Association of Canadian Studies (Cape Town) “Two fronts of anti-Apartheid struggle: Canada and South Africa”: http://findarticles
Innumerable such references and comments still appear in journals, articles and reports, demonstrating clearly the continuing impact of the comparison, finger-pointing and recrimination. The inferiority-complexed intelligentsia think somehow that the whites of South Africa are children of a lesser God and that the quality of the misdeeds of the Canadian whites who live with a native population that has hardly grown in numbers since the whites arrived and has suffered massacres like that of the Beothuks, does not match the “heinous” nature of the South Africans’. The rhetoric of the Canadian intelligentsia harks back obsessively to the time when the whites ruled in South Africa. While the official and government response to the furore of the Apartheid ambassador showing up the soft Canadian underbelly, was to sweep it under the carpet, fuggedaboutid, so what?, the intelligentsia pored over it, wrote about it and, as usual had no new suggestions to clear the dilemma of either museumising the Indians or bringing them into the mainstream. As I shall describe in my conclusions, the First Nations, despite apologies for “residential schools” and constant handwringing have come nowhere near the mainstream — and let’s face it, the First Nations were the mainstream till these lumberjacks appeared. Brian Mulroney, when Prime Minister, used the soft words: “I see the aboriginal peoples making their special contribution to Canadian society as Indian, Inuit and Métis. There is no need to sever one’s roots”. 26 Rhetorically: where are the Indian provincial governors? Nil. The Governor of Ontario when I was ambassador was a Caribbean. Where are the Canadian Indian Olympic athletes? Where are the Indian diplomats? Special role reserved: Indian dances at the Commonwealth Games.

Beyond academia, the rhetorical deed stirred some interested spirits. A number of senior Indian leaders thought to test the Canadian official condemnation of South Africa. Two delegations visited South Africa in 1985, one comprising Gerald Wuttunee, Eldon Bellegarde and Lyndsay Cyr — all chiefs from the Assembly of First Nations — and a later group with which I was not involved. The delegation saw Soweto, interviewed Development Corporations for the TBVC countries, and visited Bophutatswana. This is not what they expected, though they were careful with their words. The Canadian Embassy hid their light under a bushel. What was apparent from my conversations with the chiefs was that they realised they were part of a larger scheme of universal things in the world — development next to underdevelopment, central planning next to free enterprise and ethnic groups in competition.

The collective conscience of the Canadian Indians absorbed the reciprocal rhetorical deeds of mutual visits with a certain pensiveness. Thus, although there was no great diplomatic spin-off from the visit to the Peguis Indian Band except for some squirming in official and Departmental circles and some *schadenfreude* in South Africa, when the great proponent of the “rainbow nation”, the Right Reverend Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town, long thereafter (three years) sought to meet the First Nations on his visit to Canada in 1990, Canadian Indian hierarchy refused to see him. Memories are long.

In the dark days of sanctions, the rhetorical-diplomatic deed caused a guffaw at the expense of the pious Canadians. A moment of comic relief carried on into my appointment as Head of the African Division as South African whites savoured the embarrassment of a major critic.

Illustration by kind permission - Marlene, Pretoria News (13 March 1987).
The equation of the diplomatic-rhetorical deed or the aftermathematics

Whereas the flutter in the dovecote of Canadian-South African relations impacted on the psyche of the two countries and resulted indubitably in an augmented consciousness of Canada and its political élite that the flaws in Canadian society would lead to constant criticism internationally, the rhetorical deed faded before the momentous tsunami of the new South African politics. In 1990, President de Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC and the freeing of Mandela, all that I had said to Canadians about change which they should have been encouraging, not sanctioning, and which the Left-wing would not believe, came true. As the Groote Schuur Agreement reached finality and the CODESA talks progressed, as the elections of 1994 took place peacefully, there was no longer a need for the whites to point political fingers. The South African whites could now adopt the moral high ground. The Canadians, Australians and sub-continent Indians could assume the role of juvenile delinquents.

Ironically, this crossing over between the two countries in their internal race relations left the Canadians in the same morass they were in before: nothing changed for the Indians in Canada and everything has changed for the blacks in South Africa. With no target for their barbs, the

29 Illustration by kind permission - Frans Esterhuyse, Hoofstad (Pretoria: 19 March 1987).
Canadian intelligentsia hugs itself in a time-warp and refers incessantly and obsessively to that delicious time when South Africa presented them with an ideal target for their reproofs and a time when comparisons could deliberately be odious. This is so even though the Canadian government willingly set up their own reserves as an example for the Tomlinson Commission to follow.

The visit to the Peguis Indian Band remains the reference point for these commentators on race in Canada and the academics, journalists and writers are still miffed that it was a South African Apartheid representative that brought the world’s attention to the issue. The issue nevertheless stays on the periphery of the Canadian reality and the authorities have still to decide whether museumising Indians is less irritating than robustly bringing them into the centre of Canadian culture. It still seems that Mulroney’s “making their special contribution to Canadian society as Indian, Inuit and Métis” is their future. It seems like a no-hoper to judge by the past — they have not worked out this equation.

The ex-Dominions and India are in the unenviable position of facing a world with independent “Human Rights” Commissions and organisations which will continue to up the ante in the stakes of the protection of minority peoples. While South Africa has comfortably leapt the hurdle into an acceptable world of unity in diversity, Canada, Australia and India have still to overcome their internal contradictions. Meanwhile, harijan continue to be killed for drinking from the same water source as other castes and Australian and Canadian aboriginals continue to suffer alienation and unintended deprivation. They can no longer hide behind the horrors of Apartheid and must face their demons themselves.

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30 See “Indian ‘untouchable’ lynched”, The Cape Times (7 June 2012).