

Drew Hayden-Taylor

AN INDIAN BY ANY OTHER NAME

Last week I, a reasonably well educated man of the ever more complex 90's, made a tremendous political and social faux pas. I made the terrible mistake of referring to myself, and other people of my ethnic background as 'Indians.' Oh the shame of it all. You could hear the gasp echo across the room. It was done, I assure you, in the most innocent of intention, but nevertheless, I was soon castigated by both my brethren and, in my humble opinion, the overly politically sensitive members of other Native groups. And the White people! Needless to say, in these politically correct times, I was soon inundated by these same people with criticisms about my use of such an outdated term. "We're/You're no longer called Indians!" I was told over and over again.

Evidently I am in severe error for responding to that term for the last 31 years. No doubt an oversight on my part, and my entire family, and my reserve, not to mention the vast majority of the country. Growing up in school, all us were proud to be 'Indians.' It had a certain power to it that set us aside from all the White kids (or should I say Children of Occidental Decent). Somehow the cry of 'Proud to be Indigenous Population' just doesn't have the same ring. Or picture this, you arrive thirsty in some new town, and you ask the first skin you see, "Yo, neechee, where's the nearest First Nations Bar?" Sorry, just doesn't work for me.

I guess I'm out of date? Oh I understand the reasoning behind all the hubbub. Columbus, a member of the European/Caucasian Nation, thought he had found India and all that. That's cool, but there's also another school of thought that says that Columbus was so impressed by the generosity

and gentleness of the Native population of the Caribbean, he wrote back to Spain that they were "of the body of God" or in Spanish, 'corpus in dea.' In deo – Indian. A pretty thin link, but who knows? I knew some Indians with God-given bodies.

But a person in my position doesn't have to defend himself with theoretical history. I was too busy handling the deluge. By deluge I mean the flood of politically correct terms I was permitted and urged to use following my faux pas.

It must be obvious to most people that in the last couple of years Native people in Canada have gone through an enormous political metamorphosis, similar to what people of African descent did in the United States. Years ago they used to be called N****s, then Negro, then Coloured, then Black and finally today, I believe the correct term is African-American or African-Canadian.

That's nothing compared to the choice selection of current names and categories available to the original inhabitants of this country. And these names or classifications have nothing to do with any tribal affiliations either. These are just generic terms used to describe us 'Indians.' Grab some aspirin and let me give you some examples.

First of all, let's start with the basics. Status, non-Status, Metis. So far painless. I guess next would come the already mentioned Indian, followed by Native, Aboriginal, Amerindian, Indigenous and First Nations. Pay attention, there's going to be an exam later. From there we can go to on-Reserve, off-Reserve, urban, treaty. Got a headache yet? How about the enfranchised Indians, the Bill C-31 or reinstated people, the traditional Indians, the assimilated Indian? I'm not finished yet. There are the wannabe's (the White variety), and of course the ever popular full bloods. My personal favourites are what I call the Descartes Indians, "I think Indian, therefore I am Indian."

Get the picture? Right there are two dozen separate names for our people. Where does it all stop? I wanna know who keeps changing all the rules? Even I get confused sometimes.

That's why I usually use the term 'Indian.' I'm just too busy or too lazy to find out which way the political wind is blowing or to delve deeply into the cultural/governmental background of who I'm talking to or writing about. By the time I go through all the above mentioned categories, I've missed my deadline. Then I become an unemployed Indian.

But I know what your thinking. Why should I listen to this guy? What the hell does he know? He's just probably some Status, off-reserve, urban, Native, Aboriginal, treaty, half-breed Indian. This week anyway.