

Heard once again on CBC radio's call-in program, "Cross Country Check Up" during the height of the Idle No More Movement :

"They have everything given to them!"

Instantly we know that "they" means people of the First Nations in Canada.

They have everything given to them. It is a common fiction.

It would be impossible to address all of the fictions with all of the facts in a moment or two.

Last year for National Aboriginal Day (which occurs at the time of the summer solstice) the Toronto Dominion Bank put together a special report entitled *Debunking Myths Surrounding Canada's Aboriginal Population.*

The authors, Derek Burleton, the bank's deputy chief economist, and Sonya Gulati, who specializes in federal finances, wanted to set the record straight, replace stereotypes with facts, and foster a more enlightened national conversation. They chose the 10 most prevalent myths, based on the bank's own research in the field and the findings of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business.

Just a few of their fictions and responses are included here:

1. Aboriginal people don't pay taxes.

This is true only for a minority.

Status Indians living on reserves (30 per cent of the aboriginal population) are tax-exempt.

Those living off reserve (30 per cent) pay taxes.

So do non-status Indians (12 per cent), Metis (23 per cent) and Inuit (4 per cent).

Even the exempt group can be taxed on income earned off the reserve and purchases made off the reserve.

2. Aboriginal students get free post-secondary education.

Some do, some don't. The federal government provides money to First Nations and Inuit communities to pay for tuition, travel costs and living expenses. But not all eligible students get support because demand for higher learning outstrips the supply of funds. Non-status Indians and Metis students have been excluded.

3. Most aboriginal communities are protected by treaties, which guarantee economic and political rights.

That is true on paper in Ontario, but not in British Columbia, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Where it is true on paper, it often is not practiced in actuality. Many times, treaties which are binding agreements, have not been honoured on the government's part.

4. Aboriginal people receive a huge windfall when they settle a land claim.

That is seldom the case. Governments pay out land claim settlements in a variety of ways: economic development incentives, or cash that goes to the band council, placed in trust for possible direct payouts to individuals, which must be ratified by a community vote. It's not like winning a lottery.

5. a Aboriginal people are not entrepreneurial.

That's at odds with the evidence. Approximately 32,000 small- and medium-sized businesses are owned and operated by aboriginal citizens. Fifty-one per cent of these firms were launched by women.

5b Aboriginal businesses are not very successful.

That's wrong as well. Six out of 10 reported a profit in 2010. A third managed to boost their revenues, even though the country was still climbing out of a recession.

I add one more often repeated fiction, not included in the TD bank collection:

6. Chiefs and band councils are corrupt, serving themselves first and the people last.

This may be true of a few, but it would behoove us to remember that some parts of the Montreal, Toronto, Mississauga and many other non-native governing bodies have been charged with, or found guilty of corruption, as well. Judging the many by the few is a mistake.

The easy settlement of a question is to latch on to a stereotype;
the harder, but true way is to search out the facts behind the fictions.
May we all be engaged in the search for truth and understanding in the pursuit of right relations!

Faye Stevens May 2013