We both had an opportunity to attend a highly informative and thought-provoking lecture by Dr. Leroy Little Bear, on Oct. 9. The lecture was a part of series convened by the University of Winnipeg under the auspices of the Weweni Indigenous Speaker Series, a series that presents for the 2015-16 academic year distinguished Indigenous scholars in celebration of the success of UWinnipeg students.

Dr. Little Bear Leroy Little Bear is a member of the Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy. Little Bear is the former Director of the American Indian Program at Harvard University and professor emeritus of Native Studies at the University of Lethbridge, where he was department chair for 25 years. He has contributed much at two levels, creating space for Indigenous Knowledge within the dominant discourse and also to explorations finding new possibilities through synthesis of native and mainstream science. He has written several articles and co-edited three books including Pathways to Self-Determination: Canadian Indians and the Canadian State (1984), Quest for Justice: Aboriginal Peoples and Aboriginal Rights (1985), and Governments in Conflict and Indian Nations in Canada (1988).

The presentation began with the definition of a nation-state. The “nation” speaks to the idea of sharing of “common culture, history, customs, values, language, traditions, art and religion”. On the other hand, the “state” is “a political and judicial entity occupying a patch of land”. More importantly, states get together to make a nation.

Dr. Little Bear provided an overview of how the nation-state began and evolved over the past four hundred years. Using England as an example, the process started with the people of Iberian stock who were later mixed with Celts and they practised Druidism. This was followed by a succession of takeovers arising from invasions from outside. The net effect was that not much remained of what was at the time indigenous to the country. “Today, England is a mixture of borrowed traditions... all about cultural borrowing”. For Dr. Little Bear, the trajectory of nation-state building in Canada is similar, hence the characterization as a “pretend nation”.

An added layer to the definition of nation gives us a greater appreciation and understanding to what Dr. Little Bear seeks to convey. In a territory that is claimed from within, “the culture arises from a mutual relationship with the land.... and through its mutual relationship with the land, develops icons, symbols, and images that serve as repositories for the paradigms, values, customs, ceremonies, stories, songs, and beliefs of the people. These, in turn, are embodied into the very being of the people”.

“What does Canada today have? All of its icons, symbols, images, paradigms, values, customs, ceremonies stories, songs, and beliefs are from elsewhere: they are not indigenous to Canada”. As with a “multi-billionaire” whose wealth is primarily paper wealth and not connected to anything substantive, it is not indigenous. Canada may have a constitution, a legal system, and a government but he views this as mere paper existence... not substantive in the sense that it arises from a mutual relationship with the totality of the ecology of the territory.

How can Canada become a true nation?

For Dr. Little Bear, the only way Canada will become a true nation is to embody the indigenous roots of the territory that it claims. Generations of North American Indians have come and gone on the back of Turtle Island. They have developed and embodied into their very being icons, symbols, images, paradigms, values, customs, ceremonies, stories, songs, and beliefs that manifest out of their relationship with the land. Theirs are indigenous.

We are informed that the Canadian Constitution and other important documents from 1867 to 1982 say nothing about Canadian identity. These documents are all administrative in nature. They say nothing about who are the Canadians or what is “Canadian”. There is nothing in those documents about how they are connected to the land. If Canadian identity is being drawn from elsewhere, does that mean that Canadians really, deep down, consider themselves, and continue to consider themselves, “visitors”? If that is the case, Canadians really do have an identity problem. Until that embodiment, the connectivity to the land and its ecology, comes about Canada will continue to be a “pretend nation”, a nation that exists only on paper.

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