

The 'absurd' idea of paying reparations for slavery

By Conrad Black

Canadians should not imagine that we are alone in encouraging the monster of a victimhood industry. The key is to maintain a distinction between victimization and actually being a victim. This is a vital point that was made this week by the London writer and commentator Melanie Phillips, in reference to the imbroglio that British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who is blundering through one of the clumsiest launches of a new government in a serious country in recent memory, has managed to get himself into. Various Commonwealth leaders of non-white states have demanded that the United Kingdom offer reparations for slavery while they were under British colonial rule. Starmer started by rejecting the demand and then made rather lame efforts to change the subject and finally conceded that it may be discussed next year. Of course, it is an absurd request. Slavery has at one time or another existed almost everywhere, and was widely practised by Indigenous peoples.



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, left, attends a closing executive session during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Apia, Samoa, on Oct. 26. PHOTO BY STEFAN ROUSSEAU/POOL/AFP

In many cases, some form of slavery was underway when the British arrived, and the native inhabitants of the lands often participated in rounding up slaves and selling them to the

British (and other European powers). Britain was the first European country to end the slave trade and it encouraged other countries to do the same. As Phillips writes, what is generally known as the “victim culture” is being used to demonize the West and to induce paroxysms of guilt and self-reproach, and this is certainly familiar in Canada’s discussion of Indigenous matters. Victimization is when someone is aggressively attacked or oppressed and is therefore made a victim. This is not a fate they choose; it is inflicted upon them. Being a victim is a matter of choice and is what a person thinks of his or her own condition and behaves accordingly. Victimized people may become demoralized and hopeless and many people are victims of circumstances and almost all people are victims of mistreatment or misfortune at some time. A great many children have been abused or suffered from family breakdowns or grown up in a disadvantaged home, and they generally have the choice of thinking of themselves as victims and becoming losers in life as a result, or they can fight circumstances and generally overcome their unfortunate conditions. All those who would wish to assist

victimized people should help them to think and act positively and rise above the regrettable aspects in their past. Encouraging people to be victims is the most unhelpful course that can be devised or followed.

Most unfortunately, as Phillips wrote, "Western society has made a fetish of 'being' a victim. This has absolutely nothing to do with compassion. It has everything to do instead with a denial of objective truth and a negation of individual conscience and personal responsibility." The victim culture, which has become so overpoweringly tedious in Canada, derives from the Marxist view that all relationships are based on power and you either wield power over someone who then becomes your victim, or you are yourself the victim of someone with power over you. The attraction of this conception is that it enables almost anyone to become a righteous complainant and provides a free pass for the misdeeds and excesses of anyone self-identifying as a victim and enables them to behave as bullies to the window-rattling applause of the serried masses of contemporary society's virtue-signallers.

In current practice, this is most frequently a method of demonizing all white people as colonial oppressors and unmeritocratic inheritors of the alleged privilege of being white. Obviously, being born a white person is no more a suitable subject of criticism and moral reproach than being born into any other ethnicity, but this contorted and dishonest perspective permits actual power to be abused and overturned by conjured or confected coalitions of the innocent masquerading as avengers of victimization. This facilitates the avoidance of responsibility, unlimited unfairness and the destruction of any plausible and traditional moral compass as the victims and victimizers change roles. And because victim culture is a manipulative fraud, it frequently denies the status of victim to those who actually deserve the help and sympathy of those who are in fact in that category.

As I have often written here before, including last week, this

is an evident phenomenon in much of our treatment of Indigenous questions in Canada. Almost nothing was done officially in the history of Canada going back to colonial times that was intended to be harmful to Indigenous people, though as has been discussed ad nauseam (literally), some well-intentioned policies were poorly conceived or poorly administered. The answer is not punitive retribution or reparations, but the devising and implementation, in consultation with authentic and honourable leaders of the Indigenous community, of new policies that are carefully designed to achieve desirable ends.

As Phillips noted, at the moment, the principal victims of this specious inversion of guilt are the Jewish people, whose historical standing as victims is impeccable, but who are currently being represented as an oppressive people, both in the Middle East and elsewhere. As is an almost certain element of most aspects of political chicanery and betrayal, Jews are accused of playing the victim card to conceal their true status as oppressors, while their accusers are portrayed as righteously preventing the Jews from "getting away with it." This is conducted behind a smokescreen of alleging that the Jews are a sinister and powerful cabal that secretly manipulates events to the disadvantage of everyone except themselves and their collaborators. This is the basis of antisemitism.

I do not wish to pursue that subject any further today, but it is useful to keep in mind the comparison that it furnishes with some of the agitation on behalf of Native people in this country. The Native peoples enslaved each other and they made brutal warfare with each other. They do not now seek reparations from each other and the highest aspiration that societies can reasonably have is to discontinue barbarous practices and resolve not to resume them. Selected groups cannot reasonably extract reparations from other groups when the conduct objected to had been practically universal.

Britain, like many other countries, profited off of slavery for years, and discontinued doing so out of moral disapprobation. Since slavery was practised in Africa before the British and other European powers colonized the continent, it is unjust to expect the Europeans to bear the entire brunt of moral responsibility for that hateful practice.

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