

## OPINION

# Has anything changed? Revisiting Chief Dan George's iconic 'Lament for Confederation'



'His poem records historical truths. Not only his truth, but the truth of Indigenous reality and experience.'

Janet Rogers · for Canada 2017 · November 27, 2017

On Canada Day 1967, Chief Dan George recited his now iconic piece 'Lament for Confederation.' 6:15

When Chief Dan George from the Tsleil-Waututh Nation wrote and delivered his iconic *Lament for Confederation* marking the country's centenary, the Salish actor, poet, activist and cultural leader wasn't speaking to me. I was only four years old at the time and unaware of my own Indian-ness and what that means in terms of cultural responsibility, national reaction and political positioning.

- **OPINION** [The Wigwam Conspiracy: why are Canada 150's Indigenous people stuck in time?](#)

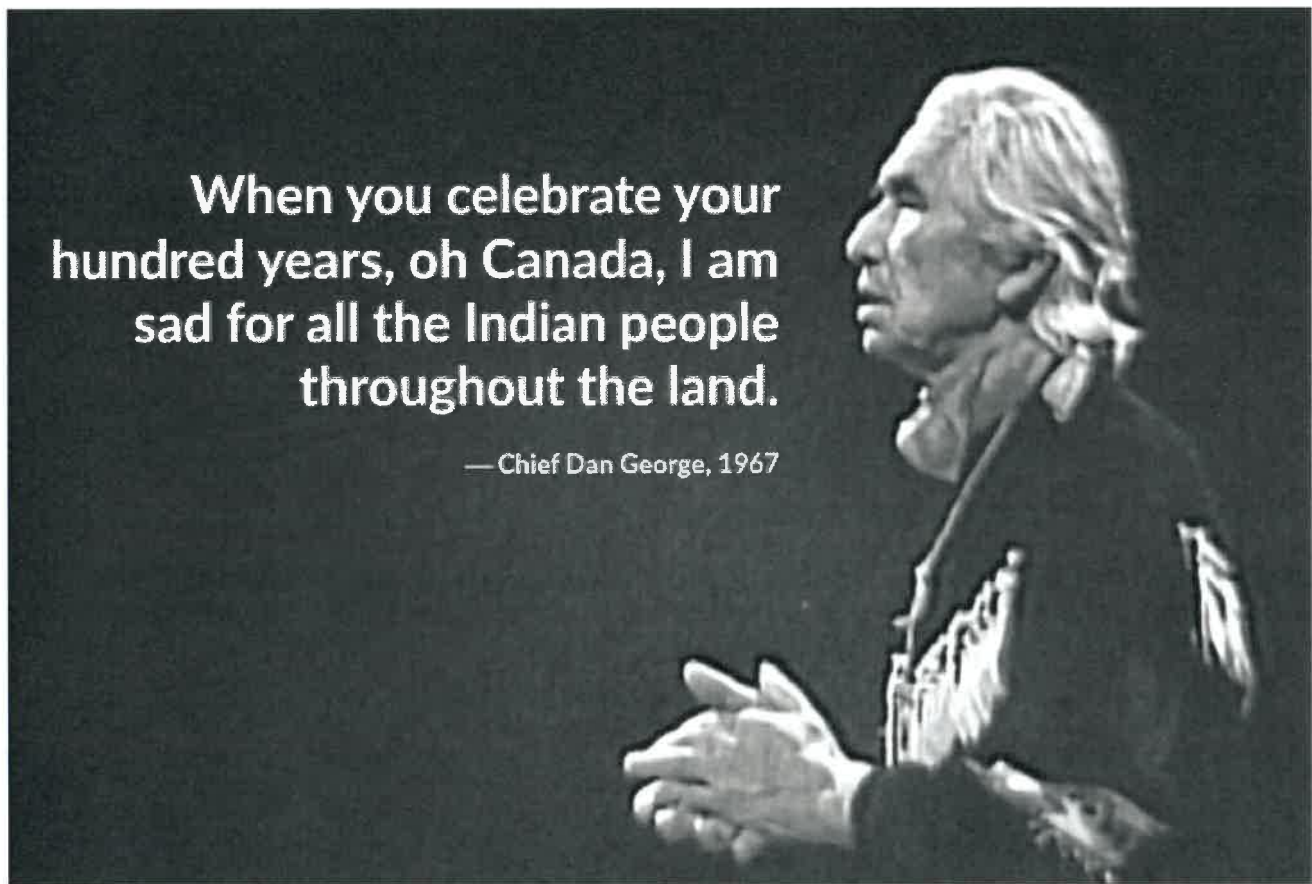
No, Chief Dan George, the beloved and revered spokesperson for many nations at that time, was speaking to the Settlers. And his poem/speech read like a report card dotted with many "Fs."

*And today, when you celebrate your hundred years, oh Canada, I am sad for all the Indian people throughout the land. For I have known you when*

*your forests were mine; when they gave me my meat and my clothing.*

*But in the long hundred years since the white man came, I have seen my freedom disappear like the salmon going mysteriously out to sea. The white man's strange customs, which I could not understand, pressed down upon me until I could no longer breathe.*

However let's, for the sake of the millennial population, reintroduce the author of that lament.



Of this video from CBC Archives: 'Chief Dan George, appearing with members of his Indian performing troupe, presents his dramatic monologue "How long have I known you, oh Canada?," a lament for the Canadian Indian on the occasion of the Canadian centennial.' (CBC)

Chief Dan George was an actual chief of the Tseil-Waututh from 1951 to 1963. He is most remembered for his poetry book *My Heart Soars* and his role as

Old Lodge Skins playing opposite Dustin Hoffman in the movie *Little Big Man*, which earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor in 1970.

He was also a residential school survivor where his original name Dan Slaholt was changed to Dan George. His Indian name Geswanouth Slahoot followed him to his resting place in 1981.

“The Lament holds true today.

-Janet Rogers

The Lament was perceived as a radical piece of writing delivered unapologetically by the one person who could make those kinds of critical statements and get away with them. Whereas today, the mere announcement of Vancouver's 150 celebrations having a strong Indigenous focus prompts the ignorant and racially biased citizens of Vancouver to chime in with comments like these on a [Global News article](#):

"Indians to celebrate for a year, wow, who will pay for their celebrations ... guess who?"

and

"The people who came to this beautiful country (and didn't have their hands out, looking for a free ride — but WORKED) — those who made Canada what it is today... will get NO recognition. Of course... And what was I thinking, silly me?"

...and these are the milder comments.

All of the whiny racist comments get an "F." They get an "F" for failing to educate themselves about the real history of Indigenous peoples. They get an "F" for failing to exercise compassion, not sympathy, but human compassion for the challenges we have faced as survivors of this 500-year-long abusive relationship with the rest of Canada.

And I'd really like to point out here, in reference to Chief Dan George's Lament, that we are not victims. Our nations never operated from a place of defense until after contact. His poem/speech records historical truths. Not only his truth, but the truth of Indigenous reality and experience. The Lament holds true today.

*When I fought to protect my land and my home, I was called a savage.  
When I neither understood nor welcomed his way of life, I was called lazy.  
When I tried to rule my people, I was stripped of my authority.*

In the fourth stanza, George (Geswanouth) points out the name-calling he endured for protecting his land and refusing to operate under colonial ways of living. "Savage," and "lazy" he writes. Those names are still hurled towards us today but now they are less audible and more textural where



they remain visible  
for many more to  
witness and add to.

'Recognize we are the foundation to what defines culture in this country.' Janet Rogers (CBC)

We have new cyber territories created through social media sites, where those who know better than to show themselves as the face of racism out in public do so from the comfort of their homes on stolen land, with the support of like-minded mobs and from behind anonymous avatars. This is the new battleground. And it really doesn't take much to incite a verbal/textual back-and-forth.

Want to take the temperature of racial progress in this country? Read any comment section of an Indigenous news story online and tell the Chief and I that we're wrong.

- [CBC closing comments on indigenous stories 'commendable,' says N.W.T. man](#)

This is not progress. This too gets an "F."

“Want to take the temperature of racial progress in this country? Read any comment section of an Indigenous news story online and tell the Chief and I that we're wrong.

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However, in the eighth stanza our chief makes a promise to "God" to rise and grab the tools of the white man's successes, education and skills, to "become the proudest segment of your society." I humbly and respectfully disagree.

*Oh God! Like the thunderbird of old I shall rise again out of the sea; I shall grab the instruments of the white man's success — his education, his skills — and with these new tools I shall build my race into the proudest segment of your society.*

We can willingly return to the same educational institutions that committed genocide on our people, we can earn all the money in the world and buy houses in very expensive white neighbourhoods, but we will always be fundamentally different. We are pre-Canada. We are in the way of Canada's progress. Our relationship with this country's government does not earn it money and therein lies the inability to have equal, meaningful and respectful relations with this country.

- **Christi Belcourt says Indigenous resistance didn't start with Canada 150**

The solution is simple. Return our land. All of it. Reciprocity and reconciliation are not possible until we reach equal status. Apologies are only words and can be easily undone with contrary actions as we've witnessed with the Harper government's insincere, theatrical delivery of the residential school apology in 2008. Without our land base, government has little reason to hold court with us at all.

Stop trying to make us like you, Canada. Come over to our side. Stop [demanding we dress in feathers and hide](#) to be included in your celebrations. Recognize we are the foundation to what defines culture in this country. Without us, hockey pucks, coffee and apologies will be your cultural legacies.

“Oh Canada, as guests on our territories, we ask you to bring your best behavior and wipe your feet of your colonial ways as you enter.

-Janet Rogers

I look forward to hearing Chief Dan George's *Lament for Confederation* read again and again during 2017. Let's revisit this honest and accurate piece of writing penned by an Indigenous leader who all of Canada proudly recognized and embraced. His uncompromising response to the centenary is an indication of the integrity of his character and resolve in who he was.

During my term as Victoria's poet laureate from 2012 to 2015, I was asked to write the official Victoria 150 poem to be read in a special City Council meeting. I wrote a six-page piece titled *Lekwungen Land* in honour of the Coast Salish people on whose territory I have been a guest and a visitor for the past 23 years. Oh Canada, as guests on our territories, we ask you to bring your best behavior and wipe your feet of your colonial ways as you enter.

