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Community Response to the Recent Federal Apology

Monday, March 19, 2018

Norwood Hotel

- Opening remarks from **Muhammad Ahsan**, Education Coordinator at the Rainbow Resource Centre.
 - I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are in Treaty 1 territory and that the land on which we gather is the traditional territory of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.
 - Canada has a despicable history of what can be termed as state sponsored homophobia, bi-phobia and transphobia. For decades there was a policy aimed at oppressing and consequently criminalizing same-sex conduct through “heteronormalization.” Heterosexual relationships were depicted by society at large as being “normal”. Conversely, same sex relationships were often suppressed and depicted as savage or as having abnormal sexuality through state-backed churches and the criminal law.
 - The LGBT community has historically been the subject of prosecution and discrimination in the Canadian Armed Forces, RCMP, and Federal Public Service. The campaign to identify and purge LGBT Federal Public Servants on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression in the Federal Public Service and military began in the 1950s and continued for decades.
 - On November 28th 2017, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued an apology to LGBTQ2 Canadians, here are the highlights of that historic moment. (Video clip excerpt of the federal apology.)
- **Introduction of panel**
 - **Albert McLeod:** Albert is a Status Indian with ancestry from Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and the Metis community of Norway House in northern Manitoba. He has over twenty years of experience as a human rights activist and is one of the directors of the Two-Spirited People of Manitoba. Albert also works as a consultant specializing in HIV/AIDS and Aboriginal peoples, cultural reclamation, and cross-cultural

training. Albert was present to hear the apology in Ottawa.

- Albert offered his reflections on the apology:
 - Organized Two-Spirited People of Manitoba in 1986 in response to the suicide of two young gay men to respond to the lives and experiences of indigenous LGBT2SQ+ people. Was part of the national advisory council about the apology. Albert's role was to document and share the experiences of indigenous Canadians in this and push for their inclusion in the apology.
 - The term two-spirit was introduced in 1990 in Manitoba. The term is an aspect of decolonization. It provides an indigenous lens to gender and sexuality and how it ties into spirituality. Worked (and still works) hard at advocating for the inclusion of two-spirit in the "acronym".
 - "What are you sorry for? And what has occurred historically?"
 - Canada recently apologized for the era of residential schools, which played a part in the homophobia and transphobia imposed on indigenous Canadians. There is a section in the full apology that addresses the impact European colonizers have had on indigenous people, acknowledging the destruction that colonizers have brought. This is a section of the text that is often left out of the media coverage of the apology. This is a section that highlights gender violence, and for the media to exclude it in the era of the MMIW inquiry is troubling. The media glosses over this portion of indigenous history. This not only affected indigenous Canadians, it affected the first settlers too. There's very little about queer settler Canadians in that era of history. Colonization defines gender and gives privilege based on gender and sexual identity.
- **Jim Kane:** Jim Kane was among the 250 people who marched in the first Pride Winnipeg parade in 1987. He is a well-known a community activist and fought for the rights of the community for several years. Recently served as Vice Chair of the Canadian Aids Society and Chair of Nine Circles Community Health Clinic. Jim was also present at the apology in Ottawa, and is a recipient of Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2011 for his service in HIV/Aids.
 - A friend of Jim's was directly impacted by the policies of the federal government; this friend was arrested for holding hands with a same-gender friend and was sentenced to six months at Headingly. He never quite got over it; it impacted his whole life. The arresting police officer went on to become the chief of police, so any visit to Winnipeg after this time brought back all of those memories and experiences.
 - Hearing the apology brings up a lot of the history of our struggles. Jim looks at it through the history of the community and through the eyes of an HIV+ person and the stigma that comes with that.
 - The whole gallery in parliament was all in tears because of the emotions brought up. The public apology is an important first step – the beginning of the next phase, not the ending.

- Jim had discussions with Randy Boissenault and wanted to make sure in the public apology that there was mention made of gay men’s blood ban and organ donation policy and the over-criminalization of non-disclosure.
- “We have to keep moving forward. I believe that more than an apology is needed.”
- “A couple of things that stand out to me: I was really helped through that time by elders in my community and they have been through so much more than my generation. I really think that from a historical perspective that nobody forgets this. I will be advocating to have some sort of commemorative statue in Vimy Ridge Park where the first pride parade happened in Winnipeg. I would like to see the slogan – We Are The People of Your Gaybourhood – in there.”
- He was so glad it happened before his friend passed on. There are so many people who weren’t that fortunate.
- This is about building a legacy.
- When we grow older in this community, we sometimes get isolated. Jim works with Positive Spaces (a 55+ housing committee at Rainbow Resource Centre).
- He will make sure the government moves forward on the promises they’ve made. “We’ve accomplished a lot in the last few years.”
- In 1987 under NDP government and Liberal support, employment equality was granted through the legislative process in Manitoba. Clause 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms – everything since then has been because of that.
- **Brandy Pollard:** Brandy is a retired teacher, an advocated for transgender rights, mostly through education and public speaking.
 - The apology came across as misogynistic – very little mention of gay women or transgender people.
 - Being transgender in Canada is just coming to the limelight.
 - Brandy shared a story of someone she met in Montreal who grew up in a residential school as transgender and the troubles she went through when she came out to her priest. She was sent to a mental facility (an asylum, essentially). She was there from age 12 to the age of 23.
 - Back then, if you were transgender and refused to say what you were assumed to be, you were given a sentence without an end date. If you were gay or lesbian, police would do raids at bars. If you were caught there, you were sentenced. If you were transgender and caught there in a raid, your sentence did not have an end – you could be there until you died. You’d be subjected to electroshock therapy.
 - When she was five years old, a couple years earlier she had come out to her mom as a girl, she remembers watching a documentary as a kid about a New York mental hospital and saw a June Cleaver-like woman with a beard – she asked her mom about that – her mom said the man

thinks she's a woman. From there, Brandy assumed that if you identified as transgender, you'd be taken away and put in a place like that.

- Brandy has struggled with depression and suicidal thoughts most of her life, even from those preschool years.
 - Nothing is really said about transgender people in the apology or what they are apologizing to transgender people for.
 - "To me an apology is just words. They mean nothing unless there's some type of action or consequence to follow them up. Until such time that happens, this apology is more political talk."
- **Christopher Little-Gagné:** Christopher Little-Gagné was elected as the GLBT Rep at the PSAC Prairie Region Triennial Convention in April 2017. He has been involved with Public Service Alliance of Canada for eight years and is currently UNE RVP for Manitoba. In the past, he has served in various roles, including: ARVP UNE Manitoba; President of Local 50235; Vice-President of Local 50235; Human Rights Rep for Local 50235; and Chair of the Winnipeg Human Rights Committee. Outside of PSAC, he has been a member of Solidarity & Pride Committee for the Manitoba Federation of Labour. Christopher has worked for Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) for the past nine years. During that time, he has been Co-Chair on the National Policy Health & Safety Committee, Co-Chair on the Human Rights Sub Committee, and served as a facilitator for the Joint Learning Program. He is currently working on a department-wide training program for Positive Space Initiative.
- "It's interesting to sit here as a panelist with community elders are also speaking."
 - "I'm a public servant. Leading up to the apology, I've been an activist in the union to bring change from within. I started with my department. I was the only out person in 230 people. If I'm the only out person, how are we providing advice to clients effectively?" Christopher started leading diversity events in the workplace.
 - Leading up to the apology, his department wanted to celebrate what they're doing. There are communities and employees that haven't seen or been affected by Christopher's work and so he doesn't want anything celebrated until after the apology and an appropriate response can be formulated.
 - He watched the apology at work. It was a little showy, a little anticlimactic. He sighed through this. "It hit me as not sincere."
 - "You've come out with a lot of good things, said a lot of great things. But we've just spent eight years of government ads. What are you going to do to ensure that people are protected when government changes?"
 - "My union, PSAC, I don't feel safe a lot of the times even within my union. What are you going to do to change all that. I'm still waiting to see what happens. What can we hold our government to? What can I hold my union to to ensure our government does this? A lot of public servants have lived through this and were forced to live false lives. There are still

people who do hide because they don't want to lose their jobs. It may not happen as overtly as it used to, but people can be forced out of their jobs and there is still problems in the workplace. There's still a lot of work to do. I have a lot of hope and trust in the government to do what they're saying, but I'm still waiting to see the money behind the words, to see the action following the apology."

- **Annie Feldshmid:** Annie is an active member of Peer Project for Youth, Rainbow Resource Centre's youth group.
 - "My initial reaction to the apology ... I didn't know it was happening initially, but found out more from articles afterward, then dug up the video online. Their heart is in the right place with wanting to apologize and make amends, but the way the government is doing it is not by our standards, it's by their standards. They're recognizing the two-spirit piece and the effect colonization had on two-spirit individuals and how it erased cultures, but they're not recognizing misogyny and all the intersectionality."
 - "The apology is much, much too late. Many people who felt the hurt of the discrimination and having to live in fear did not live to see the apology. As someone who is young, I wasn't necessarily aware of the things that people before me were going through to get us to this point. It educated me on our history, but it did so on a level that was federal and country-wide – it gave LGBT2SQ youth across the country the opportunity to realize what really happened. You hear about the stories around the world, but we don't often know about our own Canadian queer history – which this apology helped bring to light. This enlightened me."
 - It is just an apology. They offered compensation to those who are still alive and have faced discrimination at their jobs, but without action, without fixing the abusive behaviour that the government has imposed on us as a community, the apology is pointless – it's just words. They could offer us things that we should feel entitled to, like healthcare for trans people, access to GSAs and resources. Federal government could put pressure on provincial governments for better services, such as better support for GSAs and homeless LGBT2SQ+ youth.
 - Action is what they really need to show us in order to make this worthwhile.
 - "I was really only aware of it because it was in the media."
- **Edmund Machona:** Edmund is an international student, he is an active member of new comers support group at Rainbow Resource Centre and he also represents QPOC.
 - "I wasn't aware and I didn't care. Before coming to Canada, I was in this country that had 80-90% unemployment – socially the country was not functioning, politically, it was a mess – when I finally turned 18, the only way to help myself, knowing I was a gay man, was to leave my country.

Canada, as my new home, branded itself as a welcoming place for newcomers, refugees, and immigrants. This is true.”

- “The rights that are awarded to us as people don’t come from gifts. The reason why most of us can sit here today is because we came in protest so *they* have given us our rights. It’s unreasonable to expect the government to do anything for us.”
 - “When I was watching the apology and talking about it, the general theme was disappointment – it was not enough, what are they going to do, it’s not satisfying. I disagreed – it was a good first step toward positive growth.”
 - “My only disappointment from the apology was that it didn’t really address the history of colonization and didn’t really address black and brown bodies and didn’t really address the experiences of people who are being oppressed and marginalized today. It was predominantly focused on lesbian women and gay men, we’re in the era of transgender rights and this was really not addressed.”
 - “It’s hard for people to see multiple identities in people. When they walk around within our community, you never really know how they are being addressed. I’ve had people I’ve been close to who have lost their jobs just because their employers didn’t think they were eloquent enough for their position. I know people who have been fired for not being white enough. This is the society we live in.”
 - “This is an important apology – there are people who have been hurt by the government in the past. The important thing that is missing is that there is no focus on what they’re not doing. There’s no focus on the hierarchies of oppression. A lot of trans people are lost in the conversations of LGBT rights. A lot of brown people are excluded. First Nations people are not included in these conversations.”
 - “I don’t believe in words. I believe in actions.”
 - “Until the lowest of the low in our society take the right to be equal – all of this doesn’t really matter. It’s great, yes, but the fundamental problem is that you should not approach a situation by trying to help someone, you should try to empower someone. The government needs to realize that yeah they can give money, but how can you empower people to let go of the traumatizing experience. How can you help them take the centre stage in empowering their own future?”
 - “I don’t want an apology from him. I want an apology from someone who has shared my experience. If I see a gay man apologizing on behalf of the government, I’d be more satisfied than I am now.”
- **Muhammad Ahsan**
 - “I was born in a country where being gay, lesbian, or bisexual was criminalized. I was hardly out to anyone when I moved to Canada.”
 - “I think Canada today is much different from the Canada of the past.”

- While there is a lot that needs to be done, from a newcomer's perspective, from someone who has seen the worst of the worst – we might not be doing the best job, but we are doing a good job.”
- “We need to recognize the work and struggle of those before us.”
- “A lot needs to be done, but we have come a long way.”
- **Open floor discussion**
 - **Person one:** “I’ve been an active and out person my whole life. We still live in a world where people are encouraged to come out and we applaud their courage, but those before us have not had that privilege. This affects everyone, even those who were straight – men who were put in compromising positions or involved in homophobia have committed suicide. We’ve got a long way to go in terms of gender stereotyping and the oppression of people, whatever the orientation of people, this has been affecting us for a long time. As out people, like it or not, people are going to come to us and say “can I talk to you?” and confide. This apology should be for everyone.”
 - **Albert McLeod:** In terms of the harm that happens to society, people don’t realize – those who don’t live full lives, those who don’t have family. People don’t recognize the gaps that are missing in their families and their communities as a result of homophobia. Those people *did* matter – just because you close the gap left by their loss, it doesn’t make things better, the pain is still there.
 - **Muhammad Ahsan:** Manitoba does not have gender expression as a protected category – one of only four provinces/territories in Canada.
 - **Person two:** “The apology didn’t go far enough for the trans community. Since the introduction of the trans bill a few months earlier, nothing has happened yet. We’re still denied jobs and made fun of. If we live somewhere, people make fun of us, humiliate us, try to make violent situations. It’s not safe for a trans person to be in a rooming area.”
 - **Brandy Pollard:** The apology comes from the federal government, but that’s them. They don’t really run our government. Underneath, we have mechanisms that run our government. With the Trudeau government, we have a good balance of people who hold portfolios – but governments come and go, but the underneath stays, and the underneath is still the old boys club. Until that is fixed/gone, nothing is going to get done. We need to hit hardest at the administration, not the government.
 - **Christopher Little-Gagné:** “I’m working at that boy’s club. I know what my privilege is and I’m trying to use that privilege to make change.” When we talk about change, right now we have a lot of trans activists in federal service who are working on change and safety in civil service. Most departments working on change, it

comes from the bottom up. It's by activist employees working within the workplace and within the system. "I'm being told from the top to keep it at the bottom, you don't need senior involvement – if you do have higher-ups involved, it's within a certain restrictive framework." Christopher has seen a lot of change happen, but there's still a lot more to do. As an LGBT community, we've done a lot of stepping on the backs of others – we need to link arms and lift each other up.

- **Person three:** "I feel excluded yet again from the apology. I'm not a federal employee – it was put in the public media to punch me in the face one more time. I'm going to say sorry to everyone who works for me, I sign their cheques. If I don't sign your cheque, it doesn't matter."
 - **Albert McLeod:** "I pressed for partnerships with non-government organizations who implemented homophobia to work on healing beyond government employees – that was not taken up by the government. Government picks and chooses their battles." There was no response from the big First Nations in response to this apology. The intent of the apology is to all Canadians, even if it was worded as addressing federal employees.
- **What needs to be done going forward?**
 - **Edmund Machona:** Using this apology to the civil servants to really address society as large and the community at large without commenting on culture. Culture is the biggest part. The way you change anyone's opinion is by changing how they live their lives, by changing their values slowly, by changing what happens. I approach things from the perspective of art. When people consume things that make them feel good and relate to other people and show similarities between communities – it bridges that gap and opens their community to something larger. It helps them realize their privilege and help them stand up for people who don't have that privilege. Politically there's too much money involved, too many people who want to benefit from the suffering of others. If Trudeau had simply apologized to me, he would not get re-elected. It would galvanize the conservative base. It is a blow in that the apology wasn't directed to me, but I can live with it because ultimately they're trying to do more for people like me. Going forward, the focus should be on our relationships with people. The focus, on my end, is really on relationships.
- **What's one action you want to see in the next few months?**
 - **Annie Feldshmid:** We can't give back anything to these people who have passed on and felt this terrible pain and had to hide themselves to keep their jobs – now that they've passed on we can't give anything back to them – we can give back to the people who have lived through it. Welcoming them into our community and embracing them is what we need to do. We have the obligation and duty to honour them. The

Canadian government has an obligation to provide better resources in schools to youth and make health care more accessible for trans individuals.

- **Jim Kane:** Identify gaps and move forward on them. We have to recognize the history. People who have passed on, we can't do anything for them, but we can recognize their history. Our movement didn't start with marriage equality, it started many, many years before that, and we have to respect that history. When we look at the history of our community, success comes from building allies and relationships. Two things we can get back soon – the blood ban and the over-criminalization of HIV non-disclosure – it was specifically mentioned in the apology and I won't let that go.
 - **Brandy Pollard:** What my elders couldn't do, we can do. We need to celebrate that. We need to work on more for our younger people. "What I really push for is to have the medical procedures listed as cosmetic for trans people listed as necessary for trans people because they are."
 - **Christopher Little-Gagné:** "The reason I do any of this – my son turns five this month, which is why I do this. My heart is always in fear that my son is going to be a part of hate and fear – I do this so when he grows up, he can be who he wants to be without any negative attacks."
- **Closing remarks from Muhammad Ahsan**