Hello again Scott, January 16, 2017

Since our meeting I have been thinking more about the points that you made as I do want to be on side with the plan. As much as I love the Mayor (I do think he is an awesome leader) I find the idea of renaming the Langevin bridge and placement of a plaque to be an inadequate and ill advised response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. I am concerned that it is an example of our ‘dominant society’ trying to do the right thing in the wrong way.

It was good to meet and hear about the city’s plans re reconciliation related to the TRC and rationale for the renaming of the 106 year old Langevin Bridge. It was interesting to hear the perspective of Mayor Nenshi. On the surface of it I have to say your proposal outlines a compelling way to address a major wrong against Canada’s indigenous population. I expect that most people would probably agree with the plan to rename the bridge if they have not had the opportunity to consider a more indepth understanding of the history of residential school policy.

Here’s why

* The TRC report was a compassionate and thorough review of the evolution and effects of the residential school policy. Nowhere in any of the TRC publications does it recommend the renaming of places as a means of righting the wrongs of the past. It does talk about commemoration, but not renaming. The commission, in its wisdom did not recommend this, because I suspect they recognized the precedent it sets and the risk of revisionist history. The TRC recommends commemoration and a view to the future, not erasing a name or place from the past.
* Hector Louis Langevin is certainly not the Stalin of the Residential School policy. (I say this in reference to the Memorial to the Ukrainian Holodomor which is placed in the grassy area on the north side of the Bow River and to the east of the old Langevin Bridge. Langevin was a politician, John A. Macdonald’s French Canadian Lieutenant , who held the ministry that was charged with directing the assimilation of Indian children. Education was seen to be the key to advancing their situation. Langevin’s role in policy related to the Indians was of short duration as compared to that of John A Macdonald who had direct involvement in policy and action over many years (1850’s to 1880’s). Langevin is quoted only once in the TRC report as compared to Macdonald’s five quotes.
* The language about “savages” in the quotes reflects the superior attitude that white people as an entire society had toward nonwhites and specifically to the Indians. These beliefs arose from the Doctrine of Discovery and later the Gradual Civilization Act, put forward by Macdonald in 1857 and which was one of the most significant pieces of legislation in the history of Indian policy. By today’s standards, this attitude and belief is not “right”, but it was part of the times. We must ask what can we learn from this, not only from the past but also the here and now.
* Discussion about the renaming of the historic Langevin Bridge to Reconciliation Bridge – to be a reminder as people walk southward into the downtown and the Drop In Centre ignores the harsh realities of what goes on under the bridge now - selling and use drugs, prostitution, cold, hunger, garbage, discarded clothing, broken bottles and other evidence of the degradation of human life. This is too often the experience of indigenous people who suffer the long term effects of the residential school policy.
* From my perspective the plan to rename the bridge holds some interesting parallels between treaty signing of the past and this initiative. A respectful dialogue with indigenous leaders resulting in a ceremony, a new sign on the bridge - “reconciliation bridge” and a plaque that tells the story. And then its back to regular life. Where is the plan for concrete action to address the conditions and situation of the vulnerable, often indigenous people who hang out under the Langevin bridges? There’s a significant disconnect here!
* There also does not seem to be any plan to increase the safety (real and perceived) of people who are walking and riding their bikes along the pathway under the two Langevin bridges. No other bridge underpass along the pathway system evokes such discomfort as this area – to be renamed Reconciliation Bridge.
* So often with efforts such as these, the devil is in the details. What will be said on the plaque? Will Hector Louis’ Langevin be “crucified” in a simplistic text? Or will the systemic beliefs of the late 1800’s be articulated – the role of the doctrine of discovery, the assimilation policy of the government – as well as the significant role of religious organizations in perpetrating the actual day to day abuses experienced by children in residential schools. What about the role of government underfunding for the education and care of indigenous children, something which continues to this very day. It is not a simple matter. Can we be sure that the plaque will be more than platitudes?
* I do not feel confident that the complexity of the history of residential schools has been adequately explored for this project. I question if historians of stature, such as Hugh Dempsey have been consulted in the development of recommendations and the writing of the city’s White Goose Flying report?
* The TRC has described the long term and deleterious effects of the Macdonald governments’ Indian policy. There can be no doubt about the harm that this caused to many generations of indigenous people. The intentions of city leaders to address this are commendable, but their actions must fully consider the historic context and seek to move forward in a new, positive and educational manner.

Sincerely,

Deb Lee

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