



We Suffer While They Sling

By Dr. Lorne Foster

While public discourse in Canada is now a rage with questions and recriminations about the Toronto Bluejays as “the Whitest baseball team,” and the Toronto Star as “the Whitest newspaper to ever do front-page story on the Whitest baseball team” – a variation, if you will, on White narcissism or “Who’s calling the kettle White?” – it is interesting that the United Nations has indirectly waded in on this national debate.

After nearly a decade ranked number one in terms of “quality-of-life” among all the countries in the world, Canada has unceremoniously plummeted to eighth place.

The United Nations Human Development Index first ranked Canada number one in 1992 (when, incidentally, Cito Gaston was the first Black manager of the Toronto Bluejays, and they won the World Series). It retained the top spot into the new millennium before dropping to third spot in 2001, behind Norway and Sweden. Canada fell another five spots in 2002, with the latest HDI rankings putting Canada below countries including Australia and the United States.

The UN index was developed in 1990, and takes stock of fundamental aspects of human development in rich and poor countries – include life expectancy, education, health, income, the environment and (Canada’s Achilles heel) poverty. Now in the 2003 report, Norway ranks first, followed by Iceland, Sweden, Australia, the Netherlands, Belgium and the United States.

The UN’s Human Development Report of 2003 on Canada’s “quality-of-life” free-fall is a reflection of the sociological data revealing increasing patterns of race-based discrimination in terms of access to education, jobs and resources, particularly impacting the living conditions and poverty levels of Canada’s aboriginal peoples and African Canadians.

This was also recently confirmed by Toronto Campaign 2000 - a group that studies poverty in Ontario and releases a report card each year – in a report documenting child poverty is at an all-time high in Toronto, and citing race as a primary intervening variable. Despite the economic boom, the study maintains that one in three children in the general population or 174,050 in Toronto are living in poverty, a rate that has increased by 14 per cent or by 21,800 since 1995. Moreover, much of the increase is located in the immigrant and Black communities. Over half Toronto Blacks under age 15 are poor, although they make up only 14 per cent of all children.

In this regard, poverty activist in Canada are coming to realize that economic growth is not enough to reduce poverty because resources are disproportionately distributed along racial lines. So, while food banks began to be conceived 20 years ago as temporary stop-gap measures in the good society, meant to pick up the slack just long enough for government to get its act together on institutional fairness, they have since become permanent fixtures and symbols of chronic poverty in Canada’s multi-racial landscape.

For Canada's aboriginal peoples, the problem of inequality and social disadvantage is longer lived. It emanates from the chronic and entrenched power imbalance created by an exploitative and oppressive colonial system that decimated their traditions and cultures, and has led today to a pervasive, stifling, deep-rooted and urbanized poverty that now impacts every UN Human Development indicator. So, for instance, whereas the UN acknowledges Canada still enjoys the distinction of the highest life-expectancy in the world (at 79), it is also owns the dubious distinction of an aboriginal population with a life expectancy that is 10 years less than the non-Native population.

Every relevant sociological study in Canada, since the advent of the UN's annual global "quality-of-life" rankings, has demonstrated the substantial and increasing inequality of Aboriginal peoples and Blacks in the labour market, characterized by: (1) unemployment rates at twice the level of the general population; (2) limited in access to jobs; and (3) even more limited access for those with university educations to jobs that match their qualifications.

The fact of the matter is, all the current sociological data reveals that the popular public discourse in Toronto on "the Whitest baseball team" and "the Whitest mainstream newspaper," is applicable throughout the corporate workplace. The upper and middle management of *any* corporate or institutional structure in this society is a virtual portrait of Whiteness.

The real tragedy is, while professional baseball teams and major media organizations and other corporations and institutions in Canada go around pointing fingers at each other and hurling recriminations about who is the worst offender – "mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the Whitest of them all" – Aboriginal and Black children are left to suffer the narcissistic consequences.