

How do bad things happen  
when good people have good intentions?

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My remarks today are those of an historian within the context of research done over the last decade on the Canadian federal government's Indian residential school system and its child welfare program -- both of which fall exactly within the boundaries of our topic here: why in both these areas do we encounter the shocking mix of good people, good intentions and tragically deplorable results for Aboriginal children, families and communities?

Given our time constraints, I want to make a number of summary observations, without suggesting any rank of importance, nor that these characteristics are elements of our past only. Some, as you will not doubt recognize, remain thoughtless habits and practices within social welfare and planning systems generally.

1] Good people with good intentions who can make things happen are historically middle class and white. They often talk at but rarely listen to people outside their class. Their "good" then rarely fits the needs of those who have been forced to endure it.

2] and a corollary: The "good" that is to be one is a construction of the culture, and values of those with good intentions and it acts upon subjects who are, more often than not, of a different class, ethnicity, race or gender. The good intentions, further than being well-meaning, are normally undertaken with a sense of rightness which makes them presumptuous, triumphalist and almost always catastrophic.

3] The "good," whatever the policy may have been, was often expressed as "good for them" so that the immediate pain caused by well-intentioned policies such as the removal of children from parents and community or the attempt to suppress their language and culture to fit them for employment in the dominant society, is characterized as no more than a necessary evil -- something akin to the nasty taste of cough medicine which, after all, will cure what is really sore. Unfortunately, as we all know, such policies have not only left a bad taste in all our mouths, but they made the recipient ill, inflicted long-term damage on individuals and on communities.

4] Good people, middle class though they may be, are not powerful people, they do not run the world. And the powerful people who do are rarely good intentioned when it comes to developing or fulfilling policies directed to the disadvantaged -- such people after all have very little political capital. The powerful are, to be precise, hypocritical -- that is there is considerable space between their rhetoric and the reality of their actions. A single example will suffice. Despite the egalitarian vision of Canada's welfare state, and accompanying the rhetoric that told us and still does that children are our future, that the reality etched in annual funding indicates that only some 10% of annual provincial welfare budgets was devoted to child welfare. This meant not only under-funded children's programs but welfare departments and Children's Aid Societies with few adequately trained staff, unable to keep up with the burgeoning responsibilities the state assigned to them.

5] The people with good intentions dreamed of human betterment. The politicians with whom they had to work, and who decided policy and funding, wanted the system to promote safety. They wanted the normalization of the potentially deviant – the poor, the Indians, the ethnics, the workers and the women. Politicians could live with child welfare that meant child removal and educational differentials that promoted the well-being the children of the already well-off as long as those policies neutralized any troubling critique of the foundations of power being the inequalities which are the natural products of industrial capitalism and state socialism as we have known them. In the main those policies have achieved the desired end and the political class are well satisfied – though at election time they will tell you they are not, that they are good too and well-intentioned but that the money needs to be spent on Afghanistan and new helicopters and tax relief for corporations and so the really good people will have to wait only a little bit longer. And, of course, the really good people having little power will have no choice but to wait.

6] Good people with good intentions have been in the main, historically, women. Department of Indian Affairs social workers, CAS workers, First Nations homemakers and mothers and grandmothers were the federal child welfare system. Their “good intentions” were directed at other women and children and thus we had the most vulnerable under the care of the least influential as the Department and government were overwhelmingly male. We have had only two female Cabinet Ministers in charge of Indian affairs and one long-serving Aboriginal woman in government who never has been.

6] Good people push forward with good intentions when those good intentions are not adequately funded, and they very rarely are. Doing “good” poorly is apparently better than doing nothing well – and so hangs the tale of the residential school system and the child welfare system, too, which could only ever afford child protection, removal of children from their families, rather than prevention activity, building up families. Those good people constantly lobbied for better funding but rarely made any structural critiques and thus they became fellow travelers of a system they did not approve of and earned the ill-feeling of those to whom they delivered second-class service.

7] The village that it takes to raise a child, especially those that are Aboriginal ones, have not been supported, or developed, so that they can be, in and of themselves, places of child welfare: with adequate employment, nourishing systems of education appropriate to a peoples’ beliefs and values and supportive of their identity, and with systems of self-government that allow people, together, to make their way forward, together, in a difficult world. The result of that failure to cherish Aboriginal families in the larger Canadian family has been disastrous. In the 1970s, some 10% of Status Indian children under 16 were in care compared to 1% of non-Aboriginal children. You could produce an even smaller non-Aboriginal number if you counted only the non-Aboriginal children removed from the village of Rosedale. Good people with good intentions know all of that and they know why it is and they know that it continues.

8] Good people with good intentions will try again, will live in hope and are the only hope we have.