

THE FREE PRESS OPINION

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Mercredi says farewell to Canadian roots

There are many obstacles to bringing Canada's aboriginal people into full and, most importantly, meaningful citizenship. There is misinformation on both sides, with a recent public opinion poll showing many Canadians believe that natives living on reserves have a high standard of living. Natives, in turn, seem to be of the opinion most Canadians would be happy to create some new form of homelands for aboriginals. The truth, of course, lies somewhere in between. Canadians want an end to the land claims debate, while natives would like to be accepted for who they are. And, as often happens, it's politicians who help to create the uncertainty that pervades our nation's psyche.

In this instance, though, it is Ovide Mercredi that is causing the problems.

As leader of the Assembly of First Nations, Mr. Mercredi is one of the most quoted native leaders in the country and, to be fair, one of the most eloquent. However, Mr. Mercredi is not really a leader — think of him as the governor-general, but with less power. He can't sign treaties or commit the individual bands to any course of action. He can only talk.

And while he is quite good at that, his words do little to soothe.

The latest pronouncement from Mr. Mercredi is a call for sovereignty for natives in Canada. That's fine, if that's the desire of the people Mr. Mercredi purportedly represents.

But he should be aware that the same rules would apply to sovereign native nations as would apply to an independent Quebec — you're on your own.

If you want to be sovereign and independent, you'll have to take care of yourself. No money from the feds, none of the benefits of being Canadian.

If that's what you want, all the best.

If that's not what the aboriginal community wants, they should find a way to keep Mr. Mercredi from talking.

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Butt out of businesses

Toronto the pure and just, home to the remainder of the Puritans, is telling restaurant and bar owners how to operate their businesses. Not content to be leaders of the duller city in the country, they are now guardians of everyone's social conscience. The same city council that didn't want the Barenaked Ladies to perform on New Year's Eve (the name is sexist, they argued) has now decreed there will be no smoking anywhere in the city. And this experiment in social planning is slowly spreading across the country.

Victoria, Vancouver and, yes, Prince George are trying to tell people how to run their business that they have started with their own money, hard work and guts. A bunch of politicians want to regulate what you can and can't do with your facility.

This is not a question of smokers' rights. It's not a question of non-smokers' rights. It's a question of what's fair to the entrepreneurs who

have that right. If they decide to open a place that is non-smoking, that's also their choice.

The do-gooders who would ban smoking from the planet are missing the point when it comes to restaurants and bars — people have a choice whether they enter the premises. It's not like public buildings or city hall, where second-hand smoke is a legitimate worry (though, in Prince George, the air quality is of more immediate concern); this is a place where customers choose to go. If they don't like the smoke, the music or the food they don't have to go there. It's really quite simple.

But the politicians who want to be seen as progressive and looking out for the best interests of the public don't grasp the basic rule of business: the customer is always right. If they want to smoke let them. If enough people agree with the politicians, the bar and restaurant owners will change their policy. However, as anyone who has been to Sgt. O's on Friday night, the people want to smoke.

It seems that the people are only right, in the minds of certain politicians, when it agrees with their Puritan vision of righteousness.



RUMOUR MILLS

Shane Mills

create jobs and pay taxes.

If they choose to open up a business, to take the risks associated with small business, they deserve to run the place they want. If they want to open a pub that caters to those who smoke and drink, they should