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► **Opinion • Commentary**

OPINION

Indigenous sports mascots reflect larger racism problem

By **Kate Kempton**
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The debate, in this newspaper and elsewhere, over whether sports teams should be banned from adopting the imagery and names of indigenous peoples is a strange one. Why the debate? The practice is discriminatory. It debases dignity. It renders into cartoon images the identities of entire nations, stealing their names or replacing them with demeaning ones.

And what's the counter-argument? That fans of the Washington Redskins, Cleveland Indians and Chicago Blackhawks — and all the minor Canadian sports teams that follow their lead — are attached to these names and mascots? Boo-hoo.

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Brad Gallant has launched a human rights case against the City of Mississauga for giving discounted ice time and free advertising to teams with "offensive" names and logos. (VINCE TALOTTA / TORONTO STAR)

Maybe this wouldn't matter (as much) if in Canada today, Parliament Hill was joined by a bridge to another hill atop which sat First Nations Government House, and the laws of the latter were as respected and enforced as of the former; if the basic necessities of life like safe drinking water and heated housing were even half as much available to First Nations as they are to the rest of us; where suicide rates among the aboriginal youth population were not 600 per cent higher than for other youth.

But we don't live in that Canada. We live in a Canada that was built on dispossession of and impositions on indigenous peoples; where the privilege, granted by First Peoples to the Crown through treaties, to share in the use of land and resources, was turned into a "conquest" by all means other than legal — amounting to cultural rape. And this long sad history is one still being written today. It is in this context that images and names that perpetuate this story should be understood.

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These teams' appropriations amount to another form of both imposition and dispossession: like a bully who calls his prey a name, then steals his shoes, pisses on them and hangs them up for all to see. It is a stark in-your-face representation of the bullying against peoples that has gone on for far too long. These team names and logos send the message that it is OK to treat indigenous peoples as cartoons or mascots, as less than fully human.

Yes, indigenous peoples have come a long way from the days in which they were denied the vote. It is true that governmental authorities in Canada no longer snatch indigenous children from their families' grasps and force them into residential schools. Those atrocities ended a mere few decades ago. But their effects, as with the effects of institutionalized theft of land and culture — and dignity — remain a sodden cloud over this country today. Why must we compound the harm? The defence of these team names and logos is the opposite of reconciliation.

Chris Rock's message at the Oscars last Sunday rings true for any kind of racism or other awful-ism. He confronted the question of why there was so much outrage this year over the total lack of black nominees, when in almost all the Oscars' 88-year history, the ballots were also devoid of "black ink." He pointed out that back in the '50s and '60s, people of colour were fighting far more serious forms of racism — something as "trivial" as the blinding white of the Oscars hardly made a blip on anyone's radar. Yet, he said, just because there were far more overt and outrageous acts of racism back then, does not justify acts of racism in any form today. If Hollywood, that bastion of liberal ideals, with the power to effect great influence through words and pictures, stops caring, what message does that send? Let's be happy with partial equality, proportional dignity, fractional access to opportunity?

The same applies to sports teams — that bastion of much we idolize today in Canada, with the power to speak to and influence how so many of us, especially our youth, think and behave. In Mississauga, a man named Brad Gallant understands this. He, with the help of my law firm, is appealing to the Human Rights Commission to right the wrong of misappropriated indigenous images and names used in minor hockey in his hometown. It's a small example but no small matter. If we as a society stop working to right a central injustice that still exists today, one on which Canada was founded, then we find ourselves not building a better future on that Parliament Hill, but rolling down it.

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Kate Kempton is a partner at Olthuis Kleeer Townshend LLP, a law firm working for indigenous peoples and persons across Canada

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