



More fur hats, aboriginal correctional facilities, and world urbanization

by Catherine Morrison

Update: muskrat hats. Seems that muskrat hats are not so uninteresting as the City of Edmonton wished me to believe – as I reported last month in this column. And when Gerber Enterprises of Canada, one of the biggest manufacturers of these hats in Canada, failed to get back to me as promised, my suspicions started to solidify around the potential for controversy.

As it turns out, the wearing of muskrat hats, a winter tradition with the Mounties since 1933, is under attack by animal rights activists. Late in September, the BC-based Fur-Bearer Defenders distributed video images across Canada showing muskrats struggling underwater in leg-hold traps, according to the *Ottawa Citizen*. A spokesperson for the group was quoted as saying that two to three skins are used to make each hat. That makes for a substantial number of muskrats, given that Gerber enterprises alone manufactures 50,000 muskrat hats a year.

The RCMP is not insensitive on this issue, however. According to the *Citizen* article, the Force is in the process of “testing alternative materials for the hats.” But as anyone will tell you whoever wore a hand-me-down fur coat, nothing beats fur for warmth in a Canadian winter.

A few days after the *Citizen* article, the paper ran an editorial on the “fur flap” taking the side of our law enforcement officers, who spend a lot of time on patrol in -30°C conditions. The editorial goes on to opine: “Some people think muskrats are cute and need to be protected. Actually they are a rural rodent found in marshes across Canada, as common as squirrels in Ottawa.” And, furthermore, what about those who earn their livelihood trapping fur-bearing animals, many of whom, the *Citizen* points out, are Aboriginal?

An interesting area of acquisition that some of Canada’s aboriginal peoples are currently contemplating is the District First Nations (Fort Frances, Ontario) lobby of the provincial government for the right to establish a native-run aboriginal correctional service for young offenders. Following the province’s precedent of contracting out correctional services to private companies, the bands would similarly contract out the running of their service to correctional professionals. The difference would be that as the contractor, the Fort Frances First Nations would determine how the service would be run.

Chief Chuck McPherson, in a recent CBC radio interview, explains that the current system is “just warehousing – incarceration with no rehabilitation.” The First Nations want to reclaim their young people who wind up in jail, so they can become assets to their communities. To do this, according to the chief, a correctional environment needs to be rehabilitative, with a culture-specific orientation. It needs to be in the community, so family and community members can participate in the rehabilitation. At the moment, in Ontario facilities, he says, rehabilitation seems to involve activities like “watching re-runs of Gilligan’s Island,” of little value, in his way of thinking, in rehabilitating young people of aboriginal background.

What the Fort Frances First Nations want appears to be a creative extension of what is already a trend within the federal correctional services system. There have recently been a number of tenders posted by Correctional Service Canada for Aboriginal Elder Services, specifically for the provision of teachings and ceremonies such as sweetgrass, fasts, pipe ceremonies, healing circles, sweat lodges and smudges.

My last item concerns Canada taking to the world stage in 2006 to host, in Vancouver, the United Nations-sponsored, third World Urban Forum (WUF). The first WUF, held in Nairobi in 2002, brought together local, regional and national governments, as well as UN agencies, and representatives from the private sector and civil society. Discussion focused on solving issues of sustainable urbanization.

A media release for the second WUF, being held in Barcelona in 2004, calls sustainable urbanization “the main challenge of the new millennium – our planets’ transition to an urban world.”

Anna Tibaijuka, executive director for the UN Human Settlements Programme, Habitat, told the 2002 forum: “In 1950, two thirds of all the people lived in the countryside. By 2050, two-thirds of all people will be at home in the city.” As this urbanization trend accelerates, so will urban poverty, environmental degradation, social unrest and a host of other concerns, unless world attention is galvanized around the challenge.

According to the posting on MERX, “Canada will provide intellectual leadership to enrich the process leading to WUF 2006 by engaging national and international partner networks to illuminate and resolve challenges of sustainable global urbanization.”

This is big. The required logistics support staggers the imagination. So far a consultant has been retained to travel across Canada and abroad to drum up support and interest in the event. Dr. Peter Oberlander, of Vancouver, an expert on the UN and the history of WUF, will also advise Western Economic Diversification on the preparation of Memoranda to Cabinet related to the forum. ♪

Catherine Morrison, a writer based in Chelsea, Quebec, has been published in the Ottawa Citizen and the Globe and Mail’s print and online editions, as well as in Canadian Consumer, Asia Pacific Magazine, the Edmonton Journal and C.A.R.P. Magazine. She was a full-time writer/broadcaster for CBC Network Television and CBC TV and Radio, Winnipeg and a contributing editor and columnist for Winnipeg Magazine.

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