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'Foundation of truth' needed for race relations
By Maurice Vellacott

Following is the opinion of the writer, the Conservative Member of Parliament for Saskatoon-Wanuskewin.

I write in respect to Randy Burton's column, Hard to imagine worse choice than Vellacott (SP, April 20), about me.

Actually, I've read a fair bit on First Nations history and the intent of the treaties. Reading the history of treaty-making is mandatory to understanding the obligations we have.

I've slowly driven around the Saskatoon Queen Elizabeth power station, and the city landfill a number of times in order to reconstruct the events of the night when Darrell Night was dropped off, so I do know the geography of that area.

More importantly, I know where he was dropped off, on the edge of Montgomery where the tracks turn to the east.

Burton unintentionally exposed the point I've been emphasizing when he wrote "the core of the case against" Dan Hatchen and Ken Munson was "the debate over whether the police had a habit of dropping Native people outside of town."

Unproved innuendo should not form the core of any case in a Canadian court of law. Let's be clear. Dropping off Night 15 minutes from where he said he lived was wrong and the officers have acknowledged such. The public should know that two other young policemen were under suspicion when Munson and Hatchen stepped forward because they were not prepared to allow someone else to be blamed for what, by then, they realized might be an incident they had faced.

To his credit, former police chief Dave Scott was going to take appropriate disciplinary action before the issue became highly racialized and then politicized by being taken out of his hands by the provincial justice minister.

Without doubt, there should have been serious enough consequences to deter this from happening to aboriginals or non-aboriginals. However, the punishment should fit the offence. The media and others demanded "a pound of flesh," then through a process of error in facts and error in legal procedure, the judge found the scapegoat, and many went to bed thinking we had improved race relations in Saskatoon.

Unfortunately the recently released Saskatoon Police Survey reflected that race relations had not improved. One can't improve race relations on a foundation of falsehood. Relations have a better chance of improving when built on a foundation of truth. Night denied Munson and Hatchen a sentencing circle where Night would have had the good counsel of First Nations elders.

After serving honourably as police officers for many years and having good relations with aboriginals, Munson and Hachen had their careers destroyed and served jail time, including an incident where one of them was spared from a plot against his life. They are not bondable, struggled to find employment and are being sued by Night for a million dollars they don't have. Punishment was not proportionate to the offence.

In response to other remarks by Burton, I should have pressed provincial Justice Minister Frank Quennell to have the Ontario Provincial Police or some major city police force reinvestigate the new information. Objective-minded people acknowledge that it doesn't work, nor is it even fair to the RCMP, to ask that force, in effect to investigate itself.

Burton is wrong to say that the rent receipts showed that the relative, Lorna Night, had never lived near where Night was dropped off. The RCMP showed me the rent receipts that, in fact, proved that she had lived in Clancy Village where Night asked to be dropped off, but for the months in question -- strangely -- there was a gap of receipts.

So the best we can say about the RCMP reinvestigation, in this regard, is that it was inconclusive. Possibly if the RCMP had been more diligent in checking out Saskatoon city police incident reports, they would have established that Night had frequented Clancy Village apartments.

On the unrelated issue of what caused the tragic freezing deaths of Rodney Naistus and Lawrence Wegner, if Burton has made up his mind that Saskatoon city police did it, an alternative possibility won't do. While contemplating other possibilities during a conversation with a Globe and Mail reporter, I referred to a temporary, ramshackle, fragile shelter in the vicinity of the Queen Elizabeth power plant, which was a party place and littered with drug syringes, condoms and booze bottles.

I don't recall referring to it as a "shack" (and that was certainly not my intent) but after hearing it referred to as a "shack" by a number of media outlets who parroted Burton, I was expecting next to see it referred to as a condominium and eventually as a five-star hotel.

I've since had this ramshackle shelter's existence confirmed by a former high-ranking police officer who does not feel at liberty to speak publicly on the matter at this time. I'm told it may have been loosely thrown together from materials at the nearby city dump. Burton referred to it as a "shack" because he read that in the Globe and Mail. Burton should know by now not to believe everything he reads in the newspapers.

We can improve race relations in the city of Saskatoon, but it will require a foundation of truth!