

## **Truth, Lies and History: John Furlong and Canadian Sport's Moral Vacuum**

*By Laura Robinson*

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In the fall of 2009, just months before the Vancouver Olympics, I was in downtown Vancouver enjoying the work of First Nation artists and cultural performers. During a break I asked if the dancers would be performing at Vancouver's Cultural Olympiad. "No way", was the quick answer. "We booked our own gigs for that time. We're not dancing at the Olympics." I was struck by the immediate negative answer. The conversations I would have that afternoon changed my life as a journalist forever.

I asked the visual artists too--Would their art be available through the "Authentic Aboriginal Art" programme set up by VANOC? I could not find one cultural worker who had agreed to be part of the Vancouver Olympics. When I asked why, the answer was simple - First Nation artists would be required to sign a contract that gave VANOC and the IOC sole intellectual and cultural property rights in perpetuity to the art they created for the Olympics. If a drummer created a new song for an Olympic function, VANOC and the IOC would own the song and the recording of it forever. If an artist sold a painting to VANOC, they could reprint the design on t-shirts made in China, Bangladesh, Haiti and India and label them "Authentic Aboriginal Design." No one was going for that. Then, when I finished interviewing, one artist said "Hey, if you want a *real* story find out about John Furlong. He came from Ireland and taught at a residential school." I thought I had heard him incorrectly. "Residential school?"

The residential school system in Canada was an agreement between churches and the federal government for over 100 years that removed 150,000 Aboriginal children from their

families, culture, language and traditions and tried to make them into good, 'white' second-class Christian citizens. The legacy is now the subject of a five-year Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Atrocities of sexual, psychological and physical abuse were commonplace, including many documented in the Prince George Catholic Diocese of Northern B.C., where I later discovered Furlong had taught.

The U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Dr. James Anaya recently was in Canada to report on the treatment of First Nations people. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) reported on October 15, 2013 his observations; "From all I have learned, I can only conclude that Canada faces a crisis when it comes to the situation of indigenous peoples of the country." Much of that crisis stems from racist practices that put residential schools in place, the justice system's blindness to crimes against First Nations people, and the unwillingness of institutions within Canada, which includes the institution of organized sport, to learn our own history. First Nations people, are vastly underserved in the Canadian sport system, and can also be trotted out to dance and drum at ceremonies and then virtually forgotten about.

How could someone who worked within a system based so deeply on racist notions become the CEO of VANOC and host an Olympic Games? I was assured the information was correct and that the school was in Northern B.C., but in the fall of 2009 I honestly could not believe what I was being told was true.

***Games Bid:***

In order to host the Olympics VANOC partnered with the four First Nations - Squamish, Lil'wat, Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh - on whose traditional lands the games would take place. The IOC was not interested in awarding the Games without a partnership because of the strong possibility of protests. Virtually all of the land had been claimed by the various First Nations who had not ceded their land in a treaty process with the Crown. Given the history of abuse of First Nation children in residential schools, however, it is impossible to imagine partnerships could have been formed if Furlong's history had been known.

### ***Background***

I have covered Aboriginal issues in Canada since 1990, and started investigating all forms of abuse in residential schools in 1999. More recently we have come to understand that the day schools First Nation children attended also had numerous abusers, in fact very often the staff at residential and day schools were interchangeable. When it became apparent that an abuser's actions were simply too obscene to be protected, they were sent to a new school and a new group of children. The practice of forcing Indigenous children into this nightmare for over one hundred years has cast the ugliest of shadows. On October 14, 2013, Bernie Farber, former president of the Canadian Jewish Congress and former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Phil Fontaine, published part of their letter to Dr. Anaya in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper;

*It is our conviction that Canada's history with First Nations people was not just dark and brutal, but in fact constituted a "genocide" as defined by the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide. Unresolved issues regarding genocide can have the effect of holding back real progress in economic development in any community. Genocides rarely emerge fully formed from the womb of evil. They typically evolve in a stepwise fashion over time, as one crime leads to another and another....the entire residential school system also passes the genocide test, in particular if you*

*consider the fact that the Department of Indian Affairs, headed by Duncan Campbell Scott, deliberately ignored the recommendations of Peter Bryce, Canada's first Chief Medical Officer, regarding the spread of tuberculosis in the schools. Such willful disregard for the basic principles of public health constitutes an act of genocide by omission, if not deliberate commission....Our conviction is that Canadian policy over more than 100 years can be defined as a genocide of First Nations under the 1948 UN Genocide Convention....*

*We hold that until Canada as represented by its government engages in a national conversation about our historical treatment of the First Nations; until we come to grips with the fact that we used racism, bigotry and discrimination as a tool to not only assimilate First Nations into the Canadian polity, but engaged in a deliberate policy of genocide both cultural and physical; we will never heal.*

### ***Patriot Hearts***

The unpacking of the John Furlong story, for me, started in February 2011 after the Vancouver Olympics when I reviewed John Furlong's newly published book, "*Patriot Hearts: Inside The Olympics That Changed A Country*". In it he wrote:

*A recruiter from a high school in Prince George, British Columbia, had come to Dublin in search of someone to set up an athletic program. I was a young teacher with just two year's experience....I decided to take the position, thinking I would return to Ireland in a few years. It was a fall day in 1974 when my wife and I bundled up our son and daughter and boarded a plane to Canada.*

I attended high-school in Canada in 1974. We didn't have athletic directors - we had physical education department heads, who had an Honours Bachelor Degree and years of teaching experience. Furlong also wrote that he had previously played on Ireland's national basketball and handball teams, played Gaelic football for Dublin, and coached the national women's basketball team. How could anyone have done all this by age twenty-three? But two other questions were even more troubling.

Why did a Prince George high-school look to Ireland to find a physical education teacher? Secondly, why did Furlong not mention the name of the school? An on-line "Olympic

CV” of Furlong’s does not list any of this, and when I asked Rusty Goepel, the chair of VANOC who oversaw hiring if he had ever seen Furlong’s CV, he couldn’t remember seeing one. Goepel admitted he couldn’t remember if he ever saw Furlong’s CV. ‘But it wouldn’t be like I asked him....There was nothing we did wrong in our hiring process. You’re describing a totally different, alien person than I know.’”

Research showed just one Catholic high-school in Prince George - Prince George College -founded by Bishop O’Grady. First Nation young people, from grade 8 to 12 were taken from their families from a diocese totaling 346,000 square kilometres reaching to the Pacific Ocean and the Yukon border. Bishop O’Grady also established a missionary group - the Frontier Apostles (FA’s) - to teach Catholic virtues to First Nation children. Many FA’s came from Ireland because of the Bishop’s strong ties. In various interviews the Bishop described the students as “little Indians” or “half-breeds.” On the FA’s Facebook site someone had posted hundreds of yearbook photos, including photos of Coach J. Furlong.

I queried Furlong’s publisher. “Was it Prince George College he taught at and was he a Frontier Apostle missionary?” “Yes, Mr. Furlong ran the athletic program at Prince George College”, but nothing was said about his missionary position. I kept asking. They told me Furlong was unavailable for interviews. Over two weeks later the answer arrived. Furlong did not “have anything further to say.”

In April 2011, I wrote “Sins of Omission” for Play the Game. At that time one person alluded to his abuse of children but gave no proof. The article was mainly about his secret past as a Catholic missionary in a residential school and his role as CEO of VANOC. It wasn’t until March 2012 that, having read the article, another First Nation person contacted me with more

information. After a number of phone calls to the Indian Residential School Survivor Society and to others, all of whom spoke very emotionally about the abuse they said they endured from Furlong, I headed to Northern B.C. where many more told similar stories. Some had him at the residential school in Prince George; most had him as a gym teacher and de facto disciplinarian as children in Immaculata elementary school in the remote village of Burns Lake.

The children ran away from the school - from Furlong and other authority figures who they say abused them. But the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) brought them back. One of Furlong's former students, Paul Joseph, described to me how the police dealt with students. He said they did not believe the children and returned them to their abusers who abused them again for "lying to the police." Joseph's story was corroborated by other students. I wrote the story for Canada's oldest alternative newspaper, the Georgia Straight, a weekly that started during the Vietnam war protests.

The story broke on September. 26, 2012 (<http://www.straight.com/news/john-furlong-biography-omits-secret-past-burns-lake>) . Furlong followed with a packed press conference three hours later, where he denied absolutely everything, denounced me as a "reckless" reporter with a "shocking lack of due diligence." He side-stepped around the fact that in hundreds of interviews and in his book, he said he arrived in Canada in 1974 as an athletic director at a city high-school, when in fact he dropped out of his Irish high-school, arrived in 1969 as a Catholic missionary and taught gym in a village elementary school. Once the story broke, more students and one of Furlong's ex-wives contacted me.

While the Catholic schools within the Prince George Diocese used a variety of methods to punish children, what allegedly happened in the gym was particularly troubling for girls. They

were supposed to wear shorts, which made them feel vulnerable and exposed. Beverly Abraham, and Grace Jessie West (Immaculata School) and Audrey George (Prince George College) have filed lawsuits alleging Furlong sexually abused them after keeping them in the gym, allowing the other children to leave. Abraham also alleges that Furlong waited by the girl's washroom, making her even more afraid of him, an allegation backed up by other former students. After Abraham and West sued Furlong for sexual abuse in July 2013, a male former student followed suit, alleging Furlong had forced him to fondle him and then raped him as a nine-year-old boy. Furlong has denied all of the allegations and says the RCMP have found no evidence to support the first sexual abuse claim. To date dozens of former students of Furlong have either signed affidavits or on-the-record statements about his physical, psychological and racial abuse. His second wife, who was common-law and legally changed her name to Furlong, filed a multi-page statement about his physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Women who had been girls in Hostel #2 where Furlong was a hostel supervisor along with his first wife, Margaret, gave on-the-record statements about his frequent physical abuse of her. Other students made on-the-record statements saying the girls from Hostel #2 used to tell them about the beatings.

Furlong filed his Statement of Claim against me and the Georgia Straight on November 28, 2012. We followed with our Responses in January 2013. By then the amount of people who alleged abuse was overwhelming. My January 18 Response included eighteen witnesses who described Furlong's abuse of children, references to at least five other students who the witnesses say regularly were abused by Furlong, and four witnesses who made statements about his violence towards his first wife Margaret Furlong and/or his second wife Dayle Furlong. There are many others who chose to stay off-the-record, but corroborated what the witnesses wrote. Each time I go back to Northern B.C. there is at least one more witness

waiting to speak with me. There was a groundswell of voices, but also a groundswell of pain.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the norm, not only for Furlong's former students, who were not able to watch the lead up to the Olympics or the games themselves for fear of seeing him on TV, but for many other survivors of residential school who were reminded of the person who abused them as they watched Furlong deny everything.

The time period after a victim discloses abuse is one of the most dangerous. They are more likely to try to commit suicide or other acts of violence to themselves and possibly others. Memories, flashbacks, physical pain, terror, anxiety and nightmares haunt them. Most of the students had gone for years of counseling; working to try to put behind them the haunting years they endured in school. For years many had not touched drugs or alcohol as they progressed in their healing journey, but each day in a First Nation community is difficult. Death is a constant as suicides are six times higher than the national average; fatal accidents, poverty, homelessness, unemployment and violence measure at levels way beyond the non-Native population. First Nations people felt alone and abandoned as the powerful in the sport, corporate and governments lined up behind Furlong.

The government funded organization Own The Podium that strives to put Canadian athletes on the Olympic podium and is chaired by Furlong, issued the following statement after the story broke.

*'There will be no change to John's position as chairman of Own The Podium. Own The Podium considers John a man with the utmost integrity and ethical behaviour.*

*He is the leader of our organization and has Own The Podium's complete and full support through this difficult time."*

In the fall of 2012, I asked Own The Podium how they came to this conclusion? Did they go to Northern B.C, meet with the students and determine they were not telling the truth? Did they conduct phone interviews and realize they were lying? Did they hold an emergency board



meeting to come up with the statement? Own The Podium refused to answer. A year later, in October 13, I asked each of Own The Podium's board of directors if they still stood behind the above quote and how they came to believe the quote was accurate? By then Furlong was facing three sexual abuse lawsuits. Very few responded to my emails. If they did, they simply referred me to Chris Dornan, their media relations coordinator, who confirmed that nothing had changed for the board—they backed Furlong completely.

I followed suit with the other boards on which Furlong sits—Canadian Tire, Whistler-Blackcomb Holdings, Rocky Mountaineer (where he is chair) and Whitecaps FC professional soccer team (executive chair). Duncan Fulton of Canadian Tire wrote back saying Furlong is “an active and valued member” of their board, and that “John has been an exceptional addition to the Board.”

The Whitecaps FC responded saying because the matter was before the courts they had no comment. No one from Rocky Mountaineer or Whistler-Blackcomb responded, though I received messages over three days that my messages were in some kind of holding pattern and I needn't re-send, but in the end, all appeared to be rejected by the internet server.

After this I sent a query to the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, the organization that is funded through government to clean up sport after the Ben Johnson scandal. They make this “promise” to Canada:

*The Centre is entitled to speak out on ethical issues in sport because it has proven itself as a protector of the values that were shaken by the Ben Johnson positive drug test....Sport holds a special place in the Canadian psyche. As such, sport helps to create the ties that bind civic society together. Sport in Canada is a source of community spirit for Canadians of all ages, a bridge between cultures, a common language of hope. However, sport's very ubiquity can create a sense of complacency: a sense that sport is big enough and tough enough to look after itself. Our task is to challenge those assumptions. our task is to pique our national sporting conscience to identify the values and vulnerability inherent in sport. Such is the broad responsibility that the CCES undertakes."*

I asked CCES why, given their commitment to ethics in sport, they did not initiate an independent inquiry into the hiring of Furlong and provide a forum for the ex-students to tell their stories in a safe place, much like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has done. *The* organization in Canada whose mandate it is to “speak out on ethical issues in sport” had stayed utterly silent. On October 29, I received an email from them saying they could not, under their mandate, initiate an inquiry, especially about something that happened forty years ago, and that Furlong had vehemently protested none of these things had happened.

*Plus ca Change:*

To mark the 2010 Winter Olympics, the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre mounted the exhibit “More Than Just Game: Canada and the 1936 Olympics.” History shows us the Canadian sport community, led by the Canadian Olympic Association (now the COC) and the Amateur Athletic Union of Canada failed Jews terribly leading into those Games. The Holocaust Education Centre documents the refusal of both organizations to acknowledge the evidence president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Samuel Jacobs, and journalist Matthew Halton of the Toronto Star provided showing ruthless violence, abhorrent racism, legalized anti-Semitism and a future in Germany that held unspeakable atrocities. Despite the pleas of the CJC, neither organization would even contemplate debating the possibility of boycotting the 1936 Olympics.

It is not by coincidence that today, another Canadian Jewish Congress president, Bernie Farber, speaks of another genocide—the one First Nations people in Canada have been confronting and continue to confront on a daily basis. That the Canadian sport and business community either stand behind a man, or stay silent when dozens of First Nations people allege he brutalized them and others when they were just innocent children, is beyond reprehensible. They are quite happy

to let these survivors experience all the nightmare pain, sorrow, and trauma that surfaced when they gathered the courage to speak about their past and devastating disappointment as the Canadian sport and corporate community stood by their man. The virtues and values these individuals and organizations spout are haunting mistruths as they attempt, along with Furlong, to tell a revisionist and dangerous version of Canadian sport history.