

THIS COUNTRY: RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS: ONE MAN'S DOGGED FIGHT FOR THE LIVING VICTIMS

Nothing but the truth can give apology true substance



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This Wednesday, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologizes on behalf of the country for the many abuses of the residential school system, there will be those who say it is only the proper thing to do.

There will be those who will say it is going too far.

And then there will still be the Rev. Kevin Annett.

How far would he go?

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Sit down, take a deep breath, and listen up:

A full International War Crimes Tribunal with the powers to prosecute those who can be held responsible for crimes or cover-ups at the native schools.

A nationwide search for the remains of children - Mr. Annett estimates some 50,000 - who died at these schools, by neglect or abuse, and were never given proper burials.

The creation of a National Aboriginal Holocaust Museum so Canadians will never forget the crimes against humanity that took place in these schools.

An official nationwide "Day of Mourning" for all victims, both dead and living, of residential schools.

An end to any federal tax exemptions for churches that had any involvement in establishing and running such institutions.

The abolishment of the Indian Act, the winding down of the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs - and the return of all "stolen lands and resources" to Canada's indigenous nations.

Don't worry about upsetting Mr. Annett if you disagree with him. He's used to it. He's used to being dismissed. He's been called a troublemaker. He's been accused of exaggerating to the point of making things up entirely just to draw attention to himself.

And yet this 52-year-old defrocked former United Church minister who looks uncannily like *Frasier* actor Kelsey Grammer says what he really is trying to draw attention to is the likes of Vancouver's Harry Wilson, and the unnamed woman from Saskatchewan who isn't yet sure she can tell her story in public.

They are, he says, the living victims of residential schools - the ones who desperately need far more than a simple apology.

Mr. Annett, who now ministers to the homeless along Vancouver's East Hastings, helped Harry off a bus last week. Harry is an alcoholic, a middle-aged man who was beaten and sodomized at the Port Alberni Residential School, and who claims that, when he was 13, he found the naked, bloodied body of a young Haida girl on the grounds. He also says he was tortured for months until his tormentors persuaded him he had never seen a body.

As for the woman from Saskatchewan, she remembers having to hold open the furnace doors in her residential school as small bodies were shovelled in for incineration.

Mr. Annett's critics say no such things ever happened, that such stories are either imagination or some sort of false memory.

Mr. Annett says the only way to know is through "forensic investigations." He says there is anecdotal evidence of mass graves at many residential schools. He wants digs. Others say there is no point in digging because there is nothing to find.

Going against the grain is nothing new for Kevin Annett. He was an unnoticed United Church minister until he began questioning the church's role in shifting native-held lands to logging operations and then became increasingly involved in the residential schools question as persistent challenger of church responsibility.

In 1997, he was removed from the pulpit and defrocked.

"My faith is stronger now," he says, "but not in organized religion."

His strong public stands have brought him praise from the likes of Noam Chomsky, but his battles also helped destroy his marriage - although he says he is reconciled with his two teenage daughters. He still regularly challenges the churches involved in residential schools to come clean on what happened.

That bad things happened, no one denies - that they were as bad as Annett believes they were remains the question.

He points to such historical evidence as statements by Duncan Campbell Scott, long-ago deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs, who mentioned the much-higher native death rates in the schools and how this fit with Ottawa's policy of "a final solution of our Indian Problem." And he points, as well, to Harry's story, and the Saskatchewan woman's story, and hundreds of similar stories that still stir in native circles across the country.

The Rev. Kevin Annett, understand, is not against the apology coming down this week. He agrees, in fact, that "amazing progress" has been made since the possibility of a formal apology first surfaced. But, he says, the apology is at best only a beginning.

"It's important in theory," he says, "but it's the wrong direction."

He wouldn't have the Prime Minister address Parliament, but come down to East Hastings and sit in a healing circle and listen before he says anything at all. And once the apology has been issued, the real work should begin.

"An apology," he says, "should not have any sense of 'We didn't mean to do it and we're sorry.' That would have no substance. It's not an action that will have meaning.

"I don't know if we can really talk about resolution until we know the truth about what happened."

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