

DISPATCH: RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

## Is growing up in the care of the state any better for native children today?

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JUNE 13, 2008

VICTORIA -- Prime Minister Stephen Harper acknowledged this week that stripping aboriginal children of their culture by putting them in residential schools caused great harm.

In 1945, at the peak of the program, more than 9,000 children were taken from their families and boarded in the schools.

Today there are 27,000 aboriginal children across the country in government care, most being raised in a culture that is not their own.

The difference is, today's children have been apprehended for their safety, taken from families and communities that have lost the ability to care for them. But in many cases, the negative consequences are perpetuated.

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Ed John endured the residential school system; Stewart Phillip was raised in a non-native home. Both bear the scars of childhoods spent torn from their families.

Mr. John was just 6 or 7 when he was loaded onto a bus for a frightening journey. He recalls the pain in his parents' eyes as they stood on the dusty gravel road of their village, Tache, in north-central British Columbia. They could do nothing to stop it: By government decree, he was being sent to Lejac Residential School, 140 kilometres away, to be "civilized."

Mr. Phillip was still an infant when he was taken away from his family. Child-welfare officials seized him and placed him with a non-aboriginal family 600 kilometres from his home. The women he left behind cried when they finally saw him again more than 20 years later, remembering the weight of that baby boy in their arms.

Mr. John and Mr. Phillip were among B.C.'s top aboriginal leaders who watched with mixed feelings Wednesday as Mr. Harper begged forgiveness for the residential-school system. The question is whether the 4,500 aboriginal children in government care in the province today are much better off.

"It's not a hell of a lot better," said Mr. John, now the Grand Chief of the First Nations Summit.

He reluctantly spoke about his residential school experience in an interview this week; it's a part of his life he prefers to leave in the past. But he is riled by the staggering number of aboriginal children in care.

The challenge is to integrate culture into the complex formula of child protection without creating a second-tier standard of protection for native children.

Don't look for consensus on what would work better; it isn't there. But there is agreement, at least, that an improved model is needed.

The B.C. government would be all too happy to hand over responsibility for child-welfare decisions to native communities and relieve itself of a political burden.

But few aboriginal communities in the province have secured the safety nets that would ensure their children have the same protections the broader system provides. The bureaucrats call it capacity: It means, in practice, having enough safe homes and support services to accommodate all those children among their own people.

Mr. John sees a desperate need for resources within aboriginal communities to help families before they reach a crisis that puts children at risk. There is a need to teach parenting skills to mothers and fathers who weren't raised by their own parents.

Although it is surely not the only cause, there is a clear connection between the abuses suffered in residential schools and the current generation of children in care. It is a weary acceptance of someone coming to take your child away and it has become a familiar script for generations of aboriginal families.

Mr. Phillip, Grand Chief of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, talked frankly this week about the impact his childhood had on his ability to be a parent. "I left a path of heartbreak behind me."

While some of his siblings went through the residential school system, they found their way home long before he did. "Children that went to residential schools, it was a terrible experience, but they had brothers or sisters or friends to support them. An apprehended child is completely alienated."

Growing up in Quesnel, he regained his birth family only when his father set out to find the lost boy 21 years after they were separated. "I didn't know my background and heritage. The very first question out of my mouth to my father was, 'What kind of Indian am I?' "

Tom Christensen, Minister of Children and Family Development, says the province is working on programs that aim to keep today's aboriginal children in care connected to their roots, but he has no quick solutions.

"It's taken us 150 years to get us into the situation we are in today," he said. "Unfortunately I don't see a dramatic shift over a five-year period."

Assimilation by design was wrong, Mr. Harper said on Wednesday, and has no place in Canada. But is assimilation by default any better?

## **TRACKING SHATTERED LIVES**

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, British Columbia's Representative for Children and Youth, has her own brand of the dismal science. What else can you call the work of counting and tracking the shattered lives and awful deaths of children in government care?

She met with an all-party committee of the B.C. Legislature yesterday to deliver her latest assessment and, not surprisingly, she gives the government poor marks for its efforts on behalf of the province's most vulnerable children.

And all too often, those children are aboriginal. Slightly more than 50 per cent of those in government care are native. There is something amiss on two points: The national average for native children in care is lower, at between 30 and 40 per cent; and only 8 per cent of children in B.C. are aboriginal.

Ms. Turpel-Lafond doesn't see enough effort being made to prevent child abuse, particularly in native communities.

"We are coming out of an era where all sorts of people had ideas about how to fix the problem and it seemed to get worse. One of the key challenges is very poor investment in prevention of abuse and very limited investment in good outcomes for first nations' children," she said in a telephone interview.

She agrees with native communities that want more weight given to the cultural needs of aboriginal children in care. But she cautions that this cannot be achieved by lowering the standards for protection.

"You can't say it's enough to be attached to a cultural resource," she said. "We have to consider the health, safety and well-being of those children, and the culture is one part of that."

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