

EDITORIAL

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PM's apology hits right note

The Cape Breton Post

Stephen Harper confounded his critics this week by living up to Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl's billing that the prime minister would deliver "a great apology" over Indian residential schools. It was better than OK, spoken with emotion and conviction by a PM surrounded by colour and circumstance in the House of Commons and replied to warmly by aboriginal speakers.

Not everyone agrees about what it meant or whether it should have been said. An Ipsos Reid poll of 1,000 Canadians shows two-thirds supporting the concept of official apologies where warranted, although Atlantic Canadians were the least enthusiastic at 58 per cent support.

Among dissenters, a common refrain is: "What do I have to apologize for? It was another time and I had nothing to do with it." We should pay attention, however, to what the prime minister actually said. While he did once claim to speak for "all Canadians," the thrust of the apology was on behalf of the Government of Canada for its role in encouraging the residential school system as part of an explicit assimilation policy as well as for failing to supervise the schools — a neglect of Crown duty that allowed many abuses to occur that might have been stopped.

But if Canadians living today, who had no part in residential schools and weren't even aware of them, can distance themselves from the whole business, then we can also say, for example, that we are not individually responsible in any degree, in either a positive or a negative sense, for anything that Canadian soldiers might do in Afghanistan or for what happens in our prisons. There is a connection between the citizen and the actions of the state, particularly in a democracy where in theory government governs with the consent of the governed.

Residential schools are not ancient history. The worst abuses continued into the 1970s, and the last school closed in 1996; Shubenacadie, which took in some 2,000 Mi'kmaq and Maliseet children from across Atlantic Canada, closed in 1968, the year Pierre Trudeau became prime minister. Some 150,000 children went through the system and about 80,000 are still living. Some protest that to characterize residential schools as wholly negative, and all former students as survivors, is historical revisionism which ignores the good intentions behind the system as well as the benefit bestowed on many of the children who were removed from dysfunctional homes and impoverished communities. But the whole shebang rested on the racist colonial premise that aboriginal culture, family, community were all inferior, their influence best eradicated.

Others worry that too exclusive a focus on residential schools overshadows many important aspects in the complex relationship between aboriginal people and the majority society. Yet the residential school system represents in graphic terms a way of thinking that has been at the root of this troubled relationship all along.

Gabor Maté, a physician and author who works closely with Vancouver's street people, yearns for the day Canadians see aboriginal drug addiction and alcoholism not as reflections of "individual moral failings but our collective failure as a culture to be authentic, compassionate and humane." If the Canadian government's apology brings us a day closer to that, it will have been worth it.

14/06/08

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