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## Canada Apologizes to Aboriginals

John Horvath 16.06.2008

Prime Minister Harper delivered a long-awaited apology on native residential schools. But how genuine is it?

After decades of waiting, aboriginal Canadians received a **formal apology** last week from the Conservative government of **Stephen Harper** for the loss of culture caused by residential schools that thousands were forced to attend, and for the physical and sexual abuse that many suffered in those institutions. The apology was meant to represent the government's way of addressing this painful chapter in Canada's history.

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivering his apology. Photo: pm.gc.ca

In the 19th century, it was widely assumed that aboriginal culture was unable to adapt to a rapidly modernizing society. It was believed that native children could be successful if they assimilated into mainstream Canadian society by adopting Christianity and speaking English or French. As a result, residential schools were set up to serve a socio-political agenda involving the "aggressive assimilation" of Canada's native peoples.

Residential schools were church-run, government-funded industrial schools that taught English or French and made native children adopt Christianity and Canadian customs. Students were discouraged from speaking their first language or practicing native traditions. If they were caught, they would experience severe punishment.

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Attendance at residential schools was mandatory and agents were employed by the government to ensure all native children attended. Initially, about 1,100 students attended 69 schools across the country. In 1931, at the peak of the residential school system, there were about 80 schools operating in Canada. By the time the last such school closed its doors in 1996, about 150,000 aboriginal, Inuit and Métis children were removed from their communities and forced to attend the schools.

The government felt children were easier to mould than adults, and the concept of a boarding school was the best way to prepare them for life in mainstream society. Hence, if Canada was not going to have an Indian problem, it first had to kill the Indian within the child. Ideally, children who had attended these schools would then pass their adopted lifestyle on to their own children, and in turn native traditions would gradually diminish, or be completely abolished in a few generations. Canada would then not have an Indian problem for it would not have Indians.



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Throughout the years, students lived in substandard conditions and endured physical and emotional abuse. There are also many allegations of sexual abuse. Students at residential schools rarely had opportunities to see examples of normal family life. They were in school 10 months a year, away from their parents. All correspondence from the children was written in English or French, which many parents couldn't read. Brothers and sisters at the same school rarely saw each other, as all activities were segregated by gender.

When students returned to the reserve, they often found they didn't belong. They didn't have the skills to help their parents, and became ashamed of their native heritage. Conversely, many also found it hard to function in an urban setting as the skills taught at the schools were generally substandard. As a result, Canada's program of aggressive assimilation ultimately meant devastation for thousands who were subjected to years of mistreatment.

### Truth and Reconciliation

In addition to the formal apology made by the prime minister in parliament, Canada's native people will receive financial compensation. A Truth and Reconciliation commission has also been set up to revisit the history of what happened so that both native and non-native Canadians can come to terms with this ignominious past. This commission will run for the next five years.

Most observers look to the Harper apology a sincere attempt to have a sad chapter in Canada's history seriously addressed. Yet many say that it doesn't go far enough to address the sad chapter of Canada's present with respects to how its native people are being treated. Moreover, there is a feeling among some that the apology was politically motivated. Indeed, some see it as a cynical way to stave increasing protests and roadblocks by native people as developers continue to grab native land, usually with government consent.



Photo: pm.gc.ca

Whatever the motivation, it's questionable whether a new beginning is really on the horizon or not. After all, an apology is not policy, and there is no indication that anything concrete will come of this. Expectations, on the other hand, especially among Canada's native people, have been raised.

Unfortunately, similar great expectations have failed in the past. This isn't the first government apology to Canada's native people: at the end of the 1990s there was an apology issued by the Liberal government which at the time was considered sincere. Soon after, however, native leaders felt that the apology didn't go far enough and its significance soon faded.

Not only this, but it's clear that a split remains in Canada among native and non-native Canadians. The average non-native Canadian lacks any form of context to see the Harper apology in historical terms. This is because as a land of immigrants, many families don't extend that far back in Canadian history. Hence, many are actually indifferent to the suffering endured and which still exists. Native Canadians, on the other hand, see the apology as a very significant and historic event. For them it represents a restoration of their pride and dignity.

Restoring pride and dignity to those who have been abused by a colonial or imperialist system is a global trend of sorts. In Australia, for example, there was also an apology along with the promise of changing social conditions for Australia's aboriginal people.

Still, a shameful past shouldn't detract Canadians from a shameful present. This shameful present is manifest in the reserve system which traps people into a certain way of life. In many ways, Canada has now come full circle: originally, residential schools were set up because of the concern that native people would be unable to adapt to modern society. Today, although one of the principal aims of the reservation system is to restore pride and dignity to Canada's native people, it in many ways segregates them from mainstream society. Thus, if Canada hopes to move on and deal constructively with native issues, Canada first needs to address its reservation regime that functions very much like the apartheid system did in South Africa.

### Just one in a series of apologies

All this begs the question as to why the Conservative government felt it necessary to issue this apology at this point in time. The question is a valid one considering the Harper government hasn't been known in the past to be friendly to native concerns. Indeed, Harper himself is quite ignorant when it comes to his country's own native people. A few years back Harper made a major blunder when he sent a telegram to native leaders and congratulated them on the 65th anniversary of Indian independence. He had confused Indians from India with those who are now commonly referred to in Canada as either native Canadians or First Nations people.

Aside from confusing Indians and native Canadians, the Harper government has also taken steps that are clearly not friendly to native concerns. For instance, the Harper government refused to endorse the UN resolution in favor of aboriginal people and similar national accords endorsed by the provinces and Canada's native people were buried by the government.

Moreover, the Conservative party in Canada is traditionally not sympathetic to native concerns. The present Conservative party is a fusion of two parties which took place a few years ago. One of the parties, the Reform party, which was strong in the west of the country, often fielded candidates that campaigned on an anti-native platform. It's hard to see, therefore, how the Conservative party of the present would have changed much, especially in the western part of the country.

In fact, some see this racist baggage as the main reason behind the Harper apology. In other words, it's nothing more than a political strategy in order to look good in the eyes of minorities. Others disagree with this view, however, pointing out that at only 3% of the population native people don't represent a significant number of votes. Thus, there are not that many votes tied to the apology.

Or is there? This apology is merely one in a series of apologies planned by the government. Next month Harper will apologize to the Sikh community for the 1914 Komataga Maru incident, when a boat load of Punjabi refugees were turned away. He is also expected to make apologies to Italian Canadians for their internment during the Second World War and Jewish Canadians for the many Jewish refugees from Nazism which had been turned away.

Meanwhile, those waiting in line for an apology continue to grow: Ukrainian Canadians want an apology and compensation for being interned during the Second World War; likewise, Croatian Canadians and German Canadians are demanding the same thing. With an election expected in the near future, it should come as little surprise that the government is feeling a little more humble than usual.

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