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Federal apology only a start

Injustices to aboriginal people still abound.

Dateline: Monday, June 16, 2008

by Scott Harris for *Vue Weekly*

Of the multitude of shameful actions in the history of Canada, the federal Indian Residential Schools system, which saw some 150,000 Aboriginal, Inuit and Métis children forcibly removed from their communities and put into federally run schools, surely ranks as one of the most egregious.

So the recent steps by the federal government, however tentative, to atone for this century-long attempt at cultural genocide are long overdue and welcome. The elements of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement — including a \$2 billion compensation package for survivors, the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the June 11 official apology by the Government of Canada — show that the government has at least begun to recognize the scale of a crime which continued until 1996, when the Gordon Residential School in Saskatchewan finally closed.

It's a reality, which suggests that, like a child who offers an apology to a wronged sibling only at the urging of their parents, we haven't really internalized what it is that we've done wrong in any meaningful way.

But while the federal government is busily making apologies and amends for this historic injustice, we as a nation continue to ignore and even compound the numerous contemporary injustices faced by Aboriginal peoples. It's a reality, which suggests that, like a child who offers an apology to a wronged sibling only at the urging of their parents, we haven't really internalized what it is that we've done wrong in any meaningful way.

There is certainly no shortage of examples happening today to illustrate that our treatment of First Nations peoples hasn't been informed by the past. For instance the sorry state of drinking water on reserves, because of which many communities have been living under boil water advisories for years.

Then there are the continued unwillingness of the Canadian government to recognize the land claims of the Lubicon Lake Indian Nation in Alberta while oil and gas development run roughshod over their traditional lands as well, the dismissal or downplaying of serious health concerns related to the tar sands by the Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations in the downstream community of Fort Chipewyan — the list goes shamefully on and on.

While it's unlikely, let's hope the current apologetics for past crimes spurs action on current ones, to ensure that we're not apologizing once again a century from now for our failure to act today.

*Scott Harris writes for *Vue Weekly*, Edmonton. He can be reached via his address below.*

Email: scott@vueweekly.com. Website: <http://vueweekly.com/>.

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