



## An end, and a beginning

Canada has made a significant gesture of respect for the native place in the national fabric, and perhaps finally set us on the path of reconciliation

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According to Anishinabek teachings the first humans were brothers created in the four colours of mankind -- red, yellow, black and white -- who were endowed by G'zhemnidoo with their own languages, cultures and belief systems.

The white brother was the most eager to set out on his own -- his was the gift of doing things quickly -- thus beginning a journey for Eurocentric people from the wheel to interplanetary travel in the blink of an archaeological eye.

But that gift can be a hindrance when it comes to living in a changing world. Inventing the internal combustion engine was a breeze for the white brother's descendants, compared to learning how to co-exist with relatives whose skin colours and customs are different, from places like Africa, China ... or Canada.

The acid test is yet to come for the June 11 federal government apology for the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. Both red and white participants agree the occasion was momentous, but did the pomp and ceremony represent only a momentary cessation in hostilities between First Peoples and the rest of Canada, or will it provide momentum for a comprehensive overhaul in a relationship that has been troubled for most of the past 500 years?

A lot has been made of the emotions invoked by the unprecedented event, in which a circle of 11 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit guests of honour sat in the centre aisle of the House of Commons, surrounded by parliamentarians. Party leaders seemed to struggle to maintain their composure, especially the NDP's Jack Layton when he talked about Indian parents having their children stolen from them. Outpourings of grief were reported at gatherings across Canada where natives and non-natives alike watched the televised proceedings.

But tears dry faster than the ink on treaties, and it didn't take long for the bloom to start fading on Stephen Harper's 3,600-word rose. Our white brothers expect quick fixes for even the most complex challenges; like Alexander the Great they would rather slice open their Gordian knots than take the necessary time to unravel them.



CREDIT: Bruce Edwards, CNSPics  
Residential school survivor Nancy Scanie, 69, from Cold Lake First Nation, weeps as she watches Prime Minister Stephen Harper's official apology last week. Outpourings of grief were reported at gatherings across Canada.

The next day the national affairs columnist for an Ontario-based newspaper group praised the government's noble gesture, then impatiently urged Ottawa to get on with dismantling the reserve system. Apparently he did not see the irony in advocating an approach to what has been called "the Indian problem" not unlike the one which had led to the previous day's apology and inspired the prime minister to say: "the policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country."

Some residential school survivors dismissed the apology as "just words," especially since they were delivered in such an impersonal way by the white brother's long-distance technology, instead of face-to-face in the same manner in which priests and nuns intimidated their young charges for over a century.

Then there was Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre, who complained on Ottawa radio about the cost of the \$4-billion compensation program to those who "partook" in residential schools. Barely a couple of hours later his boss was telling the country how sorry the government was for forcibly removing native children from their homes and subjecting thousands of them to horrific emotional, physical and sexual abuse at the schools.

Mr. Poilievre delivered a sheepish apology of his own in the House of Commons the following day, but his abject ignorance is not untypical of the lack of awareness many Canadians have of their own history, an issue that needs to be addressed if the apology is to have any meaningful impact.

Last week's apology is both an end and a beginning: it marks the first time since Confederation that Canada has made a significant gesture of respect for the native place in the national fabric, and also the launch of a five-year Truth and Reconciliation process to provide an insight into our history that has not been forthcoming from either the country's educators or journalists. Some are disturbed about this initiative, but it is surely essential in a country where people in the highest echelons of society -- including national columnists and members of Parliament -- are oblivious to how First Peoples here came to collectively rank 64th on the United Nations human development index.

A Canadian not knowing about Indian Residential Schools is like a German being unaware of the Holocaust. It's not just the dismal aspects of native history that need to be more widely known; all Canadians should take pride in the contributions First Peoples have made. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) were among the world's great agronomists, cultivating more than 70 hybrids of corn, and understanding the importance of letting fields go fallow to give the soil a rest. The Five Nations government model was copied by the founding fathers of the United States of America. Tecumseh is credited by historians with making the British victory possible in the war of 1812, and Ojibway soldiers Sgt. Tommy Prince and Cpl. Francis Pegahmagabow are two of the most decorated enlisted men in Canadian military history. Paintings by Norval Morrisseau and his Woodlands School disciples are famous around the world. Actor Graham Greene played Kicking Bird in Dances with Wolves and Shylock on the stage of the Stratford Festival. Actress Tina Keeper is currently the member of Parliament for Churchill. Dorothy Grant's fashions are worn by Hollywood stars. Ted Nolan was a National Hockey League coach of the year, and Brian Trottier had a Hockey Hall of Fame career with the New York Islanders. Al Hackner won two world curling championships.

Some are dismissive of indigenous peoples -- there are over 300 million of us around the globe -- because we didn't invent planes, trains or automobiles. But we weren't in any hurry to leave where we came from. We'd like to think that some of our contributions --over 500 medicines in modern pharmacology, and a hefty portion of the world's food basket, crops like potatoes, corn, tomatoes and rice -- have been of some lasting value.

The educational process has already been started in some forward-thinking jurisdictions. Ontario's Ministry of Education is forging ahead with a new Aboriginal Education Strategy this fall, conducting workshops with teachers and administrators across the province to mandate a curriculum that provides more native content and perspective. It's a massive undertaking but in just a few months the initiative has already provided thousands of teachers the resources to make their classrooms more conducive to the success of native students, and their courses more inclusive of the native role in Canadian society, past and present.

First Peoples are known for their patience. But sometimes it's a good thing that our white brothers can move in such a hurry.

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