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Editorial - June 19, 2008

Genocide And Residential Schools

Editorial by Jeff Green

Listening to the long-awaited apology from Prime Minister Harper last week, as well as the statements by Stephane Dion, Jack Layton, there was a sense that finally the Government of Canada was beginning to take responsibility for its historical actions.

The last-minute decision to allow for a response by Aboriginal leaders, in the House of Commons, saved the event from being undercut by the exclusion of the victims of the residential school system.

In a staged apology like this one, which has taken years, maybe decades, to orchestrate, it is fair to examine each word spoken by the federal leaders to gauge how far they are willing to go.

When Prime Minister Harper said, "and we ask for forgiveness" it was the first moment when the Aboriginal people were given any power or authority. Until that point all that Harper was doing was pronouncing an inner looking confession on behalf of the perpetrators of a historic crime; only by asking for forgiveness did the other, the victims of this historic wrong, receive the authority to decide whether the apology was acceptable.

But it is way too soon to ask for forgiveness. The legacy of the residential schools, and the overarching attitude they reflected and still reflect, are not gone; they live within the people of this country. Harper rightly should have said, "we hope to be in a position to ask for forgiveness some day."

It is also fair to consider what was not said.

There were likely dozens of meetings related to the precise text of Harper's statement, and the idea of including the description "genocide" or "cultural genocide" was undoubtedly discussed, and discarded.

Harper did say the idea behind the residential schools had been to "remove the Indian from the child" which is a description of a policy of cultural genocide. The attempt was to remove the culture from the people, then kill the culture once and for all.

Along with the residential school policy, the Indian Act, which defines native status by blood quantum, has led to a watering down of blood and culture. The ultimate end of these policies is the complete end to the Aboriginal designation. Together they form a policy of slow genocide.

When I was a child, the central historical event we talked about in my family was the extermination of 6 million Jews in Europe, an event which seemed far removed from my life since, in my mind, I was born so long after it had occurred. Life changes people's perspective about time, and I realise now that in the 5000-year-old history of human culture, to be a Jew born 20 years after the Nazi holocaust, is the equivalent of dodging a bullet.

Nonetheless, as I have lived my life I have faced almost no difficulties as the result of my race. Remarkably, the anti-Semitism that my parents faced growing up, has been buffered, at least in Canada, and I simply don't feel it.

I was reminded of the Nazi genocide last week because of the description, which I heard on CBC radio late last week, of a group of priests arriving at a collection station with a team of horses to pick up some young aboriginal children and bring them to residential school.

The children were described as terrified. They were running away, they were running in circles, they had no idea what was happening, and the priests were chasing them, grabbing them, forcing them onto the carriage and holding them there.

One of the people helping with the CBC coverage, a woman about my age I believe, described how her father, realising what the schools were about, had to move his family to Minnesota to escape. He would have been charged with kidnapping his own children if he had stayed in Canada.

I grew up with stories about people being herded onto trains to be brought to death camps, about people walking across borders, taking on false identities, to avoid capture by the Nazis, oblivious to the fact these things were continuing to happen right here. The last residential school closed in 1996.

During my lifetime, while I have been living the good life, these things have been happening, in my name, in the misguided attempt to cure the aboriginal people of their essence.

While the residential schools are closed, the other institutional frameworks have not changed, "the aboriginal problem" has not been resolved to anyone's satisfaction in this country.

One of the aboriginal commentators that was on the radio last week said he was disappointed that none of the federal leaders

used the word genocide.

He was right.

The word should have been spoken, in Parliament, and those of us who have enjoyed the benefits of this country on the backs of the people who initially welcomed us to live alongside them hundreds of years ago, should have insisted upon it. - JG