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Columnist doesn't grasp bigger native issue

Updated 2 days ago

Michael Den Tandt's take on Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology for what he rightly calls "the grotesque abuses of the residential school system" seems somewhat contradictory.

While he apparently understands the severity and magnitude of the systemic abuse that plagued the government-funded and church-operated network of 132 schools, he fails to grasp the bigger issue, namely that the government was apologizing for policies that had the aim of eliminating everything that made first peoples different from others who have made Canada their home.

Because, make no mistake, we are different, and these are not, as Den Tandt says, "distinctions based on race."

If First Nations did not have unique rights, Canada would feel no legal obligation to whittle away at the 800 outstanding land claims he mentions, or pay close attention when the Supreme Court says our treaties are as valid as any laws in this land.

It would have been illegal, not "bold" for the Trudeau government to enact its infamous White Paper to try and legislate away aboriginal and treaty rights. That is why they abandoned the attempt, and why no subsequent prime minister has been foolhardy enough to risk embarrassment in an international court of human rights.

Den Tandt is correct in labelling the Indian Act as racist legislation, but it is also racist for journalists like him to continually stereotype the 633 reserves across Canada with words like "squalour", and insinuate that they are all governed by chiefs and councils "who benefit from the system."

As a taxpayer -- yes, most employed natives do pay taxes -- I've been following with great interest recent revelations of financial misdemeanours by Toronto Catholic School Board trustees. But it would be wrong for me to suggest that all school trustees -- or for that matter, all Catholics -- are a bunch of money-grubbing frauds.

Stephen Harper's apology was about dispensing with the parochial approach to first peoples, an approach referred to in the 1998 Liberal government's Statement of Reconciliation to aboriginal peoples as an "attitude of racial and cultural superiority."

For Den Tandt to say that the June 11 apology was, if anything, inadequate, and in the next breath suggest that the federal government unilaterally opt for what he calls "a bold solution" indicates that he might have heard the Harper apology, but he wasn't really listening to its condemnation of political leaders and bureaucrats of an earlier time who talked about solving "the Indian problem."

In a later era, Adolf Hitler would talk about a "final solution to the Jewish problem." Den Tandt actually refers to "the problem of reserves."

Indians are not problems. We are human beings, just like our neighbours.

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Prime Minister Harper didn't refer to us as "problems". He talked about the need to "move forward in partnership" with first peoples. That sure doesn't mean telling us where or how to live. That didn't work. That's what the apology was about.

Given the tenor of his column, I urge the Sun Media's national affairs columnist to carefully re-read the text of the Harper apology, especially the part that says: "The policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country."

Maurice Switzer, Director of Communications,
Union of Ontario Indians, Nipissing First Nation

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