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Rodney A. Clifton: For many aboriginal children, residential schools were a positive experience

Posted: May 30, 2008, 1:13 PM by Marni Soupcoff

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On Monday, a \$60-million traveling “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” chaired by Justice Harry LaForme will begin holding hearings across the country on aboriginal residential schools. This seems rather curious when you consider that some 87,000 aboriginal people who attended Canada’s 130 residential schools already have begun receiving thousands of dollars in payments from the federal government. Don’t these payouts suggest the truth is already known?

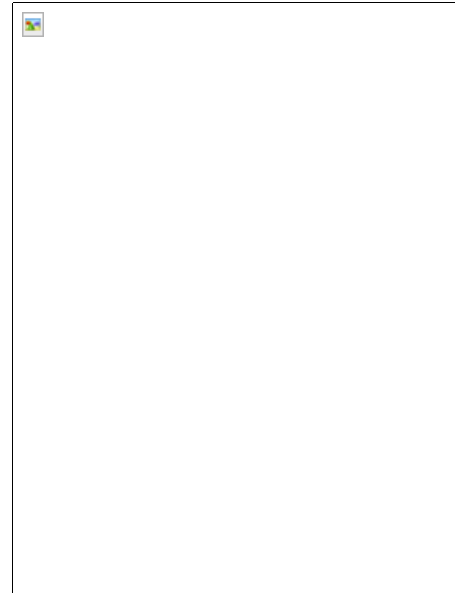
The Commission likely will hear many stories that reflect the claims made by Michael Ignatieff, the deputy leader of the Liberal Party, in an op-ed entitled “Setting the Record Straight,” published in the *National Post* a year ago. In his article, Mr. Ignatieff wrote: “The residential school system ... was without question, the most dismaying betrayal of Canada’s first peoples in our history”; and “The worst legacy of the residential schools experience is that it poisoned the wells of faith in education among generations of aboriginal Canadians.”

Many people believe that. But is it true?

In 1966-67, I spent a year as a supervisor in an Anglican residential school, Stringer Hall, in Inuvik, North West Territories. I kept extensive notes about the children and my experience. Before that, I lived at Old Sun School (named after a famous Chief), an Anglican residential school on the Blackfoot (Siksika) Reserve in Southern Alberta, for four months. Earlier, my wife (a Siksika) spent 10 years at Old Sun; and even earlier, her parents attended the same school for eight years. Moreover, I completed part of my own high school education at a United Church residential school.

Overall, I interpret the experiences as follows: Both positive and negative things happened in residential schools. In fact, when my wife is asked about her school experience, she describes Old Sun simply as a “private Anglican school.” For years after, she exchanged Christmas cards with teachers and administrators who were personal friends.

Of course, we know that some people working in residential schools brutalized the children under their care. Such individuals should be punished for their crimes. So should administrators from both the churches and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs who covered them up.



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Nevertheless, the aboriginal residential-school history must be put into appropriate context. At the time, aboriginal residential schools were not much different from many other schools. Many non-aboriginal children, for example, were strapped in schools; some were also sexually abused. Not surprisingly, some pedophiles have been imprisoned, but little attempt has been made — so far, at least — to charge teachers and administrators for using corporal punishment, in part because such brutal practices were widely accepted at the time.

Given this context, were aboriginal residential schools the unmitigated disasters that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will, without a doubt, hear them described as? Probably not.

Most children who went to residential school learned to read, write and calculate. Many children also learned other modern skills — the principles of democracy and common law, for example — which would help them participate more fully in both aboriginal and Canadian society.

Some aboriginal children had terrible illnesses — TB, serious dental problems and ruptured appendixes, for example — that were diagnosed and treated only because they were in residential schools.

At Stringer Hall, in fact, a number of children arrived with seriously infected insect bites that required having their hair washed, cut and topical antibiotics applied. Some children arrived with serious ear infections, and residential supervisors provided the appropriate medical treatment. Thankfully, a young nurse was on staff at Stringer Hall. Doctors and dentists were on call to treat children in a way that would have been impossible had they been out on the land hunting and fishing with their parents.

A few of the administrators, teachers and supervisors were aboriginal. At Stringer Hall, for example, two of the six residential supervisors were young Inuit women who, contrary to the common myth, spoke to the children in their mother-tongue. A number of the other employees also used aboriginal expressions and gestures with the children.

Similarly, not all the children who attended residential schools were aboriginal. At Stringer Hall, about 12% of the 280 students were non-aboriginal — the children of merchants, missionaries and trappers from tiny settlements where no schools existed.

Finally, some aboriginal children had been physically and sexually abused in their home communities, and residential schools actually saved some of them from continued abuse.

Even though this evidence has been available for some time, it is obvious that Michael Ignatieff did not consider it before saying: “Another illusion is that the intentions behind the [residential] schools were good.”

On the contrary, my experience is that most of the people who worked in residential schools wanted to help the children receive a good education that would allow them to survive in the modern world. Most of these people also wanted to fulfill the evangelistic calling of committed Christians: to help the poor, tend to the weak and treat the sick.

As a young student, Mr. Ignatieff attended Toronto’s Upper Canada College, arguably the top private “residential school” in the country. At the time, he probably did not know that employees of other Canadian residential schools received little pay and many sleepless nights for their labour. But, as an intellectual and as an MP, he should have searched harder for the available evidence. In Stringer Hall, for example, I was responsible for 85 senior boys between the ages of 12 and 21 for 22 hours a day, six days a week. The work was difficult, even for a strong 21-year-old.

Yet today, the reward for former residential school employees is denigration in the national press by people such as Mr. Ignatieff — and, more surprisingly, by the churches they served. I pray that the

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Commission will hear a variety of perspectives.

Unfortunately, I do not think this will happen because of the hostile climate that now exists. Few former school employees — both non-aboriginal and aboriginal — will acknowledge that they worked in residential schools, and even fewer will appear before the Commission. They already know that the “truth” has been pre-determined, and that “reconciliation” means financial compensation, which is already being distributed in any event. Few people will praise the residential schools — their administrators, their teachers or their supervisors. Fewer still will dare publicly admit that their residential-school experiences were positive.

In this reinterpretation of history, neither the Canadian people nor the Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners will likely hear the full story. As a result, I do not think the Commission will achieve lasting reconciliation.

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— Rodney A. Clifton is a professor of education at the University of Manitoba and a senior fellow at St. John’s College, an Anglican college that has a long history of educating aboriginal people. A longer version of this article appeared this month in C2C: Canada’s Journal of Ideas, <http://www.c2cjournal.ca/>.

Photo: St. Eugene Mission School in Cranbrook, B.C. Brian Sprout/Canwest News Service.

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by ShayGaetz

May 30 2008

2:11 PM

I remember addressing that very question on a final exam back in university so many years ago.

I argued as well, that residential schools as a whole did far more good than harm.

One particular residential school was so successful at teaching native children farming and animal husbandry; that, the federal government needed to intervene.

They legislated punitive measures preventing these residential school graduates from employing the latest modern farming techniques because the local farmers couldn't compete with the economy of scale resulting from native collaboration and cooperative by pooling their resources and manpower.

On another occasion I was fortunate to interview the great artist Clemence Wescoupe who assured me the nuns of his residential school were responsible for encouraging his talent and provided the means to his success.

He told me of another class-mate, Elijah Harper, who also benefited by the nuns' self-sacrifice and teaching; as did all Canada it would appear.

It is most ironic that the very first nation leaders who shout the loudest, also benefited the most from education they received in residential schools.

Clifton's article is a breath of fresh air!

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