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Canada's Shameful Legacy Of Aboriginal Abuse

By **Dave Bennett**

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On April 28, 2008 the Canadian Government announced the appointment of Harry LaForme, the Ontario judge who will head the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The government's official website calls it "an initiative meant to raise awareness of the impact on human dignity caused by the residential school experience." The website goes on to say that sixty million dollars will be allocated.

When I was growing up in the early twentieth century, folks called it "the Indian Problem," and I bought into it completely, the way we all bought into the supremacy of the British Empire, and the reading of [Christian] scriptures in our public schools.

According to the received wisdom, Indians were simple people. They couldn't handle liquor, and they certainly weren't mature enough to vote. They needed -- and benefited from -- our protective custody. In the prevailing culture of good Christian arrogance these were givens.

In such a climate we stole the birthright of Canada's aboriginal peoples.

"Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian problem." These are the words of Duncan Campbell Scott who served as director of the Indian Affairs Department for two decades. In 1920, he made it mandatory for all native children between the ages of 7 and 15 to attend residential schools. In this way he was merely following the lead of a predecessor who in 1908 prescribed education as the means to "elevate the Indian from his condition of savagery." For Campbell the mechanism was simple. He delegated a few mainstream Christian missions with the task "to take the Indian out of the Indian." The missions were given absolute authority. It was an abdication of responsibility.

The fatal flaw was that there was no accountability and no provision for oversight. We know now that this is a recipe for disaster.

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Given the delegation of absolute power for the custody of children and no accountability required, it was easy for those good missionaries and their -- mostly untrained -- staffs to become sadistic and cruel.

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The sensational stories of abuse, sexual and otherwise -- should we care to hear them -- are heart-wrenching. For speaking a native language, meals were denied or a needle run through the tongue. There was deliberate alienation from family and culture. In the words of one survivor, "When you went back home things weren't the same anymore. You were ashamed that you had once lived that way."

A native website recounts one survivor's story of a girl who received a new dress as a birthday gift from her mother. "... the nun slapped me on my face and sent me to the principal's office...I stood by [a] post for three days with only bread and water and I was forbidden to speak to the other girls. All my privileges were taken away...she made it sound like I was trying to make myself a dirty human being."

Indian agents were recruited to take the children -- sometimes forcibly - from their homes. An estimated 100,000 were abducted. Over half of them died in custody from disease augmented by malnutrition and neglect.

The story of the residential schools has been ignored by most Canadians. The history textbooks which my generation had in high school or college gave scant (if any) mention of aboriginal peoples and none of residential schools.

Fortunately things have improved somewhat. Today my grandchildren can opt to take programs in aboriginal studies conducted by serious scholars, many of them aboriginal.

There is another sign of progress. One of the many qualifications required of those who aspire to being named to the T. and R. Commission is the "ability to respect and participate in ceremonies and spiritual practices, and to understand the worldview and transformation potential of ceremonies." Duncan Campbell Scott would never have dreamed of such a thing! But then there is the matter of the 'genocide cover-up.'

Vendors at the Mohawk Pow-Wow in my community offer a T-Shirt reproducing an ancient tintype showing Native warriors in full battle regalia with the legend : "Protecting Homeland Security since 1492." - clearly a reference to Christopher Columbus. Many believe he was responsible for wiping out the defenseless and non-aggressive Taino who were numbered in the millions in 1492.

But that was another time. That couldn't happen in Canada, could it?

Dr. Roland Chrisjohn is Director of Native Studies at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Writing in the native website Turtle Island, Dr. Chrisjohn says, "What

happened with reservation schooling wasn't kind of like genocide, it wasn't cultural genocide, it wasn't something approximating genocide. It was genocide. And when I say that, even from First Nations people, I often get these long looks. And nobody who's ever given me those long looks has ever read the UN Convention on Genocide, so I put it in my book.

"If you look at Article 2(e), 'forcibly transferring children of the group to another group is an act of genocide.' This is the same UN Convention on Genocide that Canada bound itself to in 1949 and assented to in 1951 in a unanimous vote of both houses of Parliament. So for thirty years or more, Canada knowingly committed genocide."

In his book *The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Residential School Experience in Canada*, Dr. Chrisjohn expands on the ways our government deliberately fudged the definitions it signed at the Geneva Convention.

What if we accept that the majority of Canadians are to blame for this crime against humanity, this government sponsored identity theft from aboriginal peoples. We ask with a shrug, how can you pin blame on millions of people?

It's not just a matter of fixing blame. It's more about fixing deep wounds -- generations deep wounds, fixing outmoded concepts, flawed and arrogant eurocentric concepts.

Fortunately there has been a resurgence of awareness -- as reflected in books exploring aboriginal issues by a new generation of scholars and other professionals [e.g, lawyers and social workers] many of whom are aboriginal themselves.

What do I hope this Commission can accomplish?

Worst case scenario: Aboriginal people write it off as yet another meaningless report. And other Canadians hide behind that lame excuse 'Well, everyone else did it!'

Better scenario: Canadians of all backgrounds are moved to truly recognize the survivors and their descendants, acknowledge their pain and comprehend the totality of their loss.

In this respect we can learn from the Australians, who also had residential schools for Aboriginal children -- their own "Stolen Generations." A government website tells how a National Sorry Day was set up as an annual event to offer people "the opportunity to be involved in activities to acknowledge the impact of the policies of forcible removal on Australia's indigenous populations." (In 2005 Sorry Day was renamed as the National Day of Healing for all Australians.)

Suppose we are moved to act in some way, what can we do about it that can actually have some impact?

I suggest that one step is to applaud the Canadian government for setting up the Commission. And let them know that you expect them to act boldly, creatively. That we Canadians don't begrudge the sixty million tax dollars they have committed, but we are holding them accountable to ensure that the money is well spent.

Dave Bennett is a Writer and Activist, living with his wife in Belleville Ontario, Canada.

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