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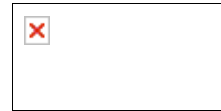
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An overdue apology to First Nations

By **ANDREW HANON**

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"Remorse is the punishment of crime; repentance, its expiation. The former appertains to a tormented conscience; the latter to a soul changed for the better."

- Joseph Joubert

More than a century after the crimes began, it looks like the federal government will finally own up to its murderous campaign against native people.

Federal Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl announced last week that on June 11, Prime Minister Stephen Harper will rise in the House of Commons and formally apologize for the native residential school system.

Presumably, the apology will be similar to the one issued on Feb. 12 by Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd for similar programs aimed at obliterating Aborigine language and culture, resulting in "profound grief and loss" among its first people.

Rudd did not equivocate.

"As prime minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the parliament of Australia, I am sorry," he said. "For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say, sorry."

Let's hope Harper has the spine to do the same.

Every time I write about residential schools, I hear from people who can't understand what the fuss is all about. The government of Canada has nothing to be sorry for, they say. It's just another way of exploiting our collective guilt, they argue.

One particularly dense ingnoramus ended his "we've-been-held-hostage-by-Indians-long-enough" rant by stabbing his finger into the table and bellowing, "I don't know what they're complaining about. We taught those people to read."

We also took an estimated 150,000 native children from their homes and taught them that their parents were evil, that the values and beliefs they held were demonic.

Completely contrary to biblical teaching, we forced them to worship Jesus and made following their grandparents' traditions a crime.

We punished them for speaking anything other than English or French. We raised them in a cold, prison-like atmosphere, devoid of affection or nurturing.

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We beat them for disobedience or undisciplined behaviour. We made thousands of children sexual playthings for hundreds of pedophiles working within the system.

We kept the children in crowded, cramped quarters, where they were exposed to deadly diseases like tuberculosis. Then when we were finished debasing, humiliating and abusing them, we sent them home to raise families.

They had learned their lessons well. Everything we taught them - anger, self-loathing, sexual dysfunction and physical abuse - was passed along to the next generation.

Residential schools were some of the key components in the federal government's answer to what officials called the "Indian Question." They were responsible for ruining individuals' lives, destroying families and undermining the fabric of entire communities.

Of the few who have even heard of residential schools, the vast majority steadfastly refuse to believe the horrors that went on inside them.

Maybe, when the prime minister rises in the house on June 11, the state of denial will finally end. Really, there's only one thing to be said about next month's apology to First Nations: What the hell took so long?

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