

It takes two sides to make an apology work

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D6 Lynda MacGibbon
People, places, things

If there is one thing I appreciate about Prime Minister Stephen Harper it is his willingness to apologize. There is something in this leader's character that moves him in the direction of reconciliation and, that, I believe, can only be a good thing for our country.

Twice in the past year and once in 2006 the prime minister has publicly offered apologies on behalf of the Canadian government and people for wrongs committed against other people and nations. He has done this vocally and in face-to-face meetings with representatives of those who were wronged. That takes courage.

His courage and humility are especially apparent to me in the light of the most recent apology which was given this past Sunday in British Columbia. The prime minister stood before a crowd of about 8,000 people, mostly representing a community of East Indian descent and apologized for something that happened nearly 100 years ago.

In 1914, more than 300 East Indians seeking refuge in Canada were held on board a ship called the Komagata Maru for two months because the Canadian government refused them entry into what these refugees hoped would be their new home. Eventually, the ship was sent back to Calcutta where, upon disembarking, 20 people were shot and killed and many more jailed. It was hardly the new life they'd anticipated.

This past week, Prime Minister Harper apologized to the community that represents those would-be immigrants. Today it is a vastly different community, even if they share the same racial and cultural roots. The people who gathered in a British Columbia park to listen to the prime minister live in Canada, enjoy our rights and freedoms, and call this country home.

As fellow Canadians they disappoint me.

Rather than accepting the prime minister's apology, they rejected it, claiming it was not the apology they deserved because it was not given from the House of Commons. Apparently, this apology is not official enough, even though it came from the mouth of Canada's most official statesman.

It seems that rather than accepting this face-to-face apology, the East Indian community wants an apology exactly like the one Harper offered to Canada's native community and to Canada's Chinese community.

Earlier this year, Harper offered an apology on behalf of Canada to aboriginals who suffered abuse in residential schools.

I watched the ceremony on television and was moved to tears, not so much by the apology, which was so important, but because it was so graciously accepted in word, song and dance by representatives of the aboriginal peoples.

Some of those accepting the apology were actually abused in residential schools. That they could accept the apology and return it with forgiveness speaks volumes about what it means to be a Canadian.

In 2006, Prime Minister Harper apologized to Chinese Canadians because of the \$500 tax imposed on Chinese immigrants who came to Canada between 1883 and 1923. The tax was exorbitant in turn of the century dollars, representing about two-year's salary. After the tax was repealed, the Canadian government banned Chinese immigration until 1947.

When the prime minister apologized for these wrongs, which seem even worse when one considers that our national railway was largely built by Chinese immigrants, representatives of the Chinese community noted the importance of his words.

They expressed happiness that a wrong was finally being acknowledged with regret, and, because of that, put that wrong to rest.

The Indian community, by refusing to accept this most recent apology is missing the point, and, unfortunately, twisting the apology into less than what it deserves to be.

It takes the co-operation of two sides to fully implement an apology. It is one thing to say you're sorry, but if the apology is never accepted, it hangs in mid-air, unable to do the cleansing, restorative work within its power.

For an apology to fully work, it must be accepted.

Someone must say, "thank you, I forgive you. Now let's get on with life as it should be lived, with equality, generosity and hope."

Prime Minister Harper has, rightly, refused to offer the second apology being demanded by the British Columbia East Indian community.

One apology, offered in a face-to-face meeting should be enough. To ignore it would be to cheapen its value.

At this point, the Government of Canada, through the voice of our prime minister, can do no more.

And so the apology hangs in mid air, waiting to be taken hold of, waiting to be finished.

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Since apologies are being handed out so freely by our PM Harper then why is it that we have not heard an apology for the condemnation of 936 Jewish refugees seeking asylum from Nazi persecution in 1939?

The passengers on the SS St. Louis were refused entrance into Cuba, the United States and CANADA!

If those in the East Indian community objecting to Harper's apology had as much class and dignity as those in the Jewish community, Harper's apology would suffice.

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