

COMMENTARY

Give truth a chance, Canada

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EDUARDO GONZALEZFROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
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As The Globe and Mail has reported, bodies of aboriginal children lie in unmarked graves across Canada, on the grounds of residential schools where the federal government sought for more than a century to extinguish aboriginal culture. Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigating these schools has hit a roadblock, it remains the best chance the schools' survivors have to tell their stories - and the best chance Canada has to face its past.

The reality of truth commissions - as I know from my experience working for such a commission in my native Peru - is they often face rocky beginnings, then go on to achieve great things.

Two weeks ago, Mr. Justice Harry LaForme resigned as chair of the residential schools commission, raising concerns about the commission's future, as well as controversy over its scope and vision. It is crucial that a new chair be appointed quickly. If the commission remains in limbo, the schools' eldest survivors risk losing their only chance to share their stories with the country.

Canada should also recognize the significant advantages it has over other countries that have formed truth commissions. In June, Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered an unequivocal apology for the state policy of forced assimilation through residential schools, acknowledging that its purpose was "to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture." The policy, that was carried out from the 1870s to the 1970s, "was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country."

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Canada also has sophisticated advocacy institutions that help victims of residential schools organize, as well as an agreement between the churches that helped run the schools and their survivors on a program of reparations and truth-telling. Last but not least, Canada's effort to face its past has drawn enormous international attention and support.

These advantages are not to be underestimated. Truth commissions usually emerge in societies deeply divided after conflict or dictatorship, exhausted by vicious confrontation that can hinder reconciliation. Canada, in contrast, has been a champion in the United Nations of the right to seek the truth for past abuses. It should capitalize on its advantages to implement this at home.

Lessons learned by truth and reconciliation commissions around the world can help Canada move forward:

-The truth commission will reveal disturbing facts and debunk myths, so the commissioners need to exercise leadership without partisanship or interference from authorities. But this does not mean they should work in isolation. Most truth commissioners have been dynamic public figures, and constructively engage the population and the state to foster reconciliation.

-Truth commissions need to be objective in order to clarify complex facts. At the same time, they do not aspire to be courts of law, and usually make an effort to dignify the experiences, perceptions and suffering of victims.

-Reconciliation cannot be imposed on a society. The most a commission can do is clarify past events and amplify the voices of people who have been stigmatized or silenced. Reconstructing facts without euphemism and restoring the dignity of victims are first steps toward national reconciliation, but they are only the beginning.

Thanks to the Canadian commission, federal researchers are working to identify the thousands of aboriginal children who vanished from the residential schools; many of the children are thought to be in the anonymous graves at the school sites. It is their memory that Canada should honour as it presses forward with its historic truth commission, and works to achieve a healthier, more united country.

Eduardo Gonzalez is deputy director of the Americas program at the International Center for Transitional Justice and a former staff member of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

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