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The Red Road

Mon, December 8, 2008

PART 2: Tragic legacy, historic apology

By **MARK BONOKOSKI**, Sun Media

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On the 11th of June, Prime Minister Stephen Harper stood up in the House of Commons and issued an historic and formal apology for the tragic legacy of the Indian residential school debacle and then sought forgiveness for the students' suffering, and for the "damaging impact the schools had on aboriginal culture, heritage and language."

He could have apologized for a great deal more.

He could have apologized for the Indian Act of 1876, the antiquated piece of legislation, still in existence, that made uninvited Europeans the legal "guardians" of this country's indigenous people — luring them into reserves with treaties often rife with failed or false promises, rendering judgment on the validity of their Native status should they follow certain life paths, deciding who counted and who didn't, and what was deemed good for them and what was not ... right up until the point that they existed no more.

But he didn't.

The goal of the Indian Act, of course, was eventual assimilation of Canada's Native population and, if it wasn't clearly evident in its conception, it was certainly crystal clear by 1920 when Duncan Campbell Scott, then deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs, encapsulated an attitude that prevails to this day.

"Our objective," said Scott, "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 question, and no Indian department."

If not the Indian Act, Harper could have apologized for Bill C-31, the amendment to the Indian Act in 1985 that, once the smoke and mirrors were set aside, received a nickname that was apropos to its intent.

It was soon called the Abocide Bill.

While initially embraced by Native communities for opening the door for 100,000 disenfranchised aboriginals to reclaim lost Native status, the fine print guaranteed



Dr. Peter Menzies is an aboriginal expert on intergenerational trauma. (Mark Bonokoski, Sun Media)

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that the status of following generations would incrementally be diluted to the point that Duncan Campbell Scott's goal would come true, and no more Indians would officially exist.

But Harper did not apologize for that, either.

If not for the Indian Act, or the residential schools, or Bill C-31, Harper could have apologized for the child welfare system in which children's aid societies routinely targeted Native homes and for many reasons — some right, some wrong — yanked generations of children from their cribs and placed them into non-Native and predominantly white foster homes and adoption agencies, all with the intent of "saving" them from the undetermined fate of being an Indian.

But Harper did not apologize for that, either.

Children's aid was not in the federal government's jurisdiction, and therefore no apology was necessary.

But, add them up — the Indian Act, the residential school experiment, Bill C-31, the child welfare system — and the creation from that collective was a force-fed toxic soup that has taken Native Canadians so far off the Red Road that was their way of life for tens of hundreds of years that dysfunction and community despair have become the norm.

Just as genes are passed down, so too is the hell they absorbed.

Peter Menzies calls it "intergenerational trauma."

And he speaks with qualified gravitas.

A member of the Sagamok Anishnawbek First Nations, the 55-year-old Menzies is clinical head of aboriginal services at Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

He is Dr. Peter Menzies.

He wrote his PhD on intergenerational trauma — the result of the cumulative impact of the above mentioned collective of trial projects, legislation and tragedies — and today Menzies not only teaches at the University of Toronto, he also serves on so many boards, advisory groups and research projects that, coupled with his hands-on clinical work at CAMH, he is seemingly always enroute to one conference or another dealing with aboriginal issues.

And he earned his way.

Snatched from alcoholic Native parents when he was an infant, Menzies was never officially adopted but was instead "institutionalized" and then punted from foster home, to group home, to emergency home, until well into his teens — yet nonetheless managed to find the straight-and-narrow early enough after thumbing his way across Canada and the United States to understand that education, and grassroots learning, were keys to both progress and understanding.

"Talking about my life would take years," he admits. "I've done the gamut."

It was after getting his master's degree in social work, and working years in such areas as Native child welfare, family services, income maintenance, homelessness, addictions and mental health, that Menzies began hearing — and then reading — about a concept called intergenerational trauma.

But it was generalized, and not specific.

Menzies' doctoral thesis, however, gave it not just a body. It gave it arms and legs.

It gave it definition and credence.

"Intergenerational trauma, back then, was theory," he says. "So I set out to find out what the indicators were, especially for so many homeless Native men — not being connected to their (Native) community, not being connected to themselves, dealing

with racism and discrimination, not knowing who their families were ... being totally lost.”

And what Peter Menzies found on his way to his doctorate degree was that intergenerational trauma was not only real, it was pervasive.

There is no bottoming-out that is deeper than homelessness, and all that it can entail. And no “ethnic” group, or so-called visible minority, in Canada has a higher rate of homeless than its Native population.

In the Greater Toronto Area, where Native populations range from a conservative estimate of 40,000 to a scattered high of 80,000, street census in Toronto alone has pegged aboriginals as representing 16% to 25% of the homeless.

“There has to be a root reason for homelessness,” says Menzies. “When you are dealing the clinical model of intergenerational trauma, ‘getting over it’ and ‘moving on’ just doesn’t work. Things — terrible things — are passed down from family to family to family.

“To ‘get over it’ is difficult when you are struggling for self-identity, when you are experiencing racism and are being discriminated against, and society looks at them as being alcoholics or drug dealers — the drunken Indian stereotype.

“Simply ‘getting over it’ is too simple of itself,” says Menzies. “It is very difficult for a person to pull themselves out of it when there is all that intergenerational baggage.”

According to Menzies, while Prime Minister Harper’s apology regarding residential Native schools did much to acknowledge that the documented abuses and tragic social consequences from those residential schools were not fiction or understated, it did little to address history as a whole.

“He may have apologized for the residential schools, but he never got into what the Indian Act did,” says Menzies. “That legislation basically denied aboriginal ceremonies. It denied them from leaving the reserves.

“It was the Indian Act that started the process towards the troubles aboriginals are enduring today, and that includes generations who had to endure the residential schools.

“The residential schools created adults who were no longer healthy. They had been physically and sexually abused, they had been isolated from their homes and, if anything, they adopted the parenting skills of their abusers.

“If I was going to take you from your home at three years old, give you different foods, cut off your hair, challenge your spirituality and your culture, and I kept doing it generation after generation, you’re going to have a lot of damaged people trying to raise each other.”

While Menzies sees light at the end of the tunnel — more aboriginal people being employed, more aboriginal people attending university, and more universities are offering Native study curriculum — the end of that tunnel where the light begins is still a goodly distance away.

“There is a lot happening, but there is still a lot that needs to be done,” he says. “The aboriginal population is the fastest-growing population in Canada, but it still has the highest rate of social illnesses — like suicide, addiction, cancer rates and diabetes.

“You have to look at governments, and their responsibilities in all this. The federal government says it’s only responsible for First Nations people, but only if they live on the reserve,” he says. “The province says they’re not responsible at all, because Ottawa has control — except when it comes to claims on provincial Crown land.

“And then the city says, ‘Hey, this is not our issue at all,’ although Toronto is doing the best that it can through supporting certain initiatives.

“But, in the end, Ottawa calls most of the shots.”

If Peter Menzies is correct, there will be no more Indians soon — at least not according to “official” Ottawa — if the game plan first put into play back in 1867 with

the Indian Act evolves through its already plotted stages, and with Bill C-31 envisioning the closure of the Good Red Road before the end of this century as Native "status" evaporates through generational dilution.

"We will no longer be a people," says Menzies. "All aboriginal treaty rights and entitlements will be extinguished.

"Bill C-31 will eventually see to it.

"There are predictions, in fact, that it will all be over by 2075 and that there will be no more C-31 Indians left — meaning no one with will be left with status, and that the last status Indian will have died," says Menzies.

"What's left? Just people. People with no status. People with no land. People the feds will have no responsibly for.

"Now, if the federal government really cared about people, why would they create this beast called Bill C-31?" Menzies asks.

"If I really cared about you, and cared about your family, I would do all I could to preserve you and your family — for now, and for the future.

"But that is not how Ottawa looks at us," says Menzies.

"It wants us gone."

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