



When it comes to Harper's apology, words are not enough
Residential-school abuses are just some of the many injustices against native people

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Indigenous people seek remedies to a long list of injustices that go far beyond the residential schools' direct and collateral victims addressed in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology this week.

The closing of the residential- school door leads down a hallway lined with other doors most Indians know about. The partnership now involves walking down that hallway together.

My grandmother, Belva, my mother, June, and my older sisters Frances, Lynda and Lillian have more than 100 descendants. Indian residential schools affected all these women's lives. Some made their way in the world. Our family has artists, social activists, professionals and businesspeople. We also have members who are part of the casualty list found in Statistics Canada 2006 and in the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy. So we also have people in jail and poor people. Whether my relatives went to residential school or on-reserve schools, we all received an Indian Affairs education that tried to extinguish the Indian in us.

Indian residential schools and on-reserve schools were imbued with assimilation goals. The Department of Indian Affairs teacher handbooks instructed teaching Indian students about hygiene, nutrition and rote learning. But one section that was emphasized was to teach Indian children "obedience to authority." Sometimes handled with care, Indian children were also subjected to abuses by teachers of obedience that were acknowledged by the government of Canada in its apology.

But Harper's apology appears to continue the tradition of word games in Canadian-Indian politics. Apologizing to "aboriginals" kills the "Indian" diplomatically anyway. Also, we expect the apology to create more divisions among indigenous peoples. Longstanding schisms already exist between traditional confederacies like the Iroquois-Blackfoot-Innu peoples, and organizations and band councils created under Canadian law. We already saw the positioning of those "favoured nations" in the House of Commons Wednesday - "aboriginal" incorporated bodies invited to the apology. So judgment is reserved about what it means to us.

Was the apology a show? Aimed only at the residential schools issue, was Canada saying, "We know you feel bad because one of our family burned down your house ... but we're only paying for the windows?"

Canada constantly flaunts the \$2 billion it has spent on residential-school payouts. The apology leads Canadians to continue to believe they are actually paying the bill.

For example, the same day the Conservative government was apologizing to aboriginals, Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre told a radio audience in Ottawa that Canada has spent a

"tremendous amount of money" - \$10-illion in its 2007-08 budget with another \$4 billion for the apology.

He also said Indians needed to learn about "hard work."

What the average Canadian heard is a message about how a large burden has fallen on the Canadian taxpayer to pay for native affairs.

For all that, the statement did make remarkable concessions.

First, Canada recognizes that collateral victims of residential schools are now admitted to the dialogue about reparations. Medical, social and mental research provides evidence on the impact of the transmission of intergenerational trauma.

Second, the admission that "it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes" has implications in international law. The 1948 UN Genocide Conventions prohibit such forcible removal.

Third, Canada has ended its Indian termination policy. What termination policy? "Our object is to continue," wrote chief architect of Indian termination Duncan Campbell Scott in the early 1900s, "until there is not a single Indian that has not been absorbed into the body politic of Canada and there is no more Indian question. That is the whole purpose of our legislation." Harper said early in Canada's apology that "this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country."

Fourth, Harper's benediction returns Canada to foundational principles between the Crown and indigenous peoples formed in our collective memory. "God bless you all, and God bless our land," he said invoking God and country. This seems unusual in the profane world of modern nation-states, but it is expected in indigenous culture.

In the past, mutual aid, mutual respect, and mutual defence based on respectful friendship allowed Europeans to prosper in this land. These foundational principles strengthen relationships and are the basis for treaties between Europeans and Indians. This might lead to mediation processes to resolve disputes.

Other issues remain. There's the uninformed sterilization of native girls up into the 1980s. And the sorry inventory of conditions on reserves where disease, drinking water, housing and intergenerational transmission of trauma create enormous social problems. In the 1980s, an Indian Affairs treaty implementation report said Canada owed indigenous people for land, resource, and treaty obligations that amounted to \$11.5 trillion. Across the continent, vast tracts like the Great Lakes watershed have underlying title retained by indigenous people whose communities are treaty-based.

I met my cousins Mariah and Maryanne for supper. They asked me if I'd applied for any of the residential-school settlement money. They said they were getting \$35,000. "I'm going to get a new car," Maryanne said. "I already got one," said Mariah.

"Do you feel healed?" I asked.

They both laughed.

So did I.

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