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## Columnists

### Making policy on the fly is risky business



William Neville

Updated: August 8 at 02:00 AM CDT

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With Parliament in summer recess, it should be easy enough to rest one's mind from monitoring the general nastiness and over-heated rhetoric which has largely displaced rational and measured political discourse. Even in summer's dog days, however, unexpected events force one to consider what our politicians are doing or proposing to do. Two in particular are arresting: both raise questions about the wisdom about continuing down paths on which we have already embarked; both illustrate the dangers of making policy on the fly.

The first has to do with the with the business of public -- and political -- apologies for the wrongs of previous governments and generations. This is a troubling issue since it effectively calls upon the present generation to accept responsibility for the sins of omission and commission of previous generations and, in some instances, to acknowledge that responsibility with financial compensation. Of these apologies, far and away the most significant and compelling has been that extended to aboriginal peoples. The First Nations, after all, were the first nations in the sense of constituting the resident populations in what is now Canada when it began to be colonized by Europeans. Not only were the First Nations physically dispossessed of most of their territories but, as is clear from the whole residential schools phenomenon, successive governments pursued policies aimed at eradicating traditional languages and cultures and assimilating aboriginal populations into the new European-based societies of Canada. The apology to First

Nations, tendered in Parliament earlier this year, was a symbolic gesture of the first importance, though its substantive importance remains uncertain.

Though the First Nations are unique in character and in their substantive importance to Canadian history, many groups have historic grievances to which the political class has responded in recent years. The Conservatives, once hostile to the idea of collective guilt, have been converted by the prospect of electoral benefits, and have boarded the apology bandwagon with a vengeance. This week, however, the bandwagon developed a flat tire. Some months ago, Stephen Harper agreed to extend an apology for the Canadian government's refusal to allow an Indian ship, the Komagata Maru, to land in Vancouver harbour in 1914. The ship's nearly 400 people -- predominantly Sikhs with some Muslims and Hindus -- had embarked believing that, as British subjects, they were free to immigrate to Canada when, in fact, Canadian laws and practices effectively curtailed non-white immigration. After two months in Vancouver harbour, the ship was forced to leave; on its return to India, 19 passengers were shot and others were imprisoned by the British colonial authorities as dangerous political activists.

Those who argued the case for an apology had organized a public event last weekend at which they expected Harper to announce a date for a formal apology in Parliament. Several days before the event, Harper's office advised that although he would apologize in Vancouver, there would be no apology in Parliament; attempts to persuade him to do both were unsuccessful. He came, delivered his speech and left.

Not surprisingly, many in the Indian community are unhappy. It appears that there is a hierarchy amongst apologies: all apologies are equal but some apologies are more equal than others. Is it perhaps time to have a moratorium on apologies, lest we begin to inflict a new round of insults and injuries which will require yet more apologies? Is it perhaps time to affirm that, in the Diefenbaker Bill of Rights and the Trudeau Charter of Rights, Canadians expressed a desire to renounce -- as part of the past -- those prejudices and practices which brought pain or harm to many in our past?

The second problematic policy issue arises from last week's horrific murder on a Greyhound bus near Portage la Prairie. Several MPs have mused publicly as to whether such a shocking crime could have been prevented. The highly probable answer is no. As a young man I rode the bus from Edmonton to Winnipeg and return several times and, though much has undoubtedly changed, my guess is that certain things have not; that in the small stops along the route there are no bus depots in which to mount screening devices. And were it possible it could only add substantially to the costs of what is intended to be an inexpensive form of transportation. If we are dealing with a psychopath, such a crime could be committed in almost any situation where people are brought together: a city bus, a shopping mall, a place of worship. To protect all people against all possible horrors is impossible.

MPs, like the rest of us, are free to muse on such issues, but the costs of constraining everyone vis-a-vis everyone else would be horrific, not least in the intrusion it would involve in the lives all those members of society who are not psychopaths. The world is not an absolutely safe place. An attempt to make it so would not only be illusory but would require a state apparatus such as to make one fear the remedy more than the problem.

wnwfp@mts.net

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