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**Aboriginals deserve an apology**

By **JOSEPH QUESNEL**

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The Canadian government should finally apologize for the shameful residential schools experience.

It is true government has done much to expedite the residential schools settlement, but it is the apology survivors now seek and are entitled to.

I was reminded of this after attending an event hosted in Winnipeg by the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was the final leg of a cross-country tour, where school survivors accompanied church leaders.

It was one of the most powerful events I have ever attended. Representatives from the Anglican, Presbyterian, United and Catholic churches formally acknowledged their complicity in the face of this government attempt to forcefully assimilate aboriginal peoples. Church leaders co-operated with government to set them up, so they bear responsibility for inter-generational effects that haunt First Nation communities today.

Some of them only closed within the last few decades. My own hometown of Spanish, Ont. (near Sudbury) had one.

When each of the church leaders apologized, you could tell it meant something to those who attended these schools. Despite their educational value, it was recognized the schools were part of the government's strategy to "kill the Indian in the child." Elderly community members, it was felt, could not be "civilized," so it was necessary to go after children.

Many speakers called for the prime minister to apologize publicly. Not because he personally is responsible, but because he is the chief spokesman for the government and it was deliberate government policy to run these schools that criminalized aboriginal language, spirituality and culture and served as havens for horrific sexual and physical abuse.

Many wonder where much of the abuse, alcoholism, suicide, and violence within First Nation communities come from and it is evident it stems partly from this experience. An entire generation of people were removed from their communities, separated from families, and put into institutions where many were prohibited from speaking their language or practising their spirituality.

For years I downplayed these experiences, until I heard the stories. As someone with libertarian beliefs, I now see it as unjustifiable acts of statist coercion against individuals. Many still harbour ill feelings against Christianity because of their experience.

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It was heartening to hear from church leaders, as it showed they were willing to work with these communities to heal.

When I saw the ministers, I was reminded of my recent experience in Rwanda, where the Catholic Church was complicit in allowing people to be massacred. While the residential schools were not as bad as the Rwandan Genocide, both events speak to the role of religion in evil acts.

Thousands in Rwanda have dissociated from Catholicism because of this experience. At least churches here have reached out to those affected and asked for forgiveness.

Now, government must accept its central role.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper should apologize because it means the government, for ever more, rejects attempts to violently assimilate people and condemns past racist attitudes that led to the founding of these schools.

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