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EDITORIAL

Harper continues shameful legacy

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For more than a century, aboriginal children as young as 5 were taken from their families and transferred to residential schools hundreds of kilometres away where they were forbidden to speak their native language, eat their customary foods or practise their traditions.

Only years later did it emerge that many of the 150,000 Indian, Inuit and Métis children sent to schools across Canada suffered widespread physical, sexual and emotional abuse. As well, many died from tuberculosis brought on by unsanitary living conditions. Because it was illegal to resist giving up children, parents could not fight this "cultural assimilation."

The scars are still there in the survivors and their descendants. Torn from their old culture and rejected by the new, many natives have never found a safe place to land. They suffer from exceedingly high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, domestic violence and sexual dysfunction.

Native residential schools were, as Phil Fontaine, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations and himself a victim, rightly says, "the most disgraceful, harmful and racist act in our history."

That is why the members of the House of Commons deserve praise for standing as one this week to collectively apologize to the 80,000 former residential school students who are still alive.

It is also why Prime Minister Stephen Harper deserves universal disgust for his stubborn and inexplicable refusal to issue an official apology to the survivors on behalf of the federal government. Instead of doing what the House did in a largely symbolic 270-0 vote on Tuesday, Harper left it to well-meaning, but powerless, Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice to explain that a formal apology is still years away – if it ever comes at all.

To native Canadians, Harper's refusal to issue an apology is just another betrayal in a long, tragic history that started in 1874 and continued until the late 1960s when the schools were gradually being phased out. The last one finally closed in 1984.

The former Liberal government under then prime minister Jean Chrétien admitted in 1998 that students were abused in the schools for more than 100 years. A groundbreaking compensation package worth more than \$2 billion to the surviving students was negotiated in 2005. At that time, the Liberal government of former prime minister Paul Martin promised an apology to the victims as part of the settlement.

Earlier this year, Prentice argued unconvincingly that no apology was necessary because the underlying objective of residential schools was to provide an education to aboriginal children.

Now Prentice says a \$60-million, five-year truth and reconciliation commission, which was set up as part of the compensation settlement, should be allowed to complete its job before any apology is issued. The commission will travel across Canada hearing stories about the traumatic impact the schools had on native lives.

By approving this approach, Harper is callously delaying an apology that is fully warranted. The commission is a forum where abused students can tell of their experiences so Canadians can learn more about this scandal. But it has nothing to do with whether Ottawa should offer an apology.

So why is Harper being so stubborn? Only he knows, because all legal obstacles have been cleared away.

If Harper wants to be seen as a compassionate leader, he should reverse his stand and offer a full apology. By doing so, he would be taking a first step in bringing closure to this shameful chapter in Canadian history.

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