

CANADA

An unusual apology for residential schools

University of Manitoba president says institution should have spoken out on 'national shame'

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In an unusual move, the president of a Canadian university has issued a formal apology to aboriginals across the country for his institution's failure to speak out against the "national shame" of residential schools.

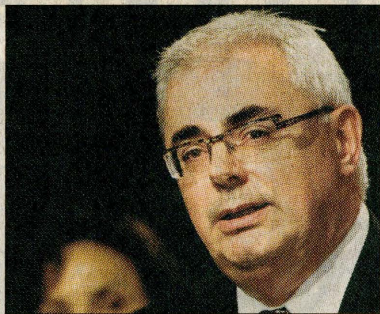
But why would University of Manitoba's David Barnard apologize for something that had nothing to do with universities?

Because as watchdogs of human rights, they should have known, Barnard maintained after his formal apology Thursday in Halifax before Canada's Truth and Recon-

ciliation Commission, which is examining the impact of some 140 residential schools on generations of native children.

"The role of the university is to be aware and ask questions about what values are being embedded in the way we treat each other, and we don't think the university was sufficiently challenging about what happened," said Barnard, the first university president to apologize for not speaking out against the abusive system.

Barnard also apologized for the fact his campus trained some of the clergy, educators, social workers, civil servants and politicians re-



David Barnard says the university's role is to be aware, ask questions.

sponsible for the "misguided assimilation policies" that robbed some 150,000 children of their sense of identity.

"Our institution failed to recognize or challenge the forced assimilation of aboriginal peoples and the subsequent loss of their language,

culture and traditions," Barnard said before the commission.

"That was a grave mistake. It is our responsibility. We are sorry."

The commission is examining the impact of some 140 residential schools that moved native children far from their homes to give them a European-style education, convert them to Christianity and punish them for using their own language.

"Tragically, many children never returned," Barnard said. "Those who did return were often strangers in their own homes and communities. Physical, sexual and emotional abuses that occurred at residential schools were among the most deplorable acts committed against any people at any time in Canada's history."

Barnard's statement was hailed as

significant by the commission chair, Justice Murray Sinclair.

The commission was set up as part of a \$4 billion class-action settlement between former students, the churches and Ottawa, and is halfway through a five-year mandate to gather stories of survivors and find ways to repair the relationship between aboriginals, the government, churches and other Canadians.

Shirley Williams was taken from her home in Wikwemikong Reserve on Manitoulin Island when she was 7 to attend a residential school where she would be strapped for speaking Ojibwa to her cousin. Now a professor at Trent University, Williams welcomed Barnard's apology and said other university presidents should consider following suit.