

For immediate release

DEHCHO GRAND CHIEF COMMENTS ON APOLOGY TO FIRST NATIONS

Following is a statement issued by interim Grand Chief Gerald Antoine of the Dehcho First Nations on the impending apology to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada by Prime Minister Stephen Harper:

On Wednesday June 11, the Prime Minister is scheduled to deliver an apology on behalf of Canada to Indigenous Peoples for the indignities imposed on us in residential schools.

It is appropriate. The residential schools devastated the lives of many of our people. Some are still in denial about it generations later.

People systematically oppressed learn to live with oppression as “normal”.. What may appear to be normal really is not.

The residential school system::

- Removed children from the influence of their parents so they could be assimilated into a “civilized” life style;
- expected that in three generations all Indigenous People would be sedentary farmers producing agricultural products for Canada;
- forbade children from speaking their own language;
- ridiculed and laughed at children who were homesick or longed for their parents;
- “if they even think of themselves as Indian they will be ashamed.” (Roman Catholic Bishop Vital-Justin Grandin)

The system shattered what was left of our societies after a history of oppression. Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada’s first Prime Minister wrote : “Tell our friends in Europe that the Indian and the Metis will be held down with a firm hand until the country is overrun, owned and operated by White settlers.” MacDonald followed up by naming people in the military as directors-general of “Indian Affairs”. The interests of European business, with the support of governments, had launched numerous initiatives to eliminate Indigenous People from North America. The French Academy of Sciences even hosted a conference in the 1800 which tried – unsuccessfully -- to find out if we were human. That did not stop many attempts to destroy our societies. Examples:

- the use of “germ warfare” which historians estimate killed nine of every 10 Indigenous men, women and children in North America;
- government legislation and policy was initiated to prevent us from maintaining economic and political independence;
- countless police and army actions removed people from their lands;
- our spiritual and religious practices were criminalized and our spiritual and political leaders imprisoned without even Canadian due process;
- our people were corralled on reservations without and of Canada’s legal rights (e.g. to meet, vote, to trade or engage legal counsel)
- we were considered non-persons in Canada until 1963.

This was the context in which residential schools were systematically introduced 97 years ago. Those of us left were shattered and the impacts are still with us:

- many lost their language;
- we lost respect of self, family and community;
- we lost trust in ourselves and others;
- as children, we never learned parenting skills;
- we lost knowledge of cultural gender relationships;
- we lost our self-esteem
- We were denied any opportunity to learn the traditional spirituality, ceremonies and ways of worship our Creator expects of us;
- We lost self-discipline;
- We lost our connections to the land;
- We lost our connections to traditional diet;
- We lost our stories, oral history, and knowledge of cosmology;
- We were denied any opportunity to learn the skills of our cultures such as songs, dances, ceremonies, hunting, and knowledge of the land, the basis of our economic independence; and
- We lost the capacity for self-determination.

The historic relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples is assimilation. This oppressive ideology resulted in the creation of the culture of Indian Affairs, a culture which exists to this day. It still works against the expressed interests of Indigenous communities, on the pretext that we are incapable of taking care of ourselves.

Yes, it is good and proper for Canada to apologize for the wrongs of the residential school. But, saying “I’m sorry” doesn’t fix anything. What does the bible say? “Before your offerings are acceptable to God, you have to go and make amends with your brother.”

When Canada dismantles Indian Affairs and the Treasury Board vote for funds to meet Treaty obligations are transferred directly to First Nations, then recovery can begin.

When Canada recognizes that it is a state with delegated authority and not sovereign over Indigenous communities, then healing will begin.

When Canada shares the wealth of Indigenous lands equitably with Indigenous communities, then the healing will begin.

When Canada recognizes its addiction to power and accepts the reality that Indigenous peoples agreed to share and live in peace and not to give their lands, resources and very lives so that the Queen’s “children” could have it all for themselves, then the healing will begin for Canada and for us.

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