

Cry me a River,
White Boy

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Aabwehyehnmigziwin is the Anishnawbe word for apology. That is what Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered in the House of Commons on the eleventh of June 2008 to the Survivors of Canada's residential school system.⁴ Quoting the immortal words of singer Brenda Lee, who put it so eloquently,

I'm sorry, so sorry ...

Please accept my apology ...

You tell me mistakes

Are part of being young

But that don't right

The wrong that's been done

Harper said, "We are Sorry." Sorry. Surprising words from a surprising source. Brenda had put it much more eloquently. But the First Nations people of Canada listened. There were thousands of Aboriginal people on the front lawn of the Parliament buildings, eager to hear this historic admission of responsibility. Televisions were set up in community centres, band offices, halls, and schools in Aboriginal communities all across the country. And then the people cried. They cried at the memory of what had been done, and what was being said. This event made a lot of people cry, and for many, it was a good cry—a cathartic one. Psychiatrists and Elders will tell you that.

Since the late 1800s, over 150,000 Aboriginal children were forcibly taken away from their families and shipped off to one of 130-plus schools scattered across seven provinces and two territories. There, they were robbed of their language, their beliefs, their self-respect, their culture, and, in some cases, their very existence in a vain attempt to make them more Canadian. The key phrase I kept hearing during the apology and in the opposition responses was the misguided belief that *in order to save the child, you must destroy the Indian*. How on earth did those two thoughts become entwined? Another fine example of an un-researched and unintelligent government policy like the Chinese head tax⁵ or sending a small Inuit community five hundred kilometres further north in an attempt to establish Arctic sovereignty. The thought processes of many a politician can truly be baffling when it comes to people of another race.

The official *Aabwehyehnmigziwin* was a long time in coming, and hopefully it will close the chapter on this unfortunate part of First Nations history so

that an entirely new book can begin, hopefully, this time with Aboriginal people as co-authors. All of the churches who ran residential schools—Roman Catholic, United, Anglican, and Presbyterian—have issued their own version of *aabwehyehnmigziwin* over the years. In 1998, the Liberals offered a kind of watered down, wimpy, anemic version. Essentially, it was something about having “profound regrets.”⁹ I have a lot of regrets too. Most people do. For instance, I have had sincere regrets about some of my past relationships, but that does not mean I apologize for them. Big difference.

Perhaps it is my working-class origins and artsy nature, but I do find it odd that it was the Conservative government who found the balls to issue the *aabwehyehnmigziwin*. It makes one wonder why the Conservative lawyers saw this as possible, when ten years earlier, an army of government lawyers under the Liberals likely advised against it. You would think the residential school system would be something the Conservatives would admire. On the surface, it fits into their political and economic agenda. The government promised, in a number of treaties, to educate the youth from over 600 reserves across the world’s second biggest country. They managed to download the cost of educating these youth by transferring it to the four main religious groups and their churches. Sounds like a sound economic decision, does it not?

In 2005, the Liberal government was all set to adopt the Kelowna Accord and address many of the serious issues plaguing First Nations communities. Then prime minister Paul Martin had long been concerned with Aboriginal issues. Yet no apology. Fast forward to 2006 when the Conservatives took power and offered Canada a new way of doing business, which basically involved shelving the Kelowna Accord and hiring Tom Flanagan, author of the controversial book *First Nations? Second Thoughts*, as a top Conservative advisor. Things did not look good for First Nations communities in this new century. Then came Harper’s 180-degree turn. One could almost hear the snow falling in hell. Perhaps the official bean counters had taken into account the fact that an official apology would be in their best interest, as it would shift responsibility to the Aboriginal communities. The government could then wash a lot of it off their hands.

How could the federal government know the whole issue of accountability for residential schools would later be classified as—and I love this term frequently used to describe screwed-up governmental policies—a boondoggle? It has literally come back to bite them in their fish-belly white asses. On average, over 1.9 billion dollars⁴ has already been paid out to many of the approximately 80,000 Survivors of Manifest Destiny High. That is a hell of an expensive education. And the price tag is still rising. Canadian taxpayers will be buying

bandages for the physical and psychological wounds their ancestors inflicted for generations.³

It had been obvious for a long time that apologizing was not high on the Liberals' to-do list. Pierre Trudeau did not want to bother with an *aabwehyehnmigziwin*. I think he felt it would just open the floodgates to more apologies that would quickly become unfortunate road bumps on the highway of proud Canadian history. I think he would have been right. Jean Chrétien did not believe current social beliefs should be applied to past issues, yet it was Brian Mulroney's Conservatives who issued an apology to Japanese Canadians for the country's misdoings during World War II.⁴ And now, Harper is regretting the Aboriginal people's historical treatment. Who would have thunk it? In all fairness, it should be mentioned that it was the Conservatives that gave Aboriginal people the right to vote in 1960. Way to go, Progressive Conservatives! ... a phrase I thought I would never say. Though many would argue old-school Conservatives are substantially different from the New World Conservatives. Personally, I think Diefenbaker could whip Harper's ass. Still, Harper is the current boss, and I guess that is why the Ojibways call him the *Kichi Toodooshaabowimijim*, which translates to "the Big Cheese" or, perhaps even more literally, to "Much Sour Milk."

Of course, there is always one spoilsport at every party, a pisser in the pool, known as the Conservative *brain trust*, a.k.a. Pierre Poilievre and his amazingly insensitive comments about Survivors just needing a stronger work ethic and his opinion that giving these people reparation money was a waste of time. Otherwise, things might have been just fine and dandy. Evidently, Harper took the boy out to the proverbial woodshed, and a new and different apology by a contrite Poilievre soon followed. It should have been expected, just like there is one drunk at every party, one ex-girlfriend at every powwow, and one veggie burger at every barbecue. It was bound to happen in the volatile world of Canadian politics, somebody was going to pee in the pool. Conservative politicians are seldom known for their subtlety.

Was the *aabwehyehnmigziwin* sincere and do I buy it? Yes, I suppose it was sincere enough for me to buy it, however naïve that may sound. I suppose something is better than nothing. I also know that, by very definition, politicians should not be trusted nor believed any more than a Jerry Springer guest, especially when it comes to commitments to Aboriginal people. But Harper looked sincere, as did Dion, Duceppe, and Layton—all privileged white men apologizing for the actions of other privileged white men and also eager to curry First Nation favour. It is amazing how a good education can make you the empathetic leader of a federal party and a bad education

can get you an *aabwehyehnmigziwin*. They probably listened to Brenda Lee and her apologetic song. They are of that generation. Brenda probably knew little or nothing about Canadian politics or Aboriginal issues, though nobody could apologize like her.

I know a lot of people who were a little cynical about the sincerity of the apology. That is their right. If an abusive husband apologizes to his abused wife and kids, however sincere it might sound, some may doubt the authenticity of that apology. Same as in this situation, an admission of responsibility is as good a place as any to start. Ask any lawyer. But the healing must start somewhere.

I am very fortunate. Neither I nor any of my immediate relatives attended a residential school. Instead, we were schooled at the Mud Lake Indian Day School located directly on the Curve Lake Reserve in eastern Ontario. Still, many of the residential school policies extended to the communities. My mother tells of not being allowed to speak Anishnawbe on school grounds, which were located just a few hundred metres from where she lived. Just the other night, I heard her reminiscing with one of her sisters about how they made sure they never played under the windows of the school so the teacher would not hear them speaking in Anishnawbe. One usually does not think of one's seventy-seven-year old shy mother as a rebel. Maybe that is why Anishnawbe is still her first language and English a distant second.

There is a lot of collateral damage from that era as well. Hot on the heels of residential school Survivors are those who went through the Sixties Scoop, where Aboriginal kids were taken away by various social services and farmed out for adoption, usually to white families, sometimes to Europe and to the United States. They were part of the same larger, overall policy of eliminating Aboriginal culture by wiping away the memories and heritage of Aboriginal children and Canadianizing them. If you cannot get them through the front door, try the back, or even the window.

Interestingly, many Aboriginal people watching the historic *aabwehyehnmigziwin* were not actual students of residential schools. But I think it is safe to say that they were all affected by the practice in some way. Most Aboriginal people who watched knew somebody or several somebodies who attended residential school or were descended from, or a relative of, a Survivor. As a result, they were forced to deal with the repercussions of that experience. It now permeates our culture. Harper and Canada's apology was for all of us—those who attended the schools and those who are living with the fallout. Just as all Jewish people were affected by the Holocaust in some way (if I may be allowed to say this), all Aboriginal people were victims

of what happened in those institutions. It is collateral damage in sort of an intergenerational way.

What happens now? I do not know. Maybe Phil Fontaine and the gang should contact Maher Arar. He might have some suggestions. If memory serves me correctly, Mr. Arar was kidnapped suddenly for no logical reason, taken far away from his family for a long period of time, beaten, starved, and terrified for the greater good. He finally returned to his family a changed man and is now seeking justice. Geez, you would think he was an Aboriginal kid or something.

As the similarly sympathetic Connie Francis who, like Brenda Lee, was neither Aboriginal nor a residential school Survivor, also sang many years ago, "I'm sorry I made you cry." Did Harper get his words right (that were chosen for him by lawyers)? Harper had said, "We are sorry ... We apologize for having done this." He must not forget that there is still a Canadian issue here that all Canadians need to address as part of an ongoing relationship. Closing the book on residential schools does not mean that the "Aboriginal problem" has been solved—at least not in the eyes of the government. Thus, I will let Connie Francis finish with her poignant lyrics:

I'm sorry I made you cry

Won't you forget, won't you forgive

Don't let us say goodbye

I'm just glad Harper did not try to sing the *aabwehyehnmigziwin*.

Notes

- 1 See Appendix 2.
- 2 For a brief review on the history of the Chinese head tax, please see pages 238-239 of Bradford W. Morse's article "Reconciliation Possible? Reparations Essential" in Castellano, Marlene Brant, Linda Archibald, and Mike DeGagné (2008). *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*. Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Healing Foundation: 233-256.
- 3 Government of Canada (1998). *Statement of Reconciliation*. Ottawa, ON: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Presented on 7 January 1998 by The Honourable Jane Stewart, Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Retrieved 15 September 2008 from: http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/gs/rec_e.html
- 4 Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (no date). Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada 2007-2008 Departmental Performance Report. Retrieved 31 March 2009 from: <http://www.its-sct.gc.ca/dpr-rmr/2007-2008/inst/ira/ira-eng.pdf>
- 5 See: Bowlus, Audra, Katherine McKenna, Tanis Day and David Wright (2003). *The Economic Costs and Consequences of Child Abuse in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: The Law Commission of Canada; and Native Counselling Services of Alberta (2001). *A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Hollow Water's Community Holistic Circle Healing Process*. Ottawa, ON: Solicitor General Canada and Aboriginal Healing Foundation.
- 6 For a brief review on the apology and redress to Japanese Canadians, please see pages 237-238 of Bradford W. Morse's article "Reconciliation Possible? Reparations Essential" in Castellano, Marlene Brant, Linda Archibald, and Mike DeGagné (2008). *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*. Ottawa, ON: Aboriginal Healing Foundation: 233-256.