

Residential School Syndrome Part One: Canada's Shameful Legacy

By Robert Laboucane

By now, readers should be clear about who the Aboriginal people are in Canada and the great diversity in cultures and languages that exist.

Readers should also, having read my past several columns in *The Pegg*, be informed about the additional rights Aboriginal people have acquired over and above those of other Canadian citizens, and how these rights evolved through history.

Why, then, are Canadian Aboriginal people where they are today? What are some of the key factors that have devastated their people, communities, governance, spirituality, cultures and languages?

Many factors come into play; this article, however, will address the federal government's ill-fated residential school system and shed light on why Ottawa is shelling out \$2 billion of your tax dollars to about 80,000 residential school survivors over the next year or so.

This is not an easy topic to explain – the details are often horrific, and the logic is seriously flawed. With all its complexities and hidden truths, it is also not an easy subject for readers to absorb.

The residential school movement began in the late 1620s, when four of eight Indian youth attending a boarding school run by the Franciscans were sent to France to complete their education. This launched a centuries-old experiment in social engineering that today we identify as cultural genocide.

By 1672, it was deemed necessary to “Frenchify” Indians by means of a more aggressive and assimilative schooling policy. That thought continued until after the war of 1812, when it became apparent to the British Crown and its representatives in North America that the “usefulness” of the Indian had become much diminished. The skills, talents and contributions of the Aboriginal people were simply no longer required: their land was occupied by arriving settlers, hundreds of treaties were signed and the newcomer's survival in this hostile land was now assured.

With the co-operation of the four major Christian churches, the task of ‘taking the Indian out of the Indian’ – thus allowing them to join the so-called ‘Circle of Civilization’ – began in earnest. The federal “Doctrine of Assimilation” for Canada's founding peoples became British policy in 1828. Through subsequent decades, federal legislation and policy development led to the establishment of the controversial residential schools, the last one closed being the Gordon First Nation in Saskatchewan a mere 11 years ago.

This policy was based on several dehumanizing (and incorrect) ideas about Aboriginal people and their diverse cultures. The policy assumed they were inferior; they were unable to govern themselves and colonial authority knew best how to protect their

interests and well-being; that the special relationship of respect and sharing enshrined in the treaties was an historical anomaly with no force or meaning; and that European ideas about progress and development was self-evidently correct and could be imposed on Aboriginal people without any other values and opinions – let alone rights – they might possess

Reflecting back over historical and modern-day actions, policies and programs, it becomes obvious that this “doctrine” continues to be a guiding light for those in power NOT to fulfill the obligations agreed to under treaties. We can then conclude that our federal government is in a very difficult and confusing state of conflict of interest, especially when it has a fiduciary duty and responsibility as a trustee to look after the best interests its wards.

Currently, the government acts as ultimate judge, jury and defendant with very biased decisions against the Aboriginal community and their concerns.

How is this in the best interests of Canadian citizens?

From an Aboriginal perspective, assimilation is the process in which Aboriginal identity is absorbed into mainstream culture and subsequently lost. Integration, on the other hand, is when a person can participate in the society around them without having to give up their fundamental identity.

Their strength, endurance, perseverance and resilience are why the Aboriginal people have survived this onslaught and the residential schools themselves. The church-run schools practiced brutal enforcement of the government’s assimilation policies. Children who spoke their native language often had pins stuck through their tongues. Others were starved, beaten or otherwise tortured.

Those who ran away were hunted down and forced to return; the sick or injured were sometimes left to die. Parents who refused to hand over their children were jailed; those who tried to reclaim their sons and daughters could not, as Indians were banned by law from leaving their reserves without the local Indian agents permission and it was a criminal act if you returned late.

The government’s own records show that more than 150,000 children attended about 150 residential schools across Canada over a period of 120 years. More than half of those children – some 75,000 – died at the schools or soon after returning home.

Why haven’t you heard these details before? That’s likely because Canada’s history books have been largely sanitized to keep the messy details of a failed policy from innocent schoolchildren and even adults.

Even today, the federal government of Canada refuses to accept responsibility for the historic damage inflicted upon the children who attended these schools. The government issued a “statement of reconciliation” in 1998 that acknowledged the grievances suffered during the residential school regime. There was, however, no apology.

That’s not good enough.

The echo of this depraved policy lingers still throughout the halls of our parliament from the time Indian Affairs Deputy Superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott declared in 1920:

“I want to get rid of the Indian problem. Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question,” Scott boasted at the time.

Yet even the churches involved have owned up to their role. “We consider that the treatment of Aboriginal peoples, including the imposition of the residential school system, constitutes a most shameful chapter in Canada’s national history,” says Rev. James Scott, United Church general council officer.

In March, the church publicly called for a full national apology by the federal government for its role in residential schools. Scott says the church acknowledges its part in the colonial enterprise, which resulted in a society that has been unjust, abusive and racist.

The church’s action was in response to comments a few days earlier by federal Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice, who said the Conservative government has no reason to apologize as that was not part of an earlier deal reached by the previous federal Liberal government to pay \$2 billion in compensation to residential school survivors

The impact of the assimilation policy has been devastating to Aboriginal communities. Many generations of Inuit, Métis and First Nation children spent the greater part of their childhood in residential schools for many generations. The abuse and neglect they suffered while there left its mark on their adult lives, as well as the lives of their descendants whose families have been characterized by further abuse and neglect.

“There were public floggings of young children who did nothing wrong,” recalls Ken Young, a residential school survivor. “Those who attempted to run away were hunted down, treated like prisoners and flogged in front of all of us in the dining room on an almost daily basis. Those events really affected me.”

By 1845, the federal Bagot Commission acknowledged that the reserve system was a failure. Another report two years later, indicated there was a very small chance that Indians could be raised to the social and political level of their white neighbours. In 1845, the Gradual Civilization Act was passed, which basically said that Indians who spoke English, had a Grade 3 level of education and no debt were no longer qualified to be an Indian. This act was withdrawn by 1910, but never forgotten.

By then, the damage had been done.

As adults, many survivors of residential schools found themselves struggling alone with the pain, rage and grief of unresolved trauma. Some were also re-victimized by domestic violence or became, themselves, the abusers of their partners, children or parents.

Intergenerational or multi-generational trauma happens when the effects of trauma are not resolved in one generation. This is the legacy of physical and sexual abuse in residential schools, according to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (www.ahf.ca) – an organization that is working to promote sustainable healing for residential school survivors and their families.

Other abuses magnified the problem. Diseases to which indigenous people had no immunity wiped out 95 per cent of the North American Aboriginal population by 1880. The Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodists and Presbyterian churches convinced the government they could educate Aboriginal children, insisting the youngsters join the “Circle of Civilization” and save their souls – for a reasonable fee of course.

For North American Aboriginal people, the “principle of non-interference” was a powerful priority whose purpose was to avoid imposing one’s will on any other individual except in the most extreme circumstances.

Non-interference demonstrates the high degree of respect for every human being's independence. A community's collective goal relies on voluntary co-operation. The ethic of democracy, which underlies the ethic of non-interference, emphasizes the equality of all individuals, encourages economic homogeneity, decision-making by consensus, independence of mind, autonomy and a high degree of personal privacy.

Why is this good for Canadians, but not acceptable for Aboriginal citizens?

Imagine how you would feel if the residential school experiment happened to you and your family, decade after decade, for more than a century? Does anger or even rage come to mind?

Does your federal government know how you feel about this? Perhaps it's time you told them.

Next month, I will write about the statement of reconciliation, alternative dispute resolution, the distribution of billions of dollars to the victims of the residential schools and the intergenerational impacts of this horrific, failed experiment which continues to impact all of us – Aboriginal or not – in Canada today.

I wonder how all this will manifest itself on June 29th, National Day of Action.

Your questions are most welcome – e-mail me at robert@ripplefx.ca

RECOMMENDED READING LIST –

History books that tell the story:

Shingwauk's Vision by J.R. Miller

A National Crime by John S. Milloy

The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada by Roland Chrisjohn and Sherri Young with Michael Maraum