

Social Issues and Aboriginal Poverty The Absence of Action.

It is my hope that this article will help readers understand why so many of Canada's Aboriginal people are where they are today – and why they face such a multitude of complex, day-to-day challenges.

We can say with confidence that there are profound disparities in every measurable societal issue between Aboriginal people and mainstream Canadians. Before we can be too judgmental, we need to comprehend why this is so, and what must be done to truly address these issues.

On June 11th last year, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized in the House of Commons for the historical wrongs done to Canada's Aboriginal peoples by the implementation of its widely loathed residential school policies. "A respect for each other and a desire to move forward together with a renewed understanding that strong families, strong communities and vibrant cultures and traditions will contribute to a stronger Canada for all of us," Harper said.

As we know, all these good intentions are conditional based on the always present words: "depending on the availability of funds." Since this pivotal day last June, Canadians have been watching carefully and with real concern to determine whether the apology was genuine and sincere on behalf of all Canadians.

An appropriate, genuine apology can inspire civility, humanity and forgiveness, while a fake one is more likely to provoke cynicism and lawsuits. A real apology acknowledges the harm done. Our government's apology acknowledges responsibility, includes a believable statement of regret, and also a commitment to ensure that it doesn't happen again. Canadians are watching to see whether our government will stand by its promise.

With this in mind, let's consider the following circumstance to help determine if another apology is required – after all, when apologies are offered it is expected that positive action will follow to set the wrongs to right. The necessity for the government to act is very real and Canadians are ready.

The World Economic Forum, United Nations and the Conference Board of Canada all chastise the federal government for inadequate legal aid, the highest rate of child apprehension and inequality for women. Domestic violence is NOT a criminal offense in Canada. These international organizations are highly critical of Canada's record on human rights, assault rates, youth suicide rates, the gender income gap (which is currently at 25 per cent), no pay equity law, no national childcare plan and no comprehensive social housing strategy.

Canada ranked among the top five countries in the world on the UN Human Development Index last year, but Canada's Aboriginal population lagged in 76th place.

This is not the Canada that Canadians want.

Why is it so difficult for our federal government to understand that Canadians want reconciliation with our fellow Aboriginal citizens? The world continues to watch Canada's dismal efforts and the results tell the story of a country moving to the back of the class because of its under-performance in almost all subjects noted above.

The Fourth World is a term used to describe the conditions that Aboriginal people in Canada often live in because they are often worse off than those associated with in the developing world. It is a shameful Canadian truth.

The poverty of women in Canada is a central concern to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which found that welfare rates are too low to

provide women and their children with adequate housing, food, health services, affordable child care spaces, insufficient access to civil legal aid, inadequate shelters for women and girls experiencing violence and education. This same organization has expressed concern that more than 500 cases involving Aboriginal women who have gone missing or been murdered in the past two decades have neither been fully investigated nor attracted priority attention, with the perpetrators remaining free.

First Nation women are five times more likely than all other women to die as a result of violence. These same women have no property rights on reserve today thanks to the outdated Indian Act, which governs almost all aspects of First Nations existence.

“The high levels of racialized, sexualized violence against Aboriginal women in Canada is a national and international shame and disgrace,” notes Beverly Jacobs, president of the Native Woman’s Association of Canada.

Amnesty International issued a report called ‘Stolen Sisters, A Human Rights Response to discrimination and violence against Aboriginal women in Canada’. One of the central themes is the role of racism and discrimination in fuelling acts of extreme brutality targeted against Aboriginal women.

“The failure of the Canadian government and society to respond adequately is appalling,” says Alex Neve, secretary general of Amnesty International. “Continued inaction is not an option. The Canadian record of upholding the rights of Aboriginal peoples is a real disgrace and a source of national shame. These are not political, economic or natural resource matters. These are issues of Human Rights.”

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes “the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.”

For Aboriginal people in Canada, the significant levels of homeless are evident with 50 per cent of all the homeless having mental health issues which are not addressed either.

The average Canadian gets services from the federal, provincial and municipal governments at an amount that is 2 ½ times greater than that received by First Nations citizens.

Equality-seeking groups who do any kind of advocacy, lobbying, or other work to make change are now ineligible for funding from the federal government (and effectively muzzled from publicly criticizing Ottawa).

The federal government has also removed Canadian’s most valuable tool in responding to rights infringements – the Court Challenges Program. For the majority of young offenders, their cases are defended on legal aid, and legal aid is also chronically under-funded.

A one-day snapshot of the national justice system has recently revealed that structural barriers faced by Aboriginal children and youth create a cycle of poverty, removal from their families into care, dropping out of school, followed by a high risk of arrest and incarceration.

The incarceration rate among Aboriginal peoples in Canada is a shocking six times higher than the national average. The facts shed more light on the story.

For example, one in 30 First Nations people live in homes with no hot running water.

The Tyendinga (215 kilometres northeast of Toronto) community has NOT had drinkable water in its school or in homes for at least 10 years.

Aboriginal people are survivors of centuries of openly discriminatory and at times genocidal policies administered by successive governments representing the Canadian people.

“Sixty of our local First Nation children are in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development because of mould-infested housing,” notes Chief Paddy Walkus of Port Hardy, B.C. Of course, government officials in B.C. have a different math formula, with provincial Liberal cabinet minister Tom Christensen noting “the number is actually only 47” and denying children have been seized because of the housing issue.

Another politician, NDP MLA Claire Trevena, had a different story for the provincial legislature. “The smell of mould stung our media visitor’s eyes and the mould coated the carpet, walls and window ledges of rooms that once housed an infant now in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Twelve, 15 or 20 people living in a two or three-bedroom house, black mould causing kids to get sick and houses condemned.”

They aren’t alone, the statistics show:

50 per cent of First Nations homes are contaminated by mould.
Six per cent of First Nations homes are without sewage services.

Thirty-five per cent of First Nations people believe their water is unsafe to drink.

Right now, First Nations need 87,000 new housing units and 44,000 more require repairs.

First Nations people on reserves do not and cannot own their homes and currently spent more than 30 per cent of their meager income on rent.

The percentage of First Nations children in state care is 6 times that of children from the general population.

Nationally, there are 27,000 aboriginal children in state care, which speaks not to the lack of parental love, but to the issue of poverty. The Assembly of First Nations has now filed a lawsuit under the Human Rights Act against the actions of the federal government regarding this tragedy.

Aboriginal children are drastically over-represented in the child welfare system with more Aboriginal children in the care of the child welfare authorities than at any other time in our history, including when residential schools populations were at their highest levels.

In Manitoba, 23 per cent of all children are Aboriginal, yet 85 per cent of all children in care are Aboriginal, a seriously gross overrepresentation. Thirty-nine per cent of Manitoba’s Aboriginal children live in poverty.

In B.C., Aboriginal children account for eight per cent of children in the province but 51 per cent of those in care. And nine per cent of all children in Alberta are Aboriginal, yet make up 50 per cent of the children in government care.

Child welfare agencies are set up to protect the interests of children at risk of neglect or abuse. The continued high rates of Aboriginal children in care outside their homes indicate a crisis in Aboriginal family life. Do Canadians still wonder why there is such despair and turmoil in Aboriginal families and their communities?

The federal government has refused to address discrimination against First Nation children in the child welfare system and education. First Nations Child and Family Services agencies receive 22 per cent less funding per child than provincial agencies. There is a direct link to the Aboriginal youth education crisis as well.

“This shortfall in funding means the federal government is not providing adequate funding requirements to meet the basic needs of First Nations children in state care,”
Sheila Fraser, Auditor General of Canada, said in a wide-ranging and damning report in 2003.

Canada has not established minimum standards for social assistance. Now, with the economic downturn, we will most certainly hear our federal government say that “the political will is there, but the cupboard is bare.” Considering the statistics, the cupboard has been bare for centuries.

The government of Canada must ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable citizens don't lose their right to shelter, food, health care and education in order for the government to balance their books. What and whom we choose to protect can make or break lives.

Effective poverty reduction requires additional investment, especially when it comes to poverty. The statistics for Aboriginal women in Canada today are grim:

36 per cent of Aboriginal women live in poverty.

38 per cent of lone mothers live in poverty.

Of 47,000 First Nations children under the age of six, nearly half are growing up with families living in poverty. But still Canadians ask, “What seems to be their problem?”

There are 35,000 Métis and 7000 Inuit children under the age of six.

In a significant number of Aboriginal communities, access to clean drinking water is not assured.

More than 100 aboriginal communities have lived under boil-water advisories for the past five years.

On-reserve housing in the majority of First Nations is inadequate in quantity and quality leading to severe overcrowding.

Homicide rates are 600 per cent higher among Aboriginals than in the broader Canadian population and 300 per cent higher among Aboriginal people in the Northwest Territories. Aboriginal males comprise 70 per cent of all homicide victims.

Male Aboriginals 15-34 years of age are subject to a suicide rate that is 400 per cent higher than the non-Aboriginal rate for the same age group.

In Ontario, 80 per cent of Aboriginal women are victims of violence.

Aboriginal housing is the worst in Canada. Homelessness has been on the rise since the federal government abandoned its responsibilities for housing 15 years ago, and a very large percentage of Canada's Aboriginal peoples are homeless. In some cities the rates of Aboriginal homeless is 40 per cent, yet the population of Aboriginal peoples in these regions makes up only 1 per cent. Homelessness is not mentioned in the federal 2009 budget.

This is yet another blot on Canada's reputation as a progressive nation.

A recent government report says the death rate in fires at Aboriginal homes is 10 times higher than in fires at other Canadian homes, with overcrowding cited as the major reason.

A recent report called `Against All Odds`, researched and published by The Canadian Institute for Health Research along with The McCreary Society in Vancouver, shows that in B.C., 40 per cent of homeless Aboriginal youth had first run away at the age of 12 or younger, and one in three had been kicked out of their home by the age of 12.

Forty-seven per cent had gone hungry because their parents didn't have money for food; sixty per cent have been physically abused; and 30 per cent of females and 18 per cent of males had tried to commit suicide in the past year.

"The trauma Aboriginal people have suffered because of colonization still affects our young people," summed up one of the report's key investigators.

The Aboriginal population is young and growing much faster than the rest of Canada. For example, 40 per cent of the 10,055 Aboriginal people in Thunder Bay, Ont., are under 19 years of age.

More than 20 per cent of Aboriginal children who live off reserves are born to mothers between the ages of 15-24.

One in four Aboriginal single mothers earn less than \$10,000 a year.

Forty-one per cent of Aboriginal children under 14 are living in poverty nationally, rising to 51 per cent in Manitoba and 52 per cent in Saskatchewan

By 2017, Aboriginals will account for 30 per cent of young adults in Saskatchewan and 23 per cent in Manitoba.

About 64,000 children in Alberta are living in poverty.

Some 343,400 Albertans earn less than \$12 an hour and 64 per cent (219,600) of these are women.

Soaring diabetes rates, dental needs, mental health and addiction issues, many incidence of fetal alcohol syndrome and extremely high rates of suicides even among children should be a concern for Canadians and these concerns must be expressed to their governments.

One former Ontario government child advocate, Judy Finlay, has this to say: "I travelled regularly to remote northern reserves in Ontario and witnessed the extreme deprivation and abhorrent living conditions in these communities. An imposed history of colonialism, residential schools, inequitable distribution of resources and geographical isolation have contributed to a depth of community impoverishment not seen anywhere else in the province" says Finlay, now a professor in the School of Child and Youth Care at Ryerson University.

The response of Canada's chiefs – essentially, the First Nations leaders - is sadly lacking. This is tragic because it is their ideas and leadership that will be the prime mover in lifting people out of poverty, not the size of the cheque they receive from Ottawa.

When the mythmakers and purveyors of misinformation are presented with the facts, they quickly fade away unable to explain or justify their perceptions, ignorant attitudes or acknowledge the harm they have done. They will never debate and/or attempt to defend their positions.

Canadians must exercise their duty and responsibility to question the nonsense they hear and challenge the hate-mongers. To do this, Canadians must have some facts and information to counter the deceptions and outright lies perpetually being spread about Aboriginal people. I believe it is a significant responsibility of our federal government to vigorously enlighten Canadians, because facts destroy rumours and lies and reduce whining by an ignorant uninformed public.

Workplace education is crucial to fostering greater understanding, and its starts at the top of the corporate ladder.

This includes “Misconception Training” for existing employees and management. Training people to change their personalities doesn’t work; however creating “engaging” leadership should be part of every corporate strategy. I believe it is these corporate leaders with a clear picture of their bottom line and a sincere concern for the well being of our country that will contribute significantly to the resolution of these challenges.

“Through ‘Misconception Training’ and close co-operation between the parties, this agreement provides the framework to prepare the workplace to become more representative of Aboriginal people and remove barriers in the workplace,” notes Corporate Services Director Chris Cvil of the City of Prince Albert.

It is my most sincere hope that these articles will assist and encourage them to do just that. We as caring Canadians must all become part of the solution rather than perpetuating and contributing to the problem and insist our governments follow suit.

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