

## Residential School Syndrome II

### PARAHEAD

**Should Canada fully address the legacy of the residential school system and other government programs directed at Aboriginals? Yes, writes our Aboriginal awareness columnist – because it's the right and honourable thing to do**

*Editor's Note: The following is the fourth in our series of Aboriginal awareness columns, which stem from an APEGGA Business Plan goal to increase Aboriginal awareness in the engineering, geological and geophysical professions. Check The PEGG Online for earlier stories in the series.*

**BY ROBERT LABOUCANE**

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This article continues our exploration into the deep-rooted issues that explain why so many Aboriginal communities in Canada today are living in despair and poverty.

As you learned from my column last month, Canada's founding citizens have endured a tumultuous past rooted in mistrust of the federal government. This mistrust developed over several centuries.

It's due to so many mis-guided programs, in-grained negative attitudes of Aboriginal people by the bureaucracies and lack of information by our politicians within our governments that many people, including me, believe why the mistreatment and disrespect of Aboriginal people continues to exist.

Aboriginal peoples are where they are today because that is exactly where our federal government's programs, laws and policies have put them. From the *Indian Act*, the residential school system (read last month's column for a full explanation of this horrific era) and the "doctrine of assimilation," our government programs have had a devastating impact, particularly in creating and maintaining that poverty.

Despite this, Aboriginal people are still here and working diligently to recover their lost languages and cultures for future generations.

Our federal government and the people it represents – we Canadians – cannot have a respectful, trusting relationship with Aboriginal citizens without resolving a horrible legacy from our shared past.

Steve Rison represented the British Columbia Environmental Network in the landmark *Delgamuukw* case of 1996, which saw the Supreme Court of Canada uphold the rights of Aboriginal title to their traditional territory across British Columbia. “Our highest court in the land recognizes that we the people want done what is right,” noted the land claims expert.

“Even if the price is great we have to be willing to pay it, or we do not deserve to be called an honourable people.”

### **No Pride**

It is crystal clear to me that we are not being honourable as a nation, and perhaps not as citizens, either. After all, we continue with programs that aren't working and are actually harming the very people the *Indian Act* is supposed to protect.

Sadly, our history of treatment of Aboriginal people is not something we can take pride in.

The term reconciliation means “to reconcile” or “to bring persons again into friendly relations after estrangement; to bring back into concord; to reunite persons in harmony.” The phrase has taken on considerable more attention in the legal community, especially as a directive from the Supreme Court toward our federal government's expected actions and attitudes.

Federal power must be reconciled with federal duty, and the best way to achieve that reconciliation is to demand the justification of any government rule, policy or law that infringes upon or denies Aboriginal rights.

Based on my observations, the federal government is resistant to change. The courts are now watching the government very closely and, thankfully, actually driving the process.

Unfettered and unaccountable federal government control of Aboriginal people has resulted in a variety of social ills, which have been passed on from generation to generation. These include the unresolved trauma of Aboriginal people who experienced or witnessed physical or sexual abuse in the residential school system.

The ongoing cycle of intergenerational abuse in Aboriginal communities includes alcohol and drug abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effect, past and ongoing sexual and physical abuse, psychological and

emotional abuse, low self-esteem, dysfunctional families, parenting issues, suicide, chronic widespread depression, chronic widespread rage and anger, extreme crime and subsequent incarceration, layer upon layer of unresolved grief and loss. Yes, the list really does seem endless.

The evidence is clear. The doctrine of assimilation has nearly destroyed the Aboriginal community. These people and their communities may be badly bent but certainly not broken.

The strength and resilience of these people in the face of such an onslaught is almost unbelievable. Aboriginal Canadians are trying hard to cope, and all Canadians are paying the price, financially and morally.

### **Restitution Details**

The federal government has come up with its own system – known as “alternative dispute resolution” – to make restitution to the countless victims of the residential school system. This has been a rather long and drawn-out process – it’s taken years and years – which has stemmed from literally thousands of lawsuits against Ottawa and the four mainstream churches that ran the hated residential schools.

Perhaps to avoid decades of trials, billions of dollars in settlements, church bankruptcies, legal fees, public embarrassment and scrutiny, Aboriginal leaders and federal government parties negotiated a settlement that acknowledges and commits that

- 86,000 victims are still alive
- every person who attended a residential school receives \$10,000
- an additional \$3,000 will be dispersed for every year a person attended the school
- survivors over 65 receive a cheque for \$8,000
- 18,000 victims of proven sexual abuse (which was rampant in the schools) will receive an additional settlement of \$250,000 to \$350,000, depending on circumstances
- the federal government (that’s you and me, the taxpayer) will foot the bill for \$100 million in legal fees
- about \$250 million in tax dollars will go to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (in addition to the \$350 million already spent by Ottawa in 1998)
- \$63 million to establish a so-called “truth and reconciliation” process and to develop archives and a library to record the stories of survivors.

Still, Ottawa has decided not to publicly apologize for the tragic and lasting wrongs forced upon Aboriginal Canadians.

Many of the folks receiving this compensation are in prison, many are elderly and frail, and others are in very poor health. More yet are concerned about how they will use this money to better their lives and those around them.

Will there be wise investment? Will there be an estate for the next generation?

These and so many other questions remain unanswered.

And speaking of questions, your questions to me are most welcome – e-mail me at [robert@ripplefx.ca](mailto:robert@ripplefx.ca)

## MORE INFO

For stories of those who spent time in the residential schools, visit [www.wherearethechildren.ca](http://www.wherearethechildren.ca)