

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Misguided, but not genocide

Perhaps the least admirable way for anyone to make a case is to offer false comparisons to something that doesn't really compare. That was the technique used, I believe, in an op-ed article last week in *The Globe and Mail*, co-authored by Bernie Farber, executive director of the Mosaic Institute, David MacDonald, political science professor at the University of Guelph, and Joseph Boyden, an author and indigenous activist.

I don't know the latter two, but I have known Farber for many years and have long admired his tireless efforts to keep the Holocaust alive so that people will never forget the unspeakable horrors wrought by Hitler and his Nazis.

But, alas, Farber and his two co-writers fell into the trap of faulty comparisons in order to promote their case against the ravages of the Indian residential schools, arguing that it should officially be recognized by Canada as a ?genocide.?

At present, Canada recognizes five genocides: the Holocaust; the Holodomor (Stalin's famine-induced starvation of millions of Ukrainians); the 1915 Armenian genocide by Turkey; the 1994 Rwandan atrocities; and the Bosnian ?ethnic cleansing? in the 1990s. There is no doubt that the residential schools caused considerable heartache and serious deprivation among many of the 150,000 First Nation, Inuit and M?tis children who were taken from their homes and forced into ill-equipped schools which sought to assimilate them into the general Canadian population.

While some of the students did in fact find a better life as a result of this, many more were left with painful memories of isolation, denigration and, in many cases, outright physical and sexual abuse in those institutions, most of which were run by various mainline churches of the day.

Indeed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that at least 3,200 Aboriginal children died in these overcrowded residential schools, mainly because of malnourishment which made them vulnerable to tuberculosis and influenza, including the deadly Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-19.

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There is no way to sugar-coat ? and no need to ? the downside of what turned out to be an ill-conceived idea from our early political leaders ? an idea, by the way, which at the time was endorsed by some Native leaders of the day.

This is why, of course, then prime minister Stephen Harper stood in the Commons June 1, 2008 and formally apologized on behalf of the government to all former students of those residential schools, saying the assimilation policy was ?wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.? The apology was also accompanied by a generous compensation package.

Saying you're sorry and sending a cheque, of course, doesn't necessarily repair all the damage that was done during all the years the schools operated.

But it was not a genocide in the true sense of the word. Not by a long shot.

Misguided? Absolutely. But evil in intent? No way.

When Hitler set out to rid the world of Jews ? and others he considered undesirable, such as Gypsies and homosexuals ? he meant to kill as many of them as he could. Same thing with Stalin and the other monsters of history responsible for the various genocides.

But the Canadian leaders in the 1880s who devised the residential schools had no such goals in mind. Their aim was not to kill the native population. Their intentions, in fact, were good, or at least from where they sat they thought they were good. They saw a native population that was falling behind even then and felt that educating them in English or French and bringing them into the mainstream of Canada would ultimately give them a better life.

That fact that the school experiment didn't turn out well does not negate the fact that their hearts were in the right place even if they

tragically miscalculated the terrible burden that loss of culture and family would impose upon those who forced into these schools. There's a huge difference here between both the results and the intent.

Unlike Hitler, et al, the idea was never to kill these children for the 'crime' of being Natives. It was a hope - a vain one for the most part - that giving them a white man's education would ultimately improve their chances of enjoying a healthier and more prosperous life.

It was a bad policy to be sure.

But it was not a genocide. Placing it the category of the Holocaust and others, it seems to me, diminishes the horror of true genocides.