

A tale of two apologies

In 2008, on February 13 and June 11, respectively, the prime ministers of Australia and Canada put motions of apology to the parliaments they lead. In both cases, these were apologies on behalf of nations and governments that had, over successive generations, pursued active campaigns to break up Aboriginal families and erase indigenous ethnicity. The consequences for multicultural relations in Commonwealth countries were obviously important, though their precise implications were (and remain) unclear.

The similarities between the timings of, and the offences motivating, these two apologies obscured a number of important differences in their institutional and legal ramifications. Canada's apology was preceded by the settlement of a class action brought by survivors of Indian residential schools and their families. The settlement primarily involved compensation and support for survivors, as well as the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It did not, however, include an apology, which the minority Harper government only chose to make after considerable pressure from other parties and from Aboriginal people. Australia's apology, by contrast, was explicitly framed as a symbolic action only, with no institutional follow-up, and compensation expressly ruled out.

ABIDING PARALLELS

But the comparisons persist. During the year and more that has passed since these events, comment in both countries has generally emphasized the subsequent disappointment. The waves of national energy and resolve that these symbolic breakthroughs both occasioned have, as many predicted, given way to the old realizations that developing policy to address entrenched disadvantage is genuinely difficult, and that implementing substantial measures to redress indigenous grievances is still more difficult.

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Thus, in Australia, the so-called gap between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders on the one hand, and non-indigenous Australians on the other, is underscored by a 17-year difference in life expectancy that many commentators take as somehow indicative of the entire situation. An ongoing military intervention in the Northern Territory, initially proposed in response to reports of endemic child sexual abuse in this area's remote communities, has made no noticeable difference to the problem it was set up to address. Cynicism quickly fills any absence of progress.

Somewhat comparably, in Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that the government agreed to in the Settlement Agreement has yet to commence hearings, due partly to personal

conflicts among the initially appointed commissioners but also to the inherent difficulties of balancing the sensitivities of diverse Aboriginal constituencies. Appointing new commissioners took nearly eight months, and the TRC has yet to publish its plans for meeting its mandate. The difficulty of providing a form of justice that is recognizable both to governments and to Aboriginal communities remains immense.

THE IMAGINATIONS THAT DRIVE THE DEBATES

Our interest in the evolution of reconciliation in these two countries comes in part from these evolving similarities. It is as though the two paths are fated to run in parallel.

In a deep sense, that "fate" must be a product of the similarities in ideology and policy that govern two economically successful colonial offshoots, in which European ethnicity remains an assumed cultural mainstream. That assumption is at odds with the multicultural realities of Canada and Australia, of course. People of indigenous and "minority" ethnicities combine to form a majority of the population in each country.

Perhaps more immediately, there are ready comparisons to be drawn between the imaginative dispositions that entered into these apologies. These dispositions show up in the wordings the apologizers and other parties to these reconciliation initiatives use—especially the stock phrasing, the clichés and platitudes that people reach for as they try to discuss the nature of the event, its significance, and mechanics.

By imaginative disposition, we mean something like Goffman's notion of "framing." How people construe the situations around them is a major determiner of their conscious and unconscious responses to those situations. Because the imaginative disposition is grounded in people's interpretation of a world-made-symbolic, it is only revealed by symbolic means: especially through

language, but also through other expressive media. This means that we stand to learn a huge amount about indigenous and non-Aboriginal attitudes in Canada, Australia, and elsewhere by paying close attention to people's discourses around reconciliation.

A FOCUS ON THE RHETORIC

Among the most important moments in the respective national reconciliation discourses has been the two parliamentary apology "debates." This is a function of their inherent symbolic importance, but also of the extent of public attention each received. The Canadians who gathered on Parliament Hill to watch live coverage of the debate were "joined" by millions of home viewers and radio listeners around the country, although that may still represent a minority response. It is clear that many Canadians (including an unknown number of survivors of the residential schools) were unaware that the apology had been made.

In Australia, towns and cities around the country set up public screens for crowds in their dozens (at many of the remote outstations) or their tens of thousands (in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney). Again, millions of home viewers and listeners joined them by tuning in for the show. But untallied millions ignored it, too.

Coverage of the Australian debate may have drawn relatively more live viewers and listeners, but it was more heavily promoted, and set up to be less taxing on the attention span. Television and radio covered the speeches of the prime minister (Labor's Kevin Rudd) and of the then-leader of the opposition (the Liberals' Brendan Nelson), but the rest of the debate was adjourned to parliamentary committees. Representatives of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were feted visitors, but their place was in the galleries and not in the bearpit.

The live coverage in Canada was both fairer and less exciting. It sought a balance between the parliamentarians apologizing and the aggrieved parties receiving that apology. It involved the

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prime minister (Conservative Stephen Harper), leaders of the three main opposition parties (the Liberals, the Bloc, and the New Democrats), and five representatives of Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

IMPORTANT RHETORICAL SIMILARITIES

We have been particularly struck by three rhetorical properties these debates share. The first is their shared aspiration to authenticity, to present a nationally important moment in a language that cuts through the inanity of regular partisan debate. In his address to the Commons, Clem Chartier, president of the Métis National Council, said: "I know deep in my heart that the party leaders and the prime minister who spoke today spoke with sincerity, not with the theatrics of the Commons. That has been set aside. I can see that. I can feel that. I know that it is deep and real." The politicians had certainly framed their speeches in language that could draw this appraisal, beginning with the unanimity of support that the government expressly requested before Harper commenced the debate.

In Australia, the aspiration to unanimity was equally in the foreground, meaning there was a deliberate avoidance of blame for living persons, a deliberate avoidance of the Labor government's crowing over the defeated Liberals (who had publicly refused to make such an apology in 1997, when they were in government, but who were now supporting the motion). Instead, both party leaders

spoke of the need, the urgency, to "go forward together." Without question, both governments have sought to draw on the political capital of their apologies in order to generate support for a renewal of, rather than a shift in, public policy as it affects indigenous interests.

That brings us to a second shared property: the political agendas that arise from the apologies in both countries are framed in more or less identical metaphors, using more or less identical phrasing. Contributors to the debates in both countries repeatedly mentioned the need to "heal," to "build a future" in which such atrocities would not be possible, and to "go forward together."

On one level, these are empty phrases: clichés and platitudes that fill in for a very loose sense of what specific policy agendas to pursue, or even what specific values should guide those policy frameworks. On another level, they reveal a shared understanding that these phrases were somehow appropriate to the moment: the language reveals just how deeply the desire for consensus was informing both the content and the styling of these speeches—exposing both the truth and the fragility of Chartier's observation. It shows us how the legacy of the residential schools and the legacy of the Stolen Generations are legacies of unresolved issues, and bound to remain that way for some time.

A third property plays off the second: that desire for consensus did not cause any vagueness in describing the wrongs of the residential schools and the Stolen Generations. Within the understandable constraints of parliamentary debate, all speakers in both countries left no doubt about the profundity of harm, about the importance of the evils they were rejecting.

LINKING RHETORIC AND ACTION

This paradox—of a past acknowledged in explicit terms, and a future about which the parties collaborate in keeping their discourse vague—is clearly related to "the lack of real progress on the ground" in both countries. Our research

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much of the 1990s, at about 2.5 per 100,000 for Canada and 2.4 per 100,000 for Toronto, the rates among blacks in Toronto, and particularly black youths, have skyrocketed. According to academic experts, the murder rate for blacks is four times that of the general population, at 10.1 per 100,000. While the black community represents just under 10 percent of the city's population, it accounted for approximately 30 percent of the murder victims annually between 1996 and 2004. This suggests that while the rates have been stable for other segments of the population, Toronto has become "more dangerous" for blacks and black youth. Since 1998, the percentage of homicide victims under the age 25 has grown to 40 percent from 25 percent in the 1970s, and a majority of these victims have been black youth.

The official response to the spate of gun killings that have engulfed Toronto in the first decade of the 21st century has been an aggressive law and order and containment incursion into racialized low-income communities. Political leaders have caved in to every resource demand from the police, with the Toronto Police Service setting up a Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS) that operates on the principles of high visibility used in military war zone operations: large vans and scout cars patrolling continuously in the identified communities; quick reaction forces; and intelligence-gathering operations that engage community members, as a way of cultivating informers.

These aggressive and illiberal responses can be rationalized because in Canadian society, young black men have historically been constructed as aggressive, violent, and dangerous. As Carl James has remarked, "when they are chilling, they are layabouts, up to no good, and generally engaged in what society considers inappropriate behaviour." The distance from these accounts of inoffensive but "inappropriate" black youth to a perception of young black men as criminalized is almost non-existent.


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Racial profiling quickly becomes an indispensable tool of law enforcement under these circumstances, in response to moral panic about black criminality.

Young blacks have often described their encounters with police as being characterized by the officers' contempt, confrontational and harassing attitudes, mistakes about identity, and harshness. They often result in harassment, harsh penalties, brutality, and criminalization. Recall that these are young people whose access to other public spaces is always being challenged by police or, in the case of malls, security guards. The street then becomes a site for turf wars, which in most cases are resolved through police harassment and brutality. Young blacks are in this way the disproportionate targets of criminalization by security institutions. The marginalization of blacks and other racialized communi-

ties has the effect of denying them equal treatment and the right to full participation in Canadian society. It also raises questions about whether liberal democratic citizenship is not determined by race, gender, class or immigrant status, and it undermines popular claims about Canada as an equitable and multicultural society.

STEPS AHEAD

The promise of multiculturalism remains unfulfilled. And yet it represents the vision of a society open to difference and cultural pluralism. That aspect of the discursive framework is clearly worth holding on to and building upon. However, we must transcend the phase in which we focus on symbolic multiculturalism and embrace a process that concretizes cultural pluralism as a horizontal reality. This means conceding the narratives of Canada as an English and French country which makes some space for Aboriginal people and ethnoracial cultural minorities. The project of nation building is a dynamic one that allows us to claim our history without being trapped in it. A bold multicultural future will mean that multiculturalism is not a hierarchical edifice with racialized groups at the bottom but a complex matrix of peoples old and new to the land. One that insists on justly resolving the colonial relationship between the settler population and the Aboriginal population. 

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over the coming months and years aims to map out and try to explain these discursive phenomena across the Canadian and Australian experiences, in both official reconciliation processes and conversations in the public forums outside of those processes.

The challenge in this, for social and cultural policy, is acute. Both countries have made quantum steps toward honest

and clear appraisals of the past, but conspicuously shy away from honesty and clarity about the options they face for the future. That reflects a fear of losing the consensus, to be sure, but also a fear that honest language will expose the lack of clear thinking—the absence of compelling policy. Bridging that gap will take more work than either country is ready to acknowledge. 