

Underfunding, short rations and overwork contributed, doctors and agents across the system reported, to the children's ill-health, and some doctors even alerted the department to a connection they observed between malnutrition and tuberculosis.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, the range and quality of food the children did receive was affected by efforts to economize. It was a widespread practice "to sell most of the milk and eggs...in order to augment maintenance funds".²⁰⁰ Inspector R.H. Cairns was so disturbed by this practice in the British Columbia schools, and in particular by milk skimming to collect cream for sale, that he declared, "if I had my way I would banish every separator....The pupils need the butter fat so much."²⁰¹

By many departmental accounts, the variety of food served was limited; "decidedly monotonous" was the way Benson described the "regulation school meal" in 1897 – "bread and drippings or boiled beef and potatoes".²⁰² In fact, there appears to have been a persistent shortage of meat and fish which, unlike grains and vegetables, were difficult to secure in bulk and to store.²⁰³ Ironically, children entering a school likely left behind a better diet, provided by communities still living on the land, than what was provided by the churches and the department.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to assess the nutritional value of school diets before 1946. In that year, however, the nutrition division of the department of national health and welfare surveyed the food services at eight schools. Though the department characterized the results as "fairly satisfactory", the report itself did not support such a conclusion but rather confirmed the impressions given by the files throughout the history of the system. The dietitians found that "mediocre" salaries secured kitchen staff who were "unqualified", carried out their "work in a careless and uninterested fashion" and thus "the food quality was not good". Poor menu planning that failed to recognize the nutritional value of certain foods, equipment that was "unfit", "antiquated cooking facilities", and bad cooking practices contributed to the "nutritional inadequacy of the children's diet", which lacked sufficient amounts of vitamins A, B and C. The children received too little meat and not enough green vegetables, whole grains, fruit, juices, milk, iodized salt and eggs.²⁰⁴

The dietitians laid much of the blame for the conditions they described on "financial limitations" – the same limitations that plagued every other aspect of the system and always led in the end to neglect of the children. With the benefit of hindsight, Davey's 1968 review of the system up to 1950 acknowledged that fact. Neither the churches nor the department, he charged,

appeared to have had any real understanding of the needs of the children....The method of financing these institutions by per capita grants was an iniquitous system which made no provision for the establishment and maintenance of standards, even in such basic elements as staffing, food and clothing.²⁰⁵

All that was to have changed in 1957, when the department brought an end to the per capita system and placed the schools on a "controlled cost basis" intended to achieve "greater efficiency in their operation" as well as to assure proper "standards of food, clothing and supervision at all schools." This system was formalized by new contracts with the churches signed in 1961. The government was prepared to "reimburse each school for actual expenditures within certain limitations."²⁰⁶ Those limitations were translated into allowances – maximum rates set for teachers' salaries, transportation, extra-curricular activities, rental costs, building repairs and maintenance, and capital costs.

In terms of standards of care, the department strove to bring the budgeting process more into line with the children's needs and regional cost differentials. In particular, with food and clothing, it attempted "to make special provision for the requirements of older children." Thus in calculating the allowances for food and clothes, the children were divided into two groups, those in grade 6 and lower grades and those in grade 7 or higher grades, with appropriate rates assigned to each.²⁰⁷ In addition, as early as 1953, the department began to issue directives to the schools on issues of care, and more detailed reporting procedures by principals were developed.

None of this was enough, however, to prevent a continuation of problems still endemic in the system. The post-1957 record of the controlled cost system was not an improvement over the previous decades. There was in fact an underlying contradiction between the intention to close down the system and that of keeping the schools in peak physical condition. Davey himself signalled this in recommending that "expenditures should be limited to emergency repairs which are basic to the health and safety of the children" in cases "where closure is anticipated, due to integration".²⁰⁸ Budgeting favoured integration, which was at the centre of the department's education strategy. In a detailed brief to the department in 1968, the national association of principals and administrators of Indian residences pointed out that in the allocation of funds, the integration program received a much greater proportion, resulting in a situation where "our Federal schools are sadly neglected when compared with the Provincial schools."²⁰⁹ Indeed, a report commissioned by the department established in 1967 that the funding level was still very "low in comparison with most progressive institutional programs" in the United States and in the provincial sector.²¹⁰

The principals' association went on to detail the effects of underfunding in a school-by-school survey that echoed the Paget report – a long system-wide catalogue of deferred maintenance, hazardous fire conditions, inadequate wiring, heating and plumbing, and much needed capital construction to replace structures that were "totally unsuitable and a disgrace to Indian affairs". Even schools built since the war to serve communities in areas outside the scope of integration gave evidence of faulty construction and inadequate recreation, residence and classroom space. In conclusion, the association tried to impress upon the department the seriousness of the situation. It was not prepared to accept the "old cliché: lack of funds". That was "not an excuse, nor an explanation for we know that funds do exist."²¹¹

In a memo from Davey forwarded to the deputy minister along with the association's brief, he admitted that,

Although I can take exception to some of the examples given in the brief, the fact remains that we are not meeting requirements as we should nor have we provided the facilities which are required for the appropriate functioning of a residential school system.²¹²

It was impossible to do so, for there were simply "too many of these units" and the department was too heavily committed in other areas of higher priority – in community development, integration and welfare expenditures. Nor did he think it was wise to devote effort to achieving increased appropriations for, with "the best interests of the Indian children" in mind, it was more sensible to close the system down.²¹³

The deputy minister, J.A. Macdonald, followed this line in his reply to the principals. There was no attempt to refute their characterization of the condition of the system. The department had failed, he conceded, to carry out "necessary repairs and renovations and capital projects". This had been "simply due to financial limitations", which he was sure, taking refuge in the "old cliché", would not improve in the future.²¹⁴ In the final analysis, however, the funds were inadequate and, as the association asserted, it was always the children who were "the first to feel the pinch of departmental economy".²¹⁵

Schools that were part of the northern affairs system after 1955 had their own doleful history and were not above the sort of critique made by the principals' association. A harsh review of the operation of Fort Providence school concluded with the remark, "I would sooner have a child of mine in a reform school than in this dreadful institution."²¹⁶ As in the south, the system did not ensure that adequate food and clothing and safe and healthy conditions were provided for all the children all the time. There was always, as at the Tent Hostel at Coppermine, for example, some considerable distance between intention and reality. One of the teachers there submitted a remarkable report on a hostel term during which the staff and Inuit children had had a "satisfactory and happy experience", despite the fact that their accommodations were "very cold because all the heat escaped through the chimneys, there was a constant fire hazard", the children's clothes were "unsatisfactory", and the children received a most non-traditional diet of corn beef and cabbage at most dinners, while the staff ate their "monthly fresh food supply" at the same table, so as to give "the youngsters an opportunity to model their table manners from those of the staff".²¹⁷ A consulting psychologist, after a visit to the Churchill Vocational Centre, which was housed in an army barracks, commented that "I know what a rat must feel when it is placed in a maze." When he moved on to two schools in the Keewatin area, he found the buildings equally unsuitable.²¹⁸

The history of Indian affairs' post-1957 determination to ensure high standards of care was no brighter than its record of repair and maintenance. At the end of the very first year of the operation of the controlled cost system, the department, on the advice of the churches and the nutrition division of the federal health department, had to raise rates, adjust the grade divisions and introduce a supplementary allowance to recognize additional costs for schools "where climatic conditions necessitate special clothing."²¹⁹ Such fine tuning became a permanent feature of the 1957 system. It was, unfortunately, always fruitless, for the funds provided by the department to feed and clothe the children continually lagged behind increases in cost, and thus the sorrowful consequences for the children went unrelieved.²²⁰

There was no improvement after 1969, when the government and the churches parted ways and the department took direct control of the system. A subsequent survey in the Saskatchewan region revealed that allowances were not adequate to provide proper clothes, especially for children in hostels who were attending provincial schools, or food or recreational activities. One administrator reported that he had to serve "more often than we should food such as hot dogs, bologna, garlic sausages, macaroni etc....the cheapest food on the market and still I can hardly make it."²²¹ Most of the others in the survey – and by implication most administrators and, therefore, most children in the system – were having the same experience.²²²

As in the case of tuberculosis, failure to provide adequate nutrition was rooted not only in the iniquitous per capita and chronic underfunding, but in the fact that departmental regulations intended to guarantee good care were administrative fictions. From the beginning of the system, and subsequently in the order in council of 1892 and the 1911 contracts, the department stipulated that to receive funds schools had to be "kept up to a certain dietary [standard]"²²³ – a regulated scale of rations outlining the foodstuffs and the amounts children were to receive weekly. This engendered considerable controversy between the department and the churches over the adequacy of the scale, how realistic it was given the level of grants, and the degree to which the principals adhered to it.²²⁴ In fact, the 'dietary' was largely ignored by everyone, including the department which did not, according to Benson, inspect the schools on any regular basis.²²⁵ Benson even repudiated the scale, explaining in 1904 that "it is not now and was never enforced" and that it was only ever a "guide...to arrive at the cost of feeding pupils."²²⁶ Thereafter, any pretence that there was actually an enforceable regulation was abandoned and, in 1922, the churches and principals were given responsibility for drawing up their own meal plans, which the department was willing to submit to the "Health Department in Ottawa for their criticism."²²⁷

In subsequent decades, the department's relationship with nutrition services at the department of health remained purely consultative, with consultations being so irregular that the service told Indian affairs in 1954 that they had "almost lost touch with most of the residential schools due to the lack of requests for our services."²²⁸ After 1957, the inspection service expanded, inspections became more regular, and food allowances were "established to provide a standard equivalent to the diet recommended by Canada's Food Rules".²²⁹

What did not change however, was the department's lax manner of responding to recommendations in inspection reports. Like the dietary standards of the earlier part of the century, they were not enforced but routinely passed along to principals with no more than a suggestion that everything be done "that can be done to live up to the recommendations of the dietician." Problems were thrown back into the laps of principals, who were to "see what can be done about them in a constructive way."²³⁰ Despite the department's regulatory authority, which tied grants to the maintenance of standards, there was no stern intervention on behalf of the children, so that even the most egregious neglect by church authorities and principals could drag on unresolved for years.²³¹ In light of such careless management, what Hamilton wrote of Elkhorn school in 1944 might stand as the motto of the system: "It is not being operated, it is just running."²³²

In reviewing the long administrative and financial history of the system – the way the vision of residential education was made real – there can be no dispute: the churches and the government did not, in any thoughtful fashion, care for the children they presumed to parent. While this is traceable to systemic problems, particularly the lack of financial resources, the persistence of those problems and the unrelieved neglect of the children can be explained only in the context of another deficit – the lack of moral resources, the abrogation of parental responsibility. The avalanche of reports on the condition of children – hungry, malnourished, ill-clothed, dying of tuberculosis, overworked – failed to move either the churches or successive governments past the point of intention and on to concerted and effective remedial action.

Neglect was routinely ignored, and without remedial action, it became a thoughtless habit. It was, however, only one part of a larger pattern of church and government irresponsibility writ more starkly in the harsh discipline, cruelty and abuse of generations of children taken into the schools. Here, too, the record is clear. When senior officials in the department and the churches became aware of cases of abuse, they failed routinely to come to the rescue of children they had removed from their real parents or, as they claimed ironically in the case of Category 3, children they had rescued from situations of neglect in communities.

3. Discipline and Abuse

...the failure to regard the children as persons capable of responding to love.²³³

At the heart of the vision of residential education – a vision of the school as home and sanctuary of motherly care – there was a dark contradiction, an inherent element of savagery in the mechanics of civilizing the children. The very language in which the vision was couched revealed what would have to be the essentially violent nature of the school system in its assault on child and culture. The basic premise of resocialization, of the great transformation from 'savage' to 'civilized', was violent. "To kill the Indian in the child", the department aimed at severing the artery of culture that ran between generations and was the profound connection between parent and child sustaining family and community. In the end, at the point of final assimilation, "all the Indian there is in the race should be dead."²³⁴ This was more than a rhetorical flourish as it took on a traumatic reality in the life of each child separated from parents and community and isolated in a world hostile to identity, traditional belief and language.

The system of transformation was suffused with a similar latent savagery – punishment. Prompt and persistent obedience to authority, order and discipline – what Davin referred to as “the restraints of civilization”²³⁵ – were virtues of a civilized society, and in its homes, schools and judicial systems, punishment was one of its servants. Children removed from “permissive” Aboriginal cultures would be brought to civilization through discipline and punishment and would become, in the course of time, civilized parents able naturally to “exercise proper authority”²³⁶ over the next generation of children. In the vision of residential education, discipline was curriculum and punishment an essential pedagogical technique. It could, one senior official advised, “produce circumstances to supplement and aid direct teaching.” In fact, he continued, in terms of learning English, it “will lead to its acquirement more quickly than direct teaching.”²³⁷ Father Lacombe’s experience in managing the High River industrial school in its first year of operation, 1884, a year in which almost all the children ran away or were removed by their parents, led him to conclude that “It is a mistake to have no kind of punishment in the Institution....It is absurd to imagine that such an institution in any country could work properly without some form of coercion to enforce order and obedience.”²³⁸

Few principals would make that “mistake”, and thus discipline and punishment in the service of cultural change formed the context of the children’s lives. At school, they lived by a meticulous regimen of early rising, working, worshipping, learning and, finally, resting. Punishment for “insubordination”,²³⁹ for transgressing that regime and thus challenging the authority of the schoolmasters was pervasive and to some observers poisonous. In 1936, G. Barry, district inspector of schools in British Columbia, described Alberni school on Vancouver Island, “where every member of staff carried a strap” and where “children have never learned to work without punishment.”²⁴⁰ Another critic, who saw the same negative implications of this tyranny of routinization, charged that at Mt. Elgin, “They learn to work under direction which doesn’t require, and even discourages, any individual acting or thinking on their part. Punishment goes to those who don’t keep in line.”²⁴¹

To “keep them in line”, as Lacombe’s successor at High River, Reverend E. Claude, explained, children could be deprived of food, confined or lectured. He tried to avoid “using too vigorous means with regard to the most rebellious tempers such as blows etc.”²⁴² but he had no cause for concern on that score. Punishment, including striking children, was well within the bounds of non-Aboriginal community standards for most of the period covered by the history of the school system. Comments made by the deputy superintendent general, Vankoughnet, in 1889 on discipline – that “obedience to rules and good behavior should be enforced” by means including “corporal punishment”²⁴³ – reflected such standards. There were, however, limits; there was always a line between acceptable chastisement and abuse. Children should not be, Hayter Reed stated in 1895, “whipped by anyone save the Principal”, and if they were, “great discretion should be used and they should not be struck on the head, or punished so that bodily harm might ensue.”²⁴⁴

Corporal punishment should not become, Reed thought, “a general measure of discipline”;²⁴⁵ inherent in the operation of the schools, however, was always the dangerous potential for just that eventuality – for not only the culture of corporal punishment instituted at Alberni and Mt. Elgin but also abuse, for situations in which deprivation verged on starvation, strapping became beating, and lecturing became the verbal abuse of ridicule and public indignity. For the staff, the schools were in many cases not peaceful or rewarding places to work; they were not havens of civilization. Rather they were, owing to the per capita grant system, sites of struggle against poverty and, of course, against cultural difference and, therefore, against the children themselves.

Isolated in distant establishments, divorced from opportunities for social intercourse, and placed in closed communities of co-workers with the potential for strained interpersonal relations heightened by inadequate privacy, the staff not only taught but supervised the children's work, play and personal care.²⁴⁶ Their hours were long, the remuneration below that of other educational institutions, and the working conditions irksome. Thus the struggle against children and their culture was conducted in an atmosphere of considerable stress, fatigue and anxiety that may well have dulled the staff's sensitivity to the children's hunger, their ill-kempt look or their ill-health and often, perhaps inevitably, pushed the application of discipline over the line into abuse and transformed what was to be a circle of care into a violent embrace. Although there were caring and conscientious staff, not every principal, teacher or employee was of the desired moral character; outside the gaze of public scrutiny, isolated from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, schools were the opportunistic sites of abuse.

And abuse there was – identified as such by those inside the system, both in the churches and in the department. Head office, regional, school and church files are replete, from early in the system's history, with incidents that violated the norms of the day. In 1896, Agent D.L. Clink refused to return a child to the Red Deer school because he feared "he would be abused". Without ever being reprimanded by the principal, a teacher had beaten children severely on several occasions, one of whom had to be hospitalized. "Such brutality," Clink concluded, "should not be tolerated for a moment" and "would not be tolerated in a white school for a single day in any part of Canada."²⁴⁷ A senior official in western Canada, David Laird, submitted a report on Norway House in 1907 detailing "frequent whippings" over an eight-year period of a young boy, Charlie Clines, for bedwetting. The "severity of his punishment" was not, Laird asserted, "in accordance with Christian methods."²⁴⁸

The result of Charlie Clines' punishment was what became an all too familiar episode. In "constant dread of the lash", Charlie finally fled. He slept out "in weather so severe that his toes were frozen and he...will lose them."²⁴⁹ Hundreds of children ran away because, the assistant deputy of the department explained in 1917, of "frequent punishment" and "too much hard work" and "travelled through all sorts of hardships to reach their distant homes".²⁵⁰ Many, however, did not make it to their communities and when the trail was followed back to the school from which an injured or dead child had fled, it led almost inevitably to conditions of neglect, mistreatment and abuse.²⁵¹ It was a commonplace within the system that, in the words of one local agent, "there is certainly something wrong as children are running away most of the time." Subsequent investigations would discover, not surprisingly, that "conditions at the school are not what they should be."²⁵²

This certainly was the case, for example, in two quite representative tragedies in British Columbia. In 1902, Johnny Sticks found his son, Duncan, dead of exposure, having fled from the Williams Lake industrial school. Nearly four decades later, in 1937 at the Lejac school, four boys ran away and were found frozen to death on the lake within sight of their community. They were wearing only summer-weight clothes. In both cases, investigations uncovered a history of neglect and violence in evidence given by staff, children and some graduates.

At the Williams Lake inquest, Christine Haines explained why she had run off twice in the past: "...the Sisters didn't treat me good – they gave me rotten food to eat and punished me for not eating it." She was locked in a room, fed bread and water and beaten "with a strap, sometimes on the face, and sometimes [they] took my clothes off and beat me – this is the reason I ran away." Other children, including Duncan's sister, made the same charges. The sister responsible for the girls denied such brutal treatment but admitted that girls had been locked up, one for as long as 12 days.²⁵³

At Lejac, one graduate, Mrs. S. Patrick, recalled, "Even when we just smiled at one of the boys they gave us that much" – 30 strokes with the strap on each hand – and when they spoke their own language, the sister "made us take down our drawers and she strapped us on the backside with a big strap." At this school, too, food was an issue. Mrs. Patrick told the department's investigator, Indian commissioner D. MacKay, "Sometimes we ate worms in the meat, just beans sometimes and sometimes just barley." The new principal admitted that there had been a regime of severe punishment at the school but that he would bring the school into line with community norms and operate it, in regard to punishment, "along the line of the provincial public schools." MacKay's central recommendation was appropriate not only to the Lejac case but to the whole school system. "My investigation leads me to the conclusion that the department should take steps to strengthen its administrative control of our Indian Residential Schools through the full use of the privilege which it reserves of approving the more important appointments of these schools."²⁵⁴ In 1937, this suggestion was long overdue. The system was out of control; its record of abuse had grown more sorrowful each decade, and it was, as MacKay implied, a problem the department had not dealt with.

MacKay was correct. Here again, as in other areas of care, the department laid claim to authority to establish standards – its "privilege" as MacKay termed it – then failed in its self-appointed responsibility. Scott himself had laid out that claim forcefully in 1921. In a letter to the principal of Crowfoot school, where a visiting nurse had discovered nine children "chained to the benches" in the dining room, one of them "marked badly by a strap", Scott stated that the department would not countenance "treatment that might be considered pitiless or jail-like in character." The children "are wards of this department and we exercise our right to ensure proper treatment whether they are resident in our schools or not."²⁵⁵

Unfortunately, Scott's word was not the department's bond. It did not exercise its right to "ensure proper treatment."²⁵⁶ Senior officials had made pronouncements on discipline to individual principals²⁵⁷ and Reed, when he was deputy superintendent general in 1895, had suggested that "Instructions should be given if not already sent to the Principals of the various schools."²⁵⁸ But comprehensive regulations on the acceptable means and limits to punishments were never issued, despite requests by more junior departmental employees,²⁵⁹ and thus principals and staff behaved largely as they saw fit. Children were frequently beaten severely with whips, rods and fists, chained and shackled, bound hand and foot and locked in closets, basements, and bathrooms, and had their heads shaved or hair closely cropped.²⁶⁰

There was more to this irresponsibility than simply a failure of regulation and oversight. There was a pronounced and persistent reluctance on the part of the department to deal forcefully with incidents of abuse, to dismiss, as was its right, or to lay charges against school staff who abused the children. Part of that pattern was an abrogation of responsibility, the abandonment of the children who were "wards of the department"²⁶¹ to the churches, which in their turn failed to defend them from the actions of members of their own organizations.

All these factors are made clear in a series of cases in western Canada brought to the attention of the department by W. Graham, beginning with an incident at Crowstand school in 1907. Graham, then an inspector of Indian agencies, reported that Principal McWhinney had, when retrieving a number of runaway boys, "tied ropes about their arms and made them run behind the buggy from their houses to the school." Referring the matter to a senior member of the Presbyterian church, the department suggested that the principal be dismissed. The church refused, for its investigation had found no reason to fault the principal's action: he had, it was claimed, tied the boys to the wagon only because there was no room inside; the distance was only some eight miles, and the boys did not have to run the whole way, as "the horses trotted slowly when they did trot and they walked a considerable part of the way." The department greeted this response with the cynicism it deserved. Benson saw these "lame arguments" as an attempt to "whitewash McWhinney". The church held firm, however. Despite a continuing record of ill-treatment of children and rising opposition to the school on the part of parents – which led Scott to demand in 1914 that McWhinney be transferred – he was kept on.²⁶²

In 1919, Graham forwarded reports to the department from a local agent and a police constable describing the case of a runaway from the Anglican Old Sun's school. On being brought back, the boy had been shackled to a bed, had his hands tied, and was "most brutally and unmercifully beaten with a horse quirt until his back was bleeding". The accused, P.H. Gentlemen, admitted using a whip and shackles and that the boy "might have been marked." Again, the department turned to the church for its 'advice'. Canon S. Gould, the general secretary of the Missionary Society, mounted a curious defence – such a beating was the norm "more or less, in every boarding school in the country." Scott accepted this, and Gentlemen remained at the school. Graham was irate, writing to Scott that "instead of placing this man in a position of responsibility, where he might repeat his disgraceful acts, he should have been relieved of his duties."²⁶³

In 1924, Graham brought forward another incident – the beating of a boy until he was "black from his neck to his buttocks" at the Anglican MacKay school in Manitoba. When he learned that the department had turned over investigation of the case to the church, Graham's reaction showed just how ingrained and corrosive this practice had become. "Chances are", he wrote, "it will end like all the other cases" and thus would undermine further the vigilance of local departmental staff, as they believed that "where the churches are concerned there is no use sending an adverse report, as the department will listen to excuses from incompetent Principals of the schools more readily than to a report from our Inspectors based on the facts as they find them."²⁶⁴

Unfortunately, Graham was proved right. The agent, J. Waddy, confirmed in a letter to Scott that the punishment of this boy, and indeed of others by the principal, Reverend E. Bird, had been excessive. Bird admitted that he had marked the boy, but the church exonerated him, and the department let the matter drop. But this was not the end of it. The very next year another boy fled from the school "almost naked and barefoot" and was found after a week in the bush "nearly out of his mind" from being "whaled black and blue". One of the non-Aboriginal men who saw the boy before he was taken to the hospital warned that if the department did nothing, he would contact the 'SPCA like he would if a dog was abused.' Graham assumed that the department would realize that the time had come when "the services of this principal should be dispensed with." Scott, however, asked Gould to give the case "your customary careful attention." Bird was exonerated again, and when Graham attacked the church's investigation for ignoring everyone except the school staff, he was put in his place by the secretary of the department: "I have to assure you that the Department has dealt with this question seriously and I feel that no further action is advisable at present."²⁶⁵

In these and in dozens of other cases, no further action was ever taken, and thus abusive situations at many schools remained unresolved. In 1931, Graham wrote to Scott, after yet another bad report on MacKay, "I have not had good reports on this school for the past ten years, and it seems that there is no improvement. I think the Department should have the whole matter cleared up."²⁶⁶ That the department seemed inherently incapable of following Graham's advice was part of the long established habit of neglect. But it stemmed, as well, from the fact that the department did not think it advisable to contradict the churches in these matters. The church was a force to be reckoned with in the national political arena and therefore in the school system. Calling for a tightening of regulatory guidelines in his 1897 report, Benson complained that the churches had "too much power."²⁶⁷ In that light, he noted, in 1903, the department had "a certain amount of hesitancy in insisting on the church authorities taking the necessary action."²⁶⁸

Some officials certainly feared church influence and thought the department should as well. Agent A. Daunt, who conducted an inquiry into a 1920 incident at Williams Lake involving the suicide of one boy and the attempted mass suicide of eight others, admitted that he felt it unwise to accept the evidence of children, for “to take action on that will bring a religious hornets nest around the ears of the Department, unless the reverence in which the missionaries are held in the East has undergone a great change since I lived there.”²⁶⁹ Scott may not have feared those clerical hornets, but he certainly carried forward Benson’s “hesitancy” throughout his long career as deputy superintendent general between 1913 and 1933, persistently deferring to church advice on issues of abuse. Chronic reluctance to challenge the churches and to insist upon the proper treatment of the children, together with the churches’ persistent carelessness in the face of neglect and abuse by their members, became central elements in the pattern of mishandling abuse as long as the system continued to operate.

The department was not simply overawed by influential churches that refused to accept criticism of their treatment of children or disciplining of their staff. The department was complicit. In the face of criticism, and when abuse or neglect was revealed, too often it seemed to feel not sympathy for the children but its own vulnerability. For the department, the school system was an important symbol. As plans were being laid for the opening of the Shubenacadie school in Nova Scotia, Scott noted that it would be sited “within full view of the railway and highway, so that the passing people will see in it an indication that our country is not unmindful of the interest of these Indian children.”²⁷⁰ He was not, however, careful of that interest when it came into conflict with the reputation of the system and the department. In 1922, a journalist passed on to Scott a letter from a boy at the Onion Lake school detailing “how we are treated”, in particular the lack of food.²⁷¹ Despite having departmental reports that confirmed the charges, Scott advised against publication, for the boy was not trustworthy and, in fact, he said, “ninety-nine percent of the Indian children at these schools are too fat.”²⁷²

Such misinformation, which tried to ensure that the public could see the schools but not see into them, was another significant element in the management of the system. The importance of the civilizing mission far outweighed issues of justice for the children. The inspector of Indian agencies in British Columbia, referring to an incident in which two girls were sexually “polluted” by male students, assured the department in 1912 that “it has been kept from the public, and I trust in the interest of the department’s educational system, that it will remain so.”²⁷³ Members of that public, including parents, Indian leaders and journalists, felt the sting of aggressive departmental attacks when their criticism came too close to the bone.²⁷⁴

The department may have been unnecessarily anxious about public opinion. Through inquests, eye witness reports and newspaper articles, some information about abuse and neglect escaped the system. None of it, however – not even the shocking revelations of the Bryce report – elicited any sustained outcry or demand for reform. The issue of Aboriginal people had been consigned to the darker reaches of national consciousness. Thus the children remained trapped and defenceless within that “circle of civilized conditions”, which was impervious both to criticism from without and to the constant evidence of abuse from officials within the department.

In the post-war era, as a part of the reorganization of the school system heralded by the new funding arrangement of 1957 and the contracts of 1961, the department did issue directives on punishment. As early as 1949, guidelines for strapping children were distributed to principals. They were expanded in 1953 and 1962,²⁷⁵ but the focus remained on strapping, and other forms of punishment that continued to be commonly applied – confinement and deprivation of food, head shaving, and public beatings – were not specifically prohibited. As was the case in other areas of care, departmental intentions to improve standards – indicated by regulations, but by little else – were insufficient to solve the problem.

In southern schools, and in the northern affairs system too, children continued to be abused. From Turquetil Hall, Chesterfield Inlet, in the Northwest Territories, to the Kamloops school and across the country to Shubenacadie, the voices of Inuit, Indian and Métis adults who were children in those or other schools can now be heard describing the dreadful experiences suffered at the hands of church or departmental staff.²⁷⁶ Writing in 1991 of her experience in both Anglican and Catholic schools, Mary Carpenter told an all too familiar story:

After a lifetime of beatings, going hungry, standing in a corridor on one leg, and walking in the snow with no shoes for speaking Inuvialuktun, and having a heavy, stinging paste rubbed on my face, which they did to stop us from expressing our Eskimo custom of raising our eyebrows for 'yes' and wrinkling our noses for 'no', I soon lost the ability to speak my mother tongue. When a language dies, the world it was generated from is broken down too.²⁷⁷

Many of those stories, or certainly ones like them, were already known to church and government officials. In 1965, in preparation for the first Residential School Principals' Conference, the department asked six 'successful' former students to give their views on the schools. Two of them were brutally frank, describing the school experience as "an insult to human dignity." One listed the punishments meted out at the "mushole", the Mohawk Institute at Brantford, Ontario. Besides the usual beatings, "I have seen Indian children having their faces rubbed in human excrement...the normal punishment for bedwetters...was to have his face rubbed in his own urine", and for those who tried to escape, "nearly all were caught and brought back to face the music". They were forced to run a gauntlet where they were "struck with anything that was at hand....I have seen boys crying in the most abject misery and pain with not a soul to care – the dignity of man!"²⁷⁸

Some did get away from the schools, however, and some of those children met their deaths.²⁷⁹ Other children tried to find escape in death itself. In June 1981, at Muscowequan Residential School, "five or six girls between the ages of 8 and 10 years had tied socks and towels together and tried to hang themselves." Earlier that year, a 15-year-old at the school had been successful in her attempt.²⁸⁰

A former employee of one school reported that the principal regularly entered classrooms and would "grab these children by the hair & pull them out of their seat" and then "thrash them unmercifully with a leather strap for no apparent reason."²⁸¹ Such incidents were not necessarily met with stern references to the directives by departmental employees. An incident at another school provides an illustration of the more common response. Two boys were beaten, leaving "marks all over the boys bodies, back, front genitals etcetera." Sweeping aside confirmation by a doctor, the department's regional inspector of schools for Manitoba conceded only that such punishment had "overstepped the mark a little", but as the boys had been caught trying to run away, "he had to make an example of them."²⁸²

"Coercion to enforce order and obedience"²⁸³ – to the degree that it constituted a reign of disciplinary terror, punctuated by incidents of stark abuse – continued to be the ordinary tenor of many schools throughout the system.²⁸⁴ In that light there can be no better summary comment on the system and the experience of the children than the rather diplomatic description of Pelican Lake school by the Bishop of Keewatin in 1960:

The Pelican Lake [school] has over the past many years suffered a somewhat unhappy household atmosphere. Too rigid regimentation, a lack of homelike surroundings and the failure to regard the children as persons capable of responding to love, have contributed at times to that condition. Children unhappy at their treatment were continually running away.²⁸⁵

As this description implies, the department and the churches knew something else about the system, and they knew it years before the voices of former students made the schools, their history and their consequences such a part of the public discourse on Aboriginal/government relations. They knew that the record of abuse and mistreatment being compiled by the school system comprised more than the sum of

innumerable acts of violence against individual children. There were, in addition, pervasive and equally insidious consequences for all the children – for those who had been marked and for those whose scars were less visible but, perhaps, no less damaging.

From early in the history of the residential school system, it was apparent that the great majority of children leaving the schools – unlike the few ‘successes’ the department was able to consult in 1965 – rarely fit the vision’s model of the enfranchiseable individual. In some manner, the educational process – an integral part of which was the system’s overweening discipline, the “regimentation” noted at Alberni and Mt. Elgin – was counter-productive, undercutting the very qualities that were the prerequisites for assimilation – “individual acting and thinking”,²⁸⁶ the development of “individuality and self control”, so that “children are prepared to accept responsibility” and “take their place in our democratic way of life.”²⁸⁷

At the same time this phenomenon had darker hues. Local agents gave notice that not only did children not undergo a great transformation, but they became stranded between cultures, deviants from the norms of both. In 1913, one agent reviewing the record of children who had come home from McWhinney’s Crowstand school, commented that there were “far too many girl graduates...turning out prostitutes, and boys becoming drunken loafers.”²⁸⁸ Another agent, writing in 1918, opposed the schools because a much greater number of former students than children who had remained in the community were “useless”, unable to get on with life on the reserve, and fell foul of the law. It would be, he concluded, “far better that they never go to school than turn out as the ex-pupils...have done.”²⁸⁹ In 1960, a Catholic bishop informed the department that the “general complaint made by our Indian Youth brought up to court shortly after leaving school for various reasons is that they cannot make a decent living nor have a steady job because they have not education to compete with their white neighbours.”²⁹⁰

Whether the bishop was correct, and those youth ended up in trouble because they did not have enough education, or whether it was the wrong sort of education and a severely debilitating experience, was not normally a matter for inquiry. However, in the late 1960s, the department and the churches were forced to face the fact that there were severe defects in the system. The former students consulted in 1965 were unanimous in the opinion that for most children, the school experience was “really detrimental to the development of the human being.” Isolated from both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal community, schools were “inclined to make robots of their students”, who were quite incapable of facing “a world almost unknown to [them].”²⁹¹

More critically, the former student perspective was confirmed forcefully in 1967 by a report from George Caldwell of the Canadian Welfare Council. Caldwell submitted a scathing evaluation of nine schools in Saskatchewan:

The residential school system is geared to the academic training of the child and fails to meet the total needs of the child because it fails to individualize; rather it treats him en masse in every significant activity of daily life. His sleeping, eating, recreation, academic training, spiritual training and discipline are all handled in such a regimented way as to force conformity to the institutional pattern. The absence of emphasis on the development of the individual child as a unique person is the most disturbing result of the whole system. The schools are providing a custodial care service rather than a child development service. The physical environment of the daily living aspects of the residential school is overcrowded, poorly designed, highly regimented and forces a mass approach to children. The residential school reflects a pattern of child care which was dominant in the early decades of the 20th century, a concept of combined shelter and education at the least public expense.²⁹²

While most of the report looked at the failure of the schools to achieve the goal of effective socialization, Caldwell did devote some attention to the consequences of that failure for children after they left school. Therein lay an even more “disturbing result.” Caldwell confirmed what some local agents had observed decades before – that not only were children ill-prepared for life and work in Canadian society but that they were unable to deal with the unique reality facing former students. A product of both worlds, they were caught in “the conflicting pulls between the two cultures” – the “white culture of the residential school” and subsequently “the need to readapt and readjust to the Indian culture.” Central to the “resolution of the impact of the cultural clash for the...child is an integration of these major forces in his life.” Unfortunately, “few children are equipped to handle this struggle on their own”,²⁹³ though they would be left to do just that, to deal alone with the trauma of their school experience. Caldwell did not say, and the department never asked, how that struggle might be, or had been for generations, playing itself out in the lives of children, the families they returned to, the families and children they gave birth to, and their communities.

What Caldwell’s report did venture was that his Saskatchewan findings could be replicated in schools throughout the system.²⁹⁴ Though opposed by some churchmen, this position was supported by others. A consulting psychologist, for example, having interviewed and tested Inuit students, concluded that “the educational problems encountered in the Keewatin Area are there because the Southern white educational system, with all its ‘hangups’ has been transported to the North.” Those educational problems included “a range of emotional problems”, including “anxious kids, fearful kids, mildly depressed kids, kids with poor self-images...”.²⁹⁵

For its part, the department, far from being prepared to dispute Caldwell’s conclusions, welcomed and even amplified them in what amounted to its own serious critique of the system. Officials in the regions and in Ottawa declared authoritatively that “more injury is done to the children by requiring them to leave their homes to attend Residential schools than if they are permitted to remain at home and not receive a formal education.”²⁹⁶ This was all suspiciously self-interested, however, for the department, pushing integration, used Caldwell’s view that the schools were not an “environment to foster healthy growth and development”²⁹⁷ as a counter-weight against those who argued for the retention of a particular school or, more broadly, for the continuation of separate and residential education. In what is perhaps the darkest irony in the history of the school system, the department acted vigorously on its failure, never having acted vigorously in the past to prevent the decades of “injury...done to children by requiring them to leave home.” Soon, however, the department and the churches had to begin to face that issue of “injury”²⁹⁸ – the product of the long unbroken history of abuse, mistreatment and neglect of children and of the sustained attack on Aboriginal culture.

4. Epilogue

...hurt, devastated and outraged.²⁹⁹

In December 1992, Grand Chief Edward John of the First Nations task force group forwarded to the minister of justice of the day, Kim Campbell, “a statement prepared and approved by B.C. First Nations Chiefs and leaders”. In it, they pointed out that

The federal government established the system of Indian residential schools which was operated by various church denominations. Therefore, both the federal government and churches must be held accountable for the pain inflicted upon our people. We are hurt, devastated and outraged. The effect of the Indian residential school system is like a disease ripping through our communities.³⁰⁰

The chiefs' conclusion was not a rhetorical flourish; it was literally true. By the mid-1980s, it was widely and publicly recognized that the residential school experience, in the north and in the south, like smallpox and tuberculosis in earlier decades, had devastated and continued to devastate communities. The schools were, with the agents and instruments of economic and political marginalization, part of the contagion of colonization. In their direct attack on language, beliefs and spirituality, the schools had been a particularly virulent strain of that epidemic of empire, sapping the children's bodies and beings. In later life, many adult survivors, and the families and communities to which they returned, all manifested a tragic range of symptoms emblematic of "the silent tortures that continue in our communities".³⁰¹ In 1990 Chief Ed Metatawabin of the Fort Albany First Nation community told the minister, Tom Siddon, that

Social maladjustment, abuse of self and others and family breakdown are some of the symptoms prevalent among First Nation Babyboomers. The 'Graduates' of the 'Ste Anne's Residential School' era are now trying and often failing to come to grips with life as adults after being raised as children in an atmosphere of fear, loneliness and loathing.

Fear of caretakers. Loneliness, knowing that elders and family were far away. Loathing from learning to hate oneself, because of the repeated physical, verbal or sexual abuse suffered at the hands of various adult caretakers. This is only a small part of the story.³⁰²

What finally broke the seal on the residential school system that had been affixed by Duncan Campbell Scott, making public the story of neglect and physical and cultural abuse, was, ironically, the deepest secret of all – the pervasive sexual abuse of the children. The official files efface the issue almost completely. There is rarely any mention of sexual behaviour that is not a concern about sexual activity among the children, which led administrators to segregate them and lock them away at night to prevent contact.³⁰³ Any other references were encoded in the language of repression that marked the Canadian discourse on sexual matters. Clink at Red Deer commented that "the moral aspect of affairs is deplorable";³⁰⁴ others wrote of "questions of immorality"³⁰⁵ of "the breaking of the Seventh Commandment."³⁰⁶ When the issue of sexual abuse emerged, this dearth of information became the first block in the foundation of a departmental response. In 1990, the director of education in the British Columbia region formulated an answer to any question about past abuse:

The sad thing is we did not know it was occurring. Students were too reticent to come forward. And it now appears that school staff likely did not know, and if they did, the morality of the day dictated that they, too, remain silent. DIAND staff have no record or recollection of reports – either verbal or written.³⁰⁷

None of the major reports – Paget, Bryce, or Caldwell – that dealt critically with almost every aspect of the system mentioned the issue at all; that fell to Aboriginal people themselves. Responding to abusive conditions in their own lives and in their communities, "hundreds of individuals have stepped forward with accounts of abuse in at least 16 schools."³⁰⁸ Women and men – like Phil Fontaine, the leader of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, who attended the Fort Alexander school – "went out on the Imb to talk...because they wanted to make things better."³⁰⁹ They did more than just talk, more than just speak their pain and anguish; they and their communities acted. Steps were taken to form support groups and healing circles. Beginning in 1989-1990, abusers, including former residential school staff, were accused, taken to court in British Columbia and the Yukon, and convicted in each case of multiple counts of gross indecency and sexual assault. This set off a chain of police investigations and further prosecutions.³¹⁰

These testimonies opened the floodgates of memories, and they poured out before the public. The trials, though far from being the first acts of resistance, may have had their greatest impact in validating the general critique of the system. In the long history of the schools, protests from parents and communities about conditions in the schools and the care of the children had not been uncommon. Many parents had struggled to protect their children, to prevent them being taken to schools, or petitioned for their return. More often than not, however, they had been brushed aside by the churches and the government. Even the initiatives that achieved their immediate goal – securing better food or calling for an inspection of the school, for example – never amounted to a serious challenge to the way the system operated, and thus they fell on stony ground.³¹¹

Times changed, however. In the 1980s, that public ground was well watered by growing concern for the safety of women and children in Canada and harrowed by reports of the sexual abuse of non-Aboriginal children at orphanages like Mount Cashel in Newfoundland and at the Alfred reform school in Ontario. Reflecting such concerns, the government set up a family violence and child abuse initiative, allocating funds for community-based projects dealing with sexual abuse and family violence.³¹² Non-Aboriginal Canadians found that Aboriginal revelations and their attack on the schools, and on the disastrous consequences of federal policy in general, fell within the parameters of their own social concerns, and thus non-Aboriginal voices joined the chorus of condemnation.

Experts working for government and Aboriginal organizations confirmed the connections made by Aboriginal people between the schools' corrosive effect on culture and the dysfunction in their communities. Experiential testimony, combined with professional analysis that charted the scope and pathology of abuse, put that reality beyond any doubt or dispute. In 1990, the *Globe and Mail* reported that Rix Rogers, special adviser to the minister of national health and welfare on child sexual abuse, had commented at a meeting of the Canadian Psychological Association that the abuse revealed to date was "just the tip of the iceberg" and that closer scrutiny of treatment of children at residential schools would show that all children at some schools were sexually abused.³¹³

Abuse had spilled back into communities, so that even after the schools were closed their effects echoed in the lives of subsequent generations of children. A 1989 study sponsored by the Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories found that eight out of 10 girls under the age of eight had been victims of sexual abuse, and 50 per cent of boys the same age had been sexually molested as well.³¹⁴ The cause was no mystery to social scientists. Researchers with the child advocacy project of the Winnipeg Children's Hospital, who investigated child abuse on the Sandy Bay reserve and other reserves in Manitoba, concluded in their report, *A New Justice for Indian Children*, that although the "roots of the problem are complex", it is "apparent that the destruction of traditional Indian culture has contributed greatly to the incidence of child sexual abuse and other deviant behaviour."³¹⁵ Consultants working for the Assembly of First Nations amplified this behaviour, detailing the "social pathologies" that had been produced by the school system.

The survivors of the Indian residential school system have, in many cases, continued to have their lives shaped by the experiences in these schools. Persons who attend these schools continue to struggle with their identity after years of being taught to hate themselves and their culture. The residential school led to a disruption in the transference of parenting skills from one generation to the next. Without these skills, many survivors had had difficulty in raising their own children. In residential schools, they learned that adults often exert power and control through abuse. The lessons learned in childhood are often repeated in adulthood with the result that many survivors of the residential school system often inflict abuse on their own children. These children in turn use the same tools on their children.³¹⁶

A central catalyst in that cycle of abuse were those powerful adults, men and women, employees of the churches and the department. In the years after 1969, when the church/state partnership in education was dissolved, the churches had boxed the political compass, so that at the highest levels and in the most public forums, they supported Aboriginal aspirations. In 1975, the Catholic, Anglican and United Churches formed Project North (the Aboriginal Rights Coalition) to co-ordinate their efforts in Aboriginal campaigns for justice; they were later joined by the Presbyterian church and other denominations. All of them, however, continued at the community level their historical missionary efforts within a new-found tolerance for Aboriginal spirituality.

By 1992, most of the churches had apologized, regretting, in the words of one of the Catholic texts, "the pain, suffering and alienation that so many have experienced."³¹⁷ However, as they told the minister in a joint communication through the Aboriginal Rights Coalition in August 1992, they wanted it recognized that they "share responsibility with government for the consequences of residential schools", which included not only "individual cases of physical and sexual abuse" but also "the broader issue of cultural impacts":

...the loss of language through forced English speaking, the loss of traditional ways of being on the land, the loss of parenting skills through the absence of four or five generations of children from Native communities, and the learned behaviour of despising Native identity.

They ended with an offer of fellowship, a re-creation of the old alliance. "We as churches encourage you, Mr. Siddon, to address the legacy of residential schools with greater vigour". In any such undertaking, they assured him their "moral support and...any experience we gain in responding to this legacy as churches."³¹⁸

Having only just brought an end to the residential school era, the federal government found that "the disclosures, criminal convictions and civil actions related to sexual abuse" forced it to consider that "legacy" and to "determine a course of action."³¹⁹ It was not lacking advice on the direction it should take. From all quarters, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, the government was encouraged to institute a public inquiry. A private citizen warned the minister that refusing to do so would be "an indication of your gross insensitivity to the staggering effect on its victims of the crime of sexual abuse." He went on to argue passionately that, more so than in the case of other crimes,

sexual abuse of children thrives on the unwillingness of society to deal with it out in the open. So long as we as a society permit 'past events' to remain buried, no matter how painful, we cannot hope to halt the shocking epidemic that we are facing.³²⁰

In the House of Commons, Rod Murphy, the member for Churchill, rose in November 1990 to "urge the government to commission an independent inquiry", which he was confident would "assist the healing process for the victims of this abuse".³²¹ Réginald Bélair, the member for Cochrane-Superior, struck the same note in a letter to the minister. "How can the healing process begin without those who were responsible for these injustices publicly acknowledging the wrongs that were done to these children?"³²²

Within the department, Mr. Murphy's sentiments and calls for an inquiry found no apparent support. There was certainly no suggestion that full public disclosure would have any therapeutic value. Files covering the years 1990 to 1992 reveal that the department accepted the basic premise that the schools' extensive record of abuse meant that "many young innocent people have suffered"³²³ and that the system had contributed to the "loss of culture and familial disruption."³²⁴ It was recognized that the "serious psychological, emotional and social sequelae of child sexual abuse are well established" and that "there was a need to address these problems among former victims...their families and communities."³²⁵ On the question of how that should be done it was first suggested that "Although much of the abuse has happened in the past, the department must take some responsibility and offer some solutions to this very serious problem."³²⁶ This was superseded by a more characteristically cautious "framework to respond to incidents of abuse and the resultant effects on Indian communities". On what "is a major issue for DIAND...It is important that DIAND be seen as responding in a way that liability is not admitted, but that it is recognizing the sequelae of these events."³²⁷

By December 1992, when the minister, Tom Siddon, replied to the August communication from the Aboriginal Rights Coalition, the government had developed its response fully. It would not launch a public inquiry. Suggestions that it do so were met with a standard reply. "I am deeply disturbed by the recent disclosures of physical and sexual abuse in the residential schools. However, I do not believe that a public inquiry is the best approach at this time."³²⁸

Nor did the government follow the churches' lead in extending an apology for the residential school system. To anyone who might suggest such a course, the minister was prepared to point out that in June 1991, at the first Canadian conference on residential schools, a former assistant deputy minister, Bill Van Iterson, had "expressed on behalf of all public servants in the department, a sincere regret over the negative impacts of the residential schools and the pain they have caused to many people." There would be no ministerial apology, no apology on behalf of Canadians, and there were no plans for compensation.³²⁹

The strategy the government adopted was a simple one. Essentially, it tried to externalize the issue, throwing it back onto the shoulders of Aboriginal people themselves. Under the guise of being "strongly committed to the principles of self-government", as Mr. Siddon informed the Aboriginal Rights Coalition in December 1992, the government would concentrate its efforts on "enabling First Nations to design and develop their own programs according to their needs."³³⁰ It was committed "to working with Indian and Inuit communities to find ways to address this problem at the community level and to begin the healing of these wounds."³³¹ To facilitate such programs the government supplemented its family violence and child abuse initiative in 1991 with provisions and funds directed specifically to Aboriginal concerns.³³² In an echo of the old per capita debates, the coalition, in reviewing the funding, informed the minister "that these amounts are still relatively modest when looking at the deep and widespread nature of the problems."³³³

The approach to legal issues, particularly the identification and prosecution of purported abusers, was equally diffuse. There was no consideration that the system itself constituted a 'crime'. Rather, the focus was placed on individual acts that violated the Criminal Code. Again, the government would not take the lead. There would be no internal inquiry, no search of departmental files. 'DIAND will not without specific cause, initiate an investigation of all former student residence employees.'³³⁴ It would be the task of those who had been abused to take action. They would be directed to "the appropriate law enforcement agency, and DIAND will continue to cooperate fully with any police investigation."³³⁵ The assistance they might receive from the department would be "as open as possible", with due respect to "the privacy rights of individuals."³³⁶

Such policies may well have been dictated by the norms of the criminal justice system and may even be appropriate in terms of community demands for funding and control. But there is in this a cynical sleight of hand. The government has refused to apologize or to institute a special public inquiry and instead wishes to concentrate on the 'now' of the problem, the 'savage' sick and in need of psychological salvation. This is an attempt to efface the 'then', the history of the system, which, if it were considered, would inevitably turn the light of inquiry back onto the source of that contagion – on the 'civilized' – on Canadian society and Christian evangelism and on the racist policies of its institutional expressions in church, government and bureaucracy. Those are the sites that produced the residential school system. In thought and deed this system was an act of profound cruelty, rooted in non-Aboriginal pride and intolerance and in the certitude and insularity of purported cultural superiority.

Rather than attempting to close the door on the past, looking only to the future of communities, the terrible facts of the residential school system must be made a part of a new sense of what Canada has been and will continue to be for as long as that record is not officially recognized and repudiated. Only by such an act of recognition and repudiation can a start be made on a very different future. Canada and Canadians must realize that they need to consider changing their society so that they can discover ways of living in harmony with the original people of the land.

The future must include making a place for those who have been affected by the schools to stand in dignity, to remember, to voice their sorrow and anger, and to be listened to with respect. With them Canada needs to pursue justice and mutual healing; it must build a relationship, as the Manitoba leader and much decorated veteran Thomas Prince encouraged the government to do in his appearance before the joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons in 1947, that will bind Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people "so that they can trust each other and...can walk side by side and face this world having faith and confidence in one another."³³⁷

5. The Need for a Public Inquiry

We must carefully assess the nature, scope and intent of Canada's residential school strategy. We must carefully assess the role of the church. We must listen carefully to the survivors. We must thoroughly review the options available to Aboriginal people for restitution and redress. We must carefully consider how it might be possible to achieve justice after all that has been wrought by residential schools.

Wendy Grant, Vice-Chief
Assembly of First Nations
Canim Lake, British Columbia, 8 March 1993

Redressing the wrongs associated with the residential school system will involve concerted action on a number of fronts. We make a number of recommendations elsewhere in our report that bear directly on residential schooling. In particular, in Volume 3, our recommendations concerning an Aboriginal university include the recommendation that the federal government fund the establishment and operation of a national Aboriginal archive and library to house records concerning residential schools (see Volume 3, Chapter 3). Also in Volume 3, our recommendations concerning health and healing include the recommendation that the federal government take immediate steps to ensure that individuals suffering the effects of physical, sexual or emotional abuse have access to appropriate methods of healing (see Volume 3, Chapter 4). The remainder of this chapter addresses the need for further inquiry and investigation into the profound cruelty inflicted on Aboriginal people by residential school policies.

Our research and hearings indicate that a full investigation into Canada's residential school system, in the form of a public inquiry established under Part I of the Public Inquiries Act, is necessary to bring to light and begin to heal the grievous harms suffered by countless Aboriginal children, families and communities as a result of the residential school system.³³⁸ The public inquiry's main focus should be to investigate and document the origins, purposes and effects of residential school policies and practices as they relate to all Aboriginal peoples, with particular attention to the manner and extent of their impact on individuals and families across several generations, on communities, and on Aboriginal society as a whole. The inquiry should conduct public hearings across the country, with sufficient funding to enable those affected to testify. The inquiry should be empowered to commission research and analysis to assist in gaining an understanding of the nature and effects of residential school policies. It should be authorized to recommend whatever remedial action it believes necessary for governments and churches to ameliorate the conditions created by the residential school experience. Where appropriate, such remedies should include apologies from those responsible, compensation on a collective basis to enable Aboriginal communities to design and administer programs that assist the healing process and rebuild community life, and funding for the treatment of affected people and their families.³³⁹

We believe that a public inquiry into residential schools is an appropriate social and institutional forum to enable Aboriginal people to do what we and others before us have suggested is necessary: to stand in dignity, voice their sorrow and anger, and be listened to with respect. It has often been noted that public inquiries perform valuable social functions. In the words of Gerald Le Dain, a public inquiry

has certain things to say to government but it also has an effect on perceptions, attitudes and behaviour. Its general way of looking at things is probably more important in the long run than its specific recommendations. It is the general approach towards a social problem that determines the way in which a society responds to it. There is much more than law and governmental action involved in the social response to a problem. The attitudes and responses of individuals at the various places at which they can affect the problem are of profound importance.

What gives an inquiry of this kind its social function is that it becomes, whether it likes it or not, part of this ongoing social process. There is action and interaction...Thus this instrument, supposedly merely an extension of Parliament, may have a dimension which passes beyond the political process into the social sphere....The decision to institute an inquiry of this kind is a decision not only to release an investigative technique but a form of social influence as well.³⁴⁰

A public inquiry is also an appropriate instrument to perform the investigative function necessary to understand fully the nature and ramifications of residential school policies. As Marius Tungilik told us at our public hearings, "We need to know why we were subjected to such treatment in order that we may begin to understand and heal."³⁴¹ A public inquiry benefits from independence and flexibility in this regard. As stated in a working paper of the Law Reform Commission of Canada,

Investigatory commissions supplement the activities of the mainstream institutions of government. They may investigate government itself, a function that must clearly fall to some body outside the executive and public service. They possess an objectivity and freedom from time constraints not often found in the legislature. They can deal with questions that do not require the application of substantive law by the courts. And they can reasonably investigate and interpret matters not wholly within the competence of Canada's various police forces.³⁴²