

## **First Nations leader demands meeting with Harper over 'colonialism' comment**

By Jorge Barrera, Canwest News Service October 1, 2009 5:02 PM

Shawn Atleo on Thursday raised the temperature in a simmering controversy sparked by the prime minister when he said Canada had 'no history of colonialism' by demanding a meeting to discuss the matter.

Photograph by: Jon Murray file, The Province

The leader of the country's most prominent First Nations organization on Thursday raised the temperature in a simmering controversy sparked by the prime minister when he said Canada had "no history of colonialism."

Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo dismissed the government's defence of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement and demanded a meeting to discuss the matter.

"The prime minister must be held to the highest standard, especially when speaking to the international community. There is no room for error. The current line of response from federal officials that the prime minister's remarks were taken 'out of context' is simply not good enough for someone in his position," Atleo said in a statement.

Harper made the remark last Friday at a news conference with international media during the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh.

"We also have no history of colonialism," said Harper. "So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers, but none of the things that threaten or bother them."

The Prime Minister's Office has said Harper's statement were taken out of context and that he was differentiating Canada from countries that had Imperial ambitions in their past.

Atleo, however, said the prime minister's comments showed the "gulf of misunderstanding" between many Canadians and First Nations people.

"The future cannot be built without regard to the past," said Atleo. "Internationally, Canada has been scrutinized and harshly criticized for its treatment of Indigenous peoples and failure to respect aboriginal and treaty rights."

Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl's office refused to comment and the Prime Minister's Office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Atleo said the effects of Canadian colonialism remained.

"It is the attitude that fuelled the residential schools, the colonial Indian Act that displaces traditional forms of First Nations governance, the theft of Indian lands and forced relocations of First Nations communities, the criminalization and suppression of First Nations languages and cultural practices," said Atleo. "The chronic under-funding of First Nations communities and programs and the denial of treaty and aboriginal rights, even though they are recognized in Canada's Constitution."

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**Sent:** Thursday, October 01, 2009 12:40 PM

**Subject:** Harper Decries " [Canada] also [has] no history of colonialism."

Over the past couple of days, while I was resting and getting better from a serious cold, I received emails from my fellow members of the Aboriginal Peoples Commission of the Liberal Party of Canada. These emails contained articles and expressions regarding Stephen Harper's latest claim, and jab, at Indigenous people from within what is now called Canada. At the G20 meeting, in the United States, Harper, while boasting about how great Canada is, claimed "We also have no history of colonialism."

As a Canadian and a member of the Hiawatha First Nation, as I am a mixture of both, my jaw dropped at this claim. My heart sunk as well because the fact is that most Canadians would agree with this statement. I don't hold this against general Canadians however, as they are heavily uneducated in a system put forth by the provincial and federal governments – which just so happens to leave out much of the colonial history that occurred here, including after 1867. Politicians, who are able to see internal policies and documents that exist now and in the past, are a different story. How can an individual who is elected as leader of a country, a democratic one at that, claim such blasphemy? No one can truly answer this – all that can be done is educate.

The term colonialism is defined "as the practice and processes of domination, control, and forced subjugation of one people to another." If Harper had looked at the definition before stating such a reckless response, he may have thought differently. Then again, this is Harper we are talking about – a man who looked up to Tom Flanagan - a man who expresses in many papers and books that First Nation women are "loose" and give birth to many children who tend to be fathered by different men; that First Nation university students "do not know what it is like to pay for their education and work for it" – instead getting a free

ride; that First Nations “are lazy and dirty”; and so on – and relied on him for advice on Indigenous policy.

However, if one does delve further into Canadian history they would find infamous examples and quotes from texts, personal journals, and policies that would show just how ridiculous Harper’s comment was. During John A. MacDonald’s time in office, he became responsible for the death of hundreds of First Nations people inhabiting the western half of Canada. He did this through starvation as he was worried about similar rebellions as that of the Red River Rebellion – led by the Métis. He was also responsible for erecting quite a few army forts right near First Nations Reservations – in order to watch them and make sure they were “good savages.”

Another example is the enforcement of European society, politics, and ignorance on to First Nations people. Making men the dominate form – while originally most First Nations societies had the sexes on an equal footing, or in the case of the Iroquois (Haudenashaune) – matrilineal. Canada also enforced special schools that many Indigenous children were forced to attend, where it was expected to civilize them and “beat the Indian child out of them.” These are also known as the infamous residential schools – the last of which closed in 1996.

Duncan Campbell Scott, the Head of the Department of Indian Affairs in the 1920’s expressed that “our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question.” Prime Minister Mackenzie King even stated, during his tenure, that “Canada should remain a white man’s country is believed to be not only desirable for economic and social reasons but highly necessary on political and national grounds.” Furthermore, for many decades it was illegal for a First Nations person to leave their community, which there are many cases where they were even fenced in, without a paper signed by the government appointed Indian Agent.

The Indian Act, a Canadian imposed doctrine that put all treaties under it – even those originally done by Britain, came into existence in 1873. With Canada and Great Britain recognizing the BNA act in 1867, it brought onus onto Canada to uphold what Britain had already done with, and to, the Indigenous groups in Canada. Lastly, there can be no other term than a colonialist regime when a constitution of a country is drawn up and the original inhabitants are excluded and made wards of the state and no citizenship or rights – until 1960, when Prime Minister Diefenbaker brought in citizenship for Indigenous people.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), put forth by Prime Minister Mulroney, explicitly laid out “Canada’s imposition of a colonial relationship” – which is the heading of one of the actual chapters.

Yet Harper, and his MPs such as Rod Bruinooge – a self proclaimed Métis, refuse to acknowledge these few examples out of many and believes that “[Canada] also [has} no history of colonialism.” But, was it not Harper himself, and his government that got up in the House of Commons that mid June day in 2008 and expressed, on behalf of Canadians and the government of Canada, a sincere apology for residential schools and the abuses that occurred within them? Do his actions here not contradict himself tremendously? Either he clearly did not mean what he stated that mid June day, or Harper is a moron.

As Chief Ghislain Picard, Representative of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, stated “denying the history of colonials in Canada is like denying the holocaust.” I too, have to agree with this statement, but also add in that denying the history of colonialism in Canada is also like denying that slavery existed in the American south, that it was not Japan that bombed Pearl Harbour, and that everyone on this planet gets along!

In my closing remarks, the optimistic side of me wants to believe that Canadians will open their eyes to these ignorances and reform to education on Indigenous issues – at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary level are needed, but the pessimistic side of me believes Canadians won't care, that the major news outlets of this country won't give this situation much coverage, and that the Canadian government will continue to ignore and deny its reckless, dark, and disturbing past.

The NDP seem to have – they now support this government ...

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