

Colonial reckoning, national reconciliation?:

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Colonial Reckoning, National Reconciliation?: Aboriginal Peoples and the Culture of Redress in Canada

Jennifer Henderson, Pauline Wakeham

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Colonial Reckoning, National Reconciliation?:
Aboriginal Peoples and the Culture of Redress in Canada**

Jennifer Henderson (bio) and Pauline Wakeham (bio)

During a press conference at the G20 Pittsburgh Summit in September 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper was asked by Reuters correspondents whether or not he feared a diminishment of Canada's role in this global economic organization with the expansion from eight to twenty members. In his response, Harper relied upon well-worn nationalist mythologies regarding Canada's distinctive status as a middle power "big enough to make a difference, but not big enough to threaten anybody" (quoted in Wherry). Elaborating further, Harper asserted: "We are one of the most stable regimes in history. There are very few countries that can say for nearly 150 years they've had the same political system without any social breakdown, political upheaval or invasion. We are unique in that regard. We also have no history of colonialism" (quoted in Wherry). While Harper's claims regarding the absence of any "social breakdown" or "invasion" in Canada alone offer a whitewashing of the foundational imperialist invasion upon which the nation is predicated as well as the state's long-standing policies of race-based discrimination, his outright denial of the "history of colonialism" punctuated the speech with a particularly remarkable form of erasure. **[End Page 1]**

In the wake of Harper's comments, many Aboriginal leaders pointed out the radical disjuncture between the prime minister's denial of colonialism and his rhetorical gesture of apology for residential schools only fifteen months earlier. Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Shawn Atleo responded by commenting: "The Prime Minister stated in his apology to students of residential schools that, 'There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again.' The Prime Minister must ensure that such commitments inform every statement and action" ("AFN National Chief"). While Atleo's assertion is apt, his efforts to hold the government to account by citing Harper's past official speech act sidestep the notable limitations of the 11 June 2008 apology. The prime minister's rhetorical gesture of contrition on behalf of the Government of Canada holds significance for some residential school survivors and their families who

have long awaited official acknowledgement of their unjust suffering. It is possible, however, to recognize that importance while remaining critical of this speech act's implications for shaping dominant state formulations of a present and future of reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples. For instance, in the very gesture of purportedly criticizing "the attitudes that inspired" residential schools, the prime minister's statement of contrition fails to identify these "attitudes" as decidedly colonial. In fact, the entire 11 June apology manages never to invoke the category of colonialism, encoding a palpable absence that is not as far removed from Harper's subsequent outright denial of the "history of colonialism" as it might initially appear. The absence of the word "colonialism" from the prime minister's apology enables a strategic isolation and containment of residential schools as a discrete historical problem of educational malpractice rather than one devastating prong of an overarching and multifaceted system of colonial oppression that persists in the present.

Insofar as Harper's comment at the G20 summit was designed to stress the value of political stability, or "peace, order, and good government," that Canada purportedly has to offer the world financial system, it was not expedient for him in that particular moment to acknowledge the kinds of historical "mistakes" that, in other contexts, his own government has been more than willing to own. In the last few decades, Canadian governments have joined those of other liberal-democratic nation-states in making apologies for historically distant, carefully circumscribed instances of so-called misguided state action, often rhetorically mitigated via references to the antiquated "attitudes" of past eras. The 2008 apology for residential schools was subsequent to several other apologies by **[End Page 2]** Canadian governments for wartime internment and racist immigration policies.¹ Knowledge of these state-inflicted group injuries, and Canada's proclaimed regret for them, now forms part of the hegemonic understanding of Canada.

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Jennifer Henderson
Carleton University

Pauline Wakeham
University of Western Ontario

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