

We need a public inquiry

Dear editor:

Prime Minister Harper has dismissed a call for a public inquiry to look into missing and murdered aboriginal women arguing that he sees this as a criminal matter, not as a societal issue. He reasons that these crimes are solved at about the same 90 per cent rate as non-aboriginal missing persons and murders. That the solve rate is comparable however, is testimony that we have efficient and non-biased police services and for that we should be thankful; but that does not argue against calling for a public inquiry.

The crime rate against aboriginal women is drastically out of proportion compared to the population as a whole, as is the rate at which aboriginal men are murdered. We see a much higher proportion of aboriginal women engaged in prostitution and aboriginal men in our jails. We see higher suicide rates, higher substance abuse rates, higher infant mortality, lower literacy and numeracy rates, shorter life spans and drastically poorer living conditions. We see hopelessness and lack of optimism for a brighter future. These are not crime statistics but rather indicators of deep, systemic, societal problems.

Political pundits complain that public inquiries are expensive and "a nice perk for the lawyers" but solve little. Perhaps they would similarly argue that higher education is expensive and a nice perk for the professors but does not lead to the public good. The fact is that public inquiries serve many different purposes, from examining allegations of government wrongdoing to studying divisive or complex issues dominating Canadian politics and policy-making. Often public inquiries are mirrors that force us to look at ourselves.

In 2005, the leaders of all ten provinces, the territories and five national aboriginal organizations under the leadership of the then Liberal federal government reached an agreement, dubbed the Kelowna Accord, which set out goals to bring aboriginal education, health and living standards to be comparable to the rest of the population within ten years. It is a tragedy, that the Harper government promptly scrapped the accord in 2006, largely on the basis that it did not carry the Conservative brand. Since then, there have been various piecemeal initiatives that tinkered with some of the peripheral symptoms but never sought an overall cure and so little has changed.

Making the inquiry about the issues that face aboriginal women will give it focus. Such a public inquiry will no doubt lead to examining the larger, intertwined issues our aboriginal people experience in general and unveil some ugly truths we may find difficult to face as a nation.

Perhaps Mr. Harper would rather not see those truths come to light in an election year.

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