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Aboriginals in Canada

Finding their voice

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Canada delivers an official apology to its increasingly assertive indigenous peoples

FEW would dispute that Canada's shameful treatment of many of its aboriginals has left a stain on its image. Between 1870 and 1996, an estimated 150,000 indigenous children were wrenched from their homes and sent to Christian boarding schools, where many were sexually and physically abused. Yet until Stephen Harper, Canada's Conservative prime minister, rose in the House of Commons on June 11th to deliver an unqualified official apology to assembled leaders of Canada's 1m First Nation, Inuit and mixed-race Métis people, no Canadian leader had taken this step.

Parallels will be drawn with a similar act of contrition by Kevin Rudd, Australia's Labor prime minister in February. But the two differ in important respects. Australia offered an apology, but no compensation, to 55,000 mixed-race children forced into white foster homes. Mr Harper's apology follows a C\$2 billion (\$2 billion) settlement in 2005 of a lawsuit by former students of schools set up, in Mr Harper's words, "to kill the Indian in the child" by assimilating them into the dominant culture.

Mr Harper's decision to apologise now is probably aimed in part at curtailing future lawsuits by Indian victims of abuse, who chose not to take part in the earlier settlement. But it also shows that he understands the value of saying sorry when the state has harmed its citizens. He recently apologised to Maher Arar, a Canadian tortured in Syria after wrongly being identified as a terrorist; and to Chinese-Canadians for the government's punitive Chinese head-tax policy of 1885-1923.

But this week's ceremony is also testimony to the increasingly sophisticated use made by Canada's indigenous tribes, who make up a mere 3.8% of the population, of the courts, alliances with environmental groups and targeted protests against mining companies to strengthen their otherwise limited influence.

This communications savvy was on display in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, on May 29th, when the premiers of the four, resource-rich western provinces decided to interrupt their annual summit to participate in a "national day of action" called by the First Nations, many in traditional feathered head-dress. Intended as a "we-share-your-pain" gesture beloved by politicians, it backfired when Chief Albert Mercredi took advantage of the assembled media to denounce the premiers for allowing mining development to pollute the aboriginals' air, land and water. The chief, whose own band lives on Lake Athabasca, downstream and downwind from massive tar-sands operations in Alberta, says the recent arrival of the internet in isolated communities allows them to keep track of the outside world's ideas and deeds.

Informal alliances with environmental groups, adept at using the media to generate political pressure, give aboriginal groups allies in the land-use disputes they once fought on their own. Their ends may differ—greens seized on the oily death of 500 ducks in an Alberta tailing pond last April to promote wildlife safeguards, while the native group downstream regarded the threat to human health as the salient point—but they help each other generate publicity. Tensions do arise, however. Whereas green groups tend to oppose any development, aboriginals are keen on job creation—so long as they are consulted about sustainable projects.

High mineral prices offer native Canadians living in the remote areas where most such resources are found

another way to raise their profile. A well-targeted protest that raises corporate hackles—such as the one over a proposed platinum mine in northern Ontario that led to the arrest and imprisonment of six members of the Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug band—can produce a quicker political response than years of patient negotiations. Ontario's premier now says he will change mining law to ensure that aboriginals are consulted in advance of any mining on their land. Across Canada, other groups are using similar tactics against a wide array of pipeline and mining projects, confident that pressure from frustrated companies will force politicians to take notice.

Although native Canadians may be speaking more loudly, they do not yet do so with one voice. No single group represents them all, which is one reason why there are no co-ordinated proposals to improve aboriginal living conditions, education and financial prospects, which still trail national averages by a wide margin. Still, with the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010 providing a golden opportunity for protest, the First Nations, Inuit and Métis have time to hone their already sharp skills in getting out their message.

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