TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JUSTIN TRUDEAU, PRIME MINISTER OF CANADA

Mr. Prime Minister, you say a Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian.

Many good words. Less action. No results.

Did little Draze Brandon-Catcheway have a chance to grow up and work hard to join the middle class like all the other Canadians about whom you sermonize all the time? Your words might have some meaning if your ward under the *Indian Act*, a 28-month-old helpless little Waywayseecappo boy slaughtered by his drunken mother, had the opportunity to achieve anything near equality with all other Canadians. Like hundreds of thousands of Indigenous kids in this country, Draze didn’t stand a chance.

The headlines don’t suggest equality; they scream the ugly opposite.

- *Mom admits to killing her two-year-old son - Brandon Sun, September 5, 2018*

*- Teen pleads guilty to 1st-degree murder in death of girl, 11, on Manitoba First Nation*

***-*** *Parents charged in death of toddler on Peguis First Nation*

*- Ten-year-old’s murder of younger boy on reserve ‘a train wreck that we could see coming’*

* *15-yr-old slain First Nation girl remembered in Winnipeg*

Year after year, Statistics Canada reports Indigenous Canadians, male and female, are far more likely to be homicide victims than their non-Indigenous fellow Canadians.

But this tragic reality tells only a small part of the story.

The reason the headlines, graphs and charts don’t tell the whole story is that the Indigenous children who die violently are but a tiny fraction of the number of children who are abandoned, neglected, abused and left to the government to try to prepare them for that blissful middle class adulthood we keep hearing about.

Prime Minister, I know you, like all Canadians, regret profoundly that Indigenous children were abused and died when, through misguided assimilationist policy, they were confined at Indian residential schools. An apology and compensation followed the closure of those awful places, and we are now in a period of reconciliation.

Or, I should say, we are trying to figure out - awkwardly - what reconciliation looks like.

Since the closure of the schools, though, how many Indigenous children have died violent deaths on their reserves, and at the hands of their own relatives? The headlines above, again, tell only a small part of the story, the story of dependence, entitlement, and wretchedness.

If young First Nations Canadians were treated like all other Canadians, they could be spared the melancholy lives they are forced to live because of the paternalistic, racist system under which they are governed today.

But no, for more than 150 years - and counting - First Nations kids have been told to attend annual treaty days and celebrate the five dollars guaranteed by those fossilized documents. They are told they are poor because white governments force them to be poor. They are told they will never get ahead because of their “special” status as “Indians”.

It’s so sad, in 2018, that all this is still true.

Some strong people rise above all this; many others do not.

Because of the *Indian Act* and the treaties which continue into our twenty-first century, most First Nations kids grow up on lands that can never be viable for agriculture or commerce or industry - or jobs. If they are not removed from their abusive or neglectful families, they become teens, many quit school, wait for “welfare” days each month and try to find things to do while they wait. Often, the things they find to do get them into trouble. Some children are placed in foster homes or group homes. Some have difficulty adjusting and, as we have seen, take out their frustrations by assaulting group home workers.

For too many, suicide is the last resort.

Those who actually manage to grow up safely and stay on their reserves are unable to buy property because reserve property is held by the federal government. They cannot be homeowners.They cannot find jobs, so many of them move to the towns and cities, where they are unable to secure jobs or credit because their work histories are spotty or non-existent. They can’t go into business because they are unable to amass capital or prove creditworthiness. So, many of them go into illicit business - crime.

These are just some of the obstacles otherwise capable First Nations young people face when they escape the “special” circumstances of their lives in their reserve communities.

Pundits cite “irregular” immigration, pipelines, trade, your trip to India, your tax-paid vacations, a tax-paid nanny and other botched issues as your failings, Prime Minister, but to thousands of young Indigenous Canadians, the sight of your back as you and their leaders walk away from their plight causes their greatest pain and utter frustration.

These young people are Canadians too, Sir.

With great respect, I offer my humble opinion: reconciliation will only happen when - in your words - a Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian.

James C. McCrae

Brandon resident and former attorney general of Manitoba

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