*The following article appeared in The Brandon Sun on February 28, 2018*

Time to apologize for Indian Act,

end apartheid regime

On Tuesday, Nov. 28, 2017, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau delivered an emotional apology to members of the LBGTQ2 communities for decades of discriminatory treatment at the hands of the federal government.

In 1984, then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was asked to offer an official apology to Japanese Canadians for their treatment by the Canadian government during the Second World War. Trudeau replied: "I do not think it is the purpose of a government to right the past. It cannot rewrite history. How many other historical wrongs would you have to be righted?" In 1988, then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney delivered an apology, and his government provided compensation to those Japanese Canadians affected.

More apologies and compensations followed:

• 2001: for the executions of 23 Canadian soldiers during the First World War.

• 2006: for the head tax imposed on Chinese immigrants.

• 2008: for Indian residential schools abuses.

• 2015: for the ’60s Scoop.

• 2016: for the relocation of the Manitoba Sayisi Dene First Nation.

• 2016: for the Komagata Maru incident.

• 2017: to Omar Khadr for his treatment by Canadian authorities.

• 2017: for Indian residential schools abuses in Newfoundland and Labrador.

• 2017: for LGBTQ2 discrimination.

Pierre Trudeau’s no-apology approach is clearly a thing of the past. Today, Canadians are well known around the world for saying, "I’m sorry." But we are not finished. Let’s consider — again — the longest standing, continuing and most atrocious of Canadian wrongs.

"For too long we clung to a dream of separated nation-states, when it was already clear that it could not succeed sufficiently. For that we are sorry."

If F.W. DeKlerk, who presided over the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, could utter those words in an apology to black, Indian and "coloured" South Africans in 1992, it is certainly time for us to say something similar to Canadian First Nations peoples today, and address many egregious historical wrongs by repealing the Indian Act and ending the apartheid regime that still exists in Canada. Official South African apartheid lasted 43 years. Official Canadian apartheid has been the law since 1876, 142 years.

The difference in Canada is that for the past 49 years First Nations’ leadership — unlike Nelson Mandela’s — has been part of the problem rather than the solution.

First Nations peoples were not allowed to vote until 1960. They were not allowed to purchase liquor until 1985. First Nations women could not marry non-Indigenous men without losing their treaty rights. Those inequities have finally been corrected, but First Nations peoples still cannot own land in the territories reserved for them by the federal government. By far, they still suffer more hardships than non-Indigenous Canadians. Hundreds of thousands are still living in Third World conditions. They remain wards of the state. All this is so because they are still governed by an apartheid-style regime, the Indian Act.

Is there no one in Canada who remembers how wrong South African apartheid was? After all these years, what is the matter with us? "Sunny ways?" Pure sophistry!

A simple apology would be altogether too little and too late for 10 or more generations of a people who have endured and, to this day, still experience the abject discrimination contained in the Indian Act and the treaties. Similarly, no form or amount of compensation can wipe out this cancerous aspect of our history.

Apologies and compensation are not remedial action. If injustice persists, they reconcile nothing. There must be compromise between government and First Nations leadership. Without that, injustice and suffering will continue. And get worse.

From whom should an apology come? It should of course come from the Government of Canada for putting the Indian Act in place, and for keeping it in place all these years. But it should also come from First Nations chiefs who, for at least the past 49 years, could have paved the way to better lives for Indigenous Canadians, but refused to do so.

While enriching themselves with government money over the years, First Nations chiefs and their lieutenants have repeatedly stood in the way of real progress. They did so in 1970 when they blocked implementation of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s White Paper on Indian Policy, which would have repealed the Indian Act and ended First Nations’ dubious special status. They did so again in 2015 when they prevented Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Shawn Atleo from proceeding with Bill C-33, the First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act.

And there are other examples. Every time chiefs open their mouths to protest something and blame the government, they fail to acknowledge their own moral culpability.

Chiefs, do the right thing for your people. Apologize to them for your part in prolonging their misery under the Indian Act. Give your apology meaning by urging the government to end apartheid in Canada. Restore Indigenous pride and establish, finally, the equal and proper place of First Nations peoples in Canadian society.

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