

Land claims must be settled

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I was all set to propose, in this column, that Prime Minister Stephen Harper take a good look at the independent arbitration system used in labour negotiations as a model for dealing with outstanding land claims by First Nations in Canada.

Then he announced his plan for a new tribunal system that might be a step in the right direction. But we have reason to be skeptical. After all, rather than showing sense in dealing with the core issues in the Caledonia land dispute, the Harper government insulted the community by tossing \$125 million on the table and linking it to the settlement of other disputes, such as the land claim around the Welland Canal.

This approach conjures up images of the white man offering beads, blankets and trinkets in order to buy off the legitimate claims of a proud people.

And that's why there's still reason to expect Friday, June 29 could be a turning point.

That is the date the leaders of Canada's First Nations have chosen for a nationwide day of action to highlight the many grievances besetting their communities -- from 125-year-old land claims, to abject poverty, to 100 communities on permanent boil-water orders.

One Northern Ontario community that typifies the many injustices is Kashechewan, located near James Bay. In 2001, a study found the community was a "Walkerton about to happen."

Sure enough, in October 2005, E. coli bacterium was discovered in the drinking water and more than half of the community's 1,600 inhabitants had to be evacuated. Imagine the hullabaloo in this province if we had transported the mainly white population of Walkerton to Toronto or Owen Sound as a solution to their water crisis.

We have a cavalier attitude towards our First Nation communities. How else can we explain that less than 18 months following the evacuation of Kashechewan, 21 young Native children, including a nine-year-old, attempted suicide?

Perhaps, the answer lies in the fact that some governments have little or no respect for our First Nations people. The now-infamous racist slur of former Ontario premier Mike Harris epitomized the problem for all to see.

When he uttered the epithet get those "f...ing Indians out of the park" he sent a message to the senior OPP officers in the room that the premier had little respect for First Nations people at Ipperwash.

The greatest insult was to drag the family of Dudley George through a 12-year ordeal in search of justice for him.

In the past 24 months, we have seen flash points over land claims. Caledonia, one of the hottest, has pitted town residents against the Native community. This confrontation would never have happened if the federal government had stopped acting as judge and jury in land claim disputes.

With his new proposal for a land claims tribunal, we can only hope Harper finally gets it.

The control of traditional lands is the key to raising the standard of living on reservations. Aboriginal people are rightly demanding compensation for past extraction of natural resources and looking to an agreement on profit sharing or royalties for future explorations on these lands.

The shape the protest takes June 29 depends on how much frustration has built up within the 630 communities across the country. I know if I lived in a community that had been under a boil-water order for two years and my children contracted scabies because of government negligence, I would be hopping mad.

Surely, as one of the wealthiest countries on the planet, Canada can do better.