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INQUIRY NEEDED INTO CALEDONIA AFFAIR

This column by Senator Bob Runciman appeared in the Toronto Sun and other Sun Media newspapers on July 13, 2011.

The \$20-million settlement announced last week in a lawsuit against the Ontario government won't even begin to cover the losses incurred by residents and businesses in Caledonia as a result of the illegal occupation of a housing development by native protesters. And it's only a small part of what the travesty of Caledonia has cost Ontario taxpayers – with the provincial bill alone now exceeding \$100 million.

The impact on Haldimand County is in the hundreds of millions of dollars since native protesters occupied the Douglas Creek estates subdivision Feb. 28, 2006. Development throughout the area ground to a halt. People lost confidence in government and the police. Lives were ruined.

The Progressive Conservatives have promised to toughen the rules on illegal occupations – and that's a welcome pledge. But we also need to ask how this happened in law-abiding Ontario and how to prevent it in the future. To answer these questions, we need a public inquiry into Caledonia.

We'll never understand Caledonia, without looking back to 1995 and the death of native protester Dudley George in a confrontation with Ontario Provincial Police during the occupation of Ipperwash Provincial Park. It was a preventable tragedy and it sparked an interest in finding fresh ways to handle such situations, avoiding violence and recognizing the legitimate grievances of First Nations people.

After watching Caledonia for five years, it's clear we drew the wrong lessons from Ipperwash. There's more to it than simply a weak-kneed provincial government.

We also need to consider the Ipperwash Inquiry and its conclusions. Justice Sidney Linden's recommendations, combined with a lack of political support for the police, led to the two-tiered policing that's been disastrous in Caledonia.

The Ipperwash report is hostile to the police and patronizing to First Nations people. Justice Linden does natives no favours by concluding they are not responsible for their own actions and by not adequately acknowledging the deep divisions in the Aboriginal community. (Remember, the band council was opposed to the occupation at Ipperwash).

But the most glaring shortcoming of the three-year, \$20-million inquiry is that it ignored the concerns of non-Native residents, who were denied a chance to testify about an escalation of incidents and a lack of police action – the same pattern Caledonia residents later experienced.

Justice Linden recommended police focus on peacekeeping rather than law enforcement, suggested that they need not enforce injunctions, and said one of their main functions should be to facilitate the protest.

What are the consequences of such an approach? We found out in Caledonia, where residents lived under a state of siege for years while police acted like politically correct social workers, afraid to enforce the law.

What's the message? Occupy a provincial park and you'll be given title to it. Set up a blockade on Argyle St. in Caledonia and receive 250 acres of Crown land.

I believe in a conciliatory approach, as the record shows I advocated at Ipperwash. But that doesn't mean two-tiered policing. Officers must be able to act with dignity, in a way that doesn't ignore their training and expose the public and officers to unnecessary danger.

~~The blueprint left by the Ipperwash Inquiry encourages two-tiered justice, ignores the impact on the community and discredits police. Ultimately, it does not resolve the grievance, either. See Caledonia for evidence of that, as the occupation continues.~~

> We need a new approach, an objective review of the police-First Nations relationship. The way to start is with a public inquiry into Caledonia.

Senator Bob Runciman was Ontario's Solicitor General at the time of the Ipperwash occupation.

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