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## Canada to apologize to native students

**Prime Minister Stephen Harper will seek to make amends for the schools that for a century plucked Indian children from their homes in order to wipe out their language and culture.**

By Maggie Farley, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
June 10, 2008

OTTAWA -- For eight years, Thomas Louttit was forced to attend a residential school whose mission was to "Christianize and civilize" Canada's native people. He doesn't remember much of what he learned, but he is keenly aware of what he lost.

"They gave us a number. That's all our name was. We didn't speak their language, and we were not allowed to speak ours," he said. Like other students, he said, he was sexually abused, a secret that filled him with shame and remained untold until many years later.



Thomas Louttit

"You forget how to cry, you forget how to show your feelings," he said, staring out of his window. "We were never taught to say, 'I love you.' We were never taught to forgive."

Now, 12 years after the last residential school shut down, Canada is asking the 150,000 students and their descendants if it is indeed possible to forgive. On Wednesday, Prime Minister Stephen Harper will formally apologize to Canada's aboriginal people and declare his support for a truth and reconciliation commission.

A \$1.9-billion compensation fund, created after the federal government settled a lawsuit in 2006, has already begun payouts. Every student is receiving some money; those who were abused are getting higher amounts. But some say the process may be more for the perpetrators than the victims.

"The important thing is that they own up to what they did, admit that it is unconscionable, and it was genocide," said Roland Chrisjohn, the director of the Native Studies program at St. Thomas University in Saskatchewan, and a member of the Iroquois nation. "But they are afraid that such an admission would bring with it criminal liability."

Over a century, Canada's government and churches built 130 residential schools across the country. Children were forcibly taken from their parents to instill mainstream language, culture and values. An Indian Affairs official in 1920 said the goal was "to kill the Indian in the child."

"Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed . . . and there is no Indian question," wrote Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent general of the Indian Affairs department. Native rituals such as powwows were outlawed, and entire communities relocated.

A [commission concluded in 1996](#) that the program indelibly damaged generations of aboriginal people and subverted their culture, prompting the last of the schools to be shut down. It outlined a program of healing and redress, but that has been a long time coming.

For Justice Harry LaForme, the chair of the newly formed Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the truth is now largely known; the real work will be in the reconciliation.

"Today, the idea that you could order the removal of a people from the fabric of a nation is a human rights violation of the first order," he said in an interview in the commission's new office across from Canada's Parliament. "In order to move forward, we need to listen to people's voices, to hear the 'whys' behind it, to write the missing chapter that everyone knows is there."

A Mississauga Indian, LaForme was the first aborigine to sit on an appellate court in Canada, where he has ruled in landmark cases to recognize same-sex marriage, and to legalize medicinal marijuana.

The commission, created under the terms of the lawsuit settlement, will hold seven national events and many more local ones involving church leaders, school survivors and government officials. LaForme says that unlike its South African model, the panel will leave "naming names" to civil courts.

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One of the largest shifts in attitude has come from Canada's churches, which ran most of the schools and have since settled lawsuits for physical and sexual abuse.

"The 'good guys,' no matter how kindly or well intentioned, have to confront they were complicit in a system of evil," said Jamie Scott, the United Church of Canada officer for residential schools.

The United Church was one of the first to withdraw from the schools, in 1969, and in 1986 was the first of the churches to apologize. Between 1991 and 1994, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate from the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and the Presbyterian Church also issued apologies. They have agreed to participate and donate to the commission. Scott said staff members have their own tales to tell.

"Many of the people who worked in those schools never beat a kid," he said. "They saw themselves called to help people they saw as marginalized. They have a side of the story too."

But the dominant narrative will probably be stories like Thomas Louttit's.

Louttit, 60, now an elder of the Moose Factory First Nation, tosses some tobacco leaves into the flames as an offering to the spirits, a gesture that was once against the law. He watches them burn, then turns the gas fireplace off with a switch, and begins his story.

When he was 5, he and his sister were taken from their home and put on a motorboat to Fort George on James Bay, a day's journey. Their parents weren't sure where they spent 10 months of the year, didn't know that they answered to numbers, did heavy labor, and were mentally and sexually abused in the school that was run by the Catholic Church.

"One summer after I went home, my father was calling and calling me," Louttit recalled. "I didn't answer him because I was not used to hearing my name. He asked what was the matter with me. I never told him."

Louttit said he passed that distance and dysfunction on to his children.

"I never knew how to bring up my kids," he said. "After I stopped drinking, I shared my stories with my daughter in a sacred circle. She said she had been miserable with my drinking and the violence. I told her I love her, and it took a long time for me to say that."

Louttit has made a point of instructing his community in the ways of the tribe and the world, taking boys to sweat lodges in the bush. He has kept his hair in a long, graying braid, and his eagle feather fan is close at hand.

"Many of my classmates have gone over to the spirit side. Seven committed suicide. I wish I could have found them first," he said.

On the day of Harper's apology, Louttit will be in the bush, unsure it will make a difference.

"It's not from him inside. Someone else wrote it for him," he said. "I will share my story to people who want to hear it. I will be comfortable to listen to theirs. But I wonder if they will really listen to ours."

"I think it's going to be a long journey."

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