



Break from past

What's expected from the residential schools apology

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Indian residential schools were blunt instruments of the state, designed to "educate" and "Christianize" us -- "to kill the Indian in the child." The churches were willing accomplices in operating these institutions.

Today, Prime Minister Stephen Harper will apologize on behalf of the federal government to the former students of the schools. For me, there are still too many stories behind this apology, stories which have yet to be told and their depth understood.

As children and students, we experienced and felt deeply our removal from our parents, family, community, cultures and languages. As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples found in 1996, "The basic premise of resocialization, of the great transformation from 'savage' to 'civilized' was violent . . . the department [of Indian affairs] aimed at severing the artery of culture that ran between generations and was the profound connection between parent and child sustaining family and community."

The federal government has now closed all residential schools, but their devastating legacy is ongoing. The "artery of culture" was severed, in part, by cutting off our access to our languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. In a boys' shower room, a friend of mine innocently asked his older brother in our language whether he should wash the dirt between his toes. He was emphatically told by a school supervisor that he was not to speak this language. Many of our indigenous languages are now on life support, on the verge of becoming extinct. If governments supported indigenous languages the way they support English or French, there may be hope for their survival. Governments should put as much effort into restoring our languages as they put into destroying them.

In residential schools, generations of aboriginal children were denied access to the love and support of their families. In turn, some have struggled to develop parental skills to raise their own children. The federal and provincial governments have not heeded our advice to understand the intergenerational impacts of residential schools and provide the necessary support, preventive and intervention services to families and communities before children are apprehended and taken into government care. The sad reality is that both governments will only provide resources when there is a court order to remove a child. Rather than recognizing our authority to care for our children, in many instances children are moved away from their families and communities, further "severing the artery" of our culture.

As residential school survivors, families and leaders, we will gather in our homes, meeting halls and on Parliament Hill to watch Prime Minister Harper deliver his long-awaited apology. Since we were not involved in the drafting process for the statement, we have no idea what it will say. But we will

listen closely to the tone and to the content, and reflect on the depth and sincerity in Harper's words.

We will remember and honour the many who were unable to survive the impacts and indignities of the physical and sexual abuses perpetrated in residential schools. Any aboriginal leader or social worker/counsellor will tell you of the devastating pain and ongoing impact upon individuals, families and even entire communities stemming from the trauma experienced in residential schools.

We will also pay our deepest respects to the many courageous survivors who, in criminal and civil proceedings in the courts, found the strength to recount the horrifying physical and sexual abuse and their isolation, torment and feelings of abandonment that they experienced as children.

For years, government and churches disavowed any knowledge of, and did not accept responsibility for, such abuse. Due to the brave action of these survivors, the federal government and churches were eventually forced to own up to their lawful obligations and responsibilities to children in these residential schools.

We can only hope we will find comfort and solace in the apology, and that we will have good reason to celebrate. Regardless of the nature of the prime minister's statement, it is our intention as aboriginal peoples across this great land to stand on the dignity of our cultures, celebrate our survival and build for our individual and collective well-being.

We will bring out the heartbeat of our peoples -- our drums -- and call for our sacred songs and prayers which have given us strength in times of great sorrow and in times of great celebration. We will call on our ancestors for the guidance of their teachings and for comfort. We will pray for the many generations of our people yet to be born.

We will do this in the hope of lifting our spirits. We hope that all Canadians will listen and join with us. We need to reach out to each other -- across time, languages and cultures, spiritual and religious beliefs -- and lift each other up.

An apology alone is not reconciliation. An apology cannot undo history. There are many for whom this apology will be too little, too late. For some Canadians it will be too much, because they believe that the court-ordered settlement agreement, which includes compensation for survivors, is enough. But we must seek to understand our history better. This better understanding will help support the many important efforts and initiatives that become acts of reconciliation.

Today, I want the prime minister to say that the policies behind the establishment of residential schools were wrong and that what happened in these institutions was wrong. I want to know and hear that he understands this in a deep and sincere way.

I want to know that the Canadian government will work with our people in a truthful and meaningful way to rectify the substantial damage caused by its policies, carried out through the residential school system and felt by subsequent generations.

Most of all, I want this apology to serve as a stimulus to build strong and supportive relationships for meaningful and transformative reconciliation.

Grand Chief Edward John is on the political executive of the First Nations Summit and a First Nations Leadership Council Member. He is hosting a discussion group on this issue on [Facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)

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