



The Apology Decoded

Excerpts from Stephen Harper's official apology for the native residential school system and what it means

Vancouver Sun

Thursday, June 12, 2008

For over a century the residential schools separated over 150,000 native children from their families and communities.

In the 1870s, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools.

Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.

Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child."

Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.

132 schools financed by the federal government were located in all provinces and territories with the exception of Newfoundland, New Brunswick and P.E.I.

Most schools were operated as "joint ventures" with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United churches.

The government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities.

Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed.

All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities. First nations, Inuit and Metis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools.

The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today. It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered.

The government recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation. Therefore, on behalf of the government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system.

To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes ...

n We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions ...

n In separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow ...

The government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.

In moving towards healing, reconciliation and resolution of the sad legacy of Indian residential schools, implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement began on September 19, 2007. A cornerstone of the settlement agreement is the Indian residential schools truth and reconciliation commission.

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Harper begins by outlining the official explanation for creating the residential school system and its generational scope. Canada continued to support residential schools until the 1970s.

First nations groups asked that the apology reveal the role of the federal government in the destruction of native culture and language.

This common phrase from another era chillingly places the real goal of the Indian Residential Schools in stark relief.

Harper fails to name the provinces involved, instead naming those not home to a residential school.

The role of churches in the operation of the schools is noted specifically. The Anglican Church offered an apology for its role in 1993. The United Church apologized in 1998, the same year the federal Liberals established a \$350-million healing fund.

This description is intended to list specific wrongs done to individuals and recognizes the ripple impacts on their families.

Admission of cultural impact, that many native languages were completely or nearly extinguished during the period of the schools' operation.

The process of public reconciliation is central to the agenda of survivors' groups. A truth and reconciliation commission established last week will hear testimony from survivors for the next five years.

Important admission that Canada and not just the government or governing party must take responsibility for wrongs and begin the process of healing. Parliament apologized in 1998, but it was not considered an official apology from one nation to another. The limited apology led to a \$5-billion class action suit that was settled in 2005.

A series of specific admissions including: that the removal of children was forcible, that children were deprived of family and culture, that many of the social ills suffered by first nations people now and in the past are a result of so-called institutional kidnapping.

Though many first nations parents were aware that their children were being abused, they were powerless to stop it.

This crucial moment is when Harper asks for forgiveness of the first nations representatives who were received as guests in the Commons. It was left up to each individual to offer forgiveness.

First nations groups listed an offer of remedy as an essential element of the apology. The National Residential School Survivors' Society has 50,000 members. To date 90,000 applications for compensation from a \$2-billion fund have been received.

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