



From apology to action: A response to the Residential Schools Apology

Grand Chief Edward John
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I am Akile Ch'oh, Dene Zah (hereditary chief) and I proudly acknowledge that I am from Tl'azt'en Nation, Dakelh Territory. Many of you will know me as Edward John, Grand Chief, Tl'azt'en Nation and an elected member of the First Nations Summit. In days gone by I was #34 at Lejac Indian Residential School where I was sent at a very young age.

I wish to acknowledge the people and Council of Squamish Nation on whose territory we gather today. Over the years they have been the gracious hosts of our many important deliberations and we are very grateful for their generosity. Today we gather again at the Chief Joe Mathias Centre at this defining moment in our collective history and of our relationship with Canada.

We have a destiny with Canada and Canada has a destiny with its historic treatment of our peoples. Already Canada has extended much welcomed apologies to the Chinese for the head tax, to the Japanese for their wartime internment and to the East Indians for the Komagata Maru incident. As well, we acknowledge our Indigenous brothers and sisters in Australia, particularly the members of the Stolen Generations and their families, to whom Prime Minister Rudd apologized on February 13, 2008. We understand their situation deeply.

On this day the Prime Minister extends a long overdue apology to us, the Indigenous Peoples, for the fundamentally racist and genocidal policies underpinning the entire residential schools system-"to kill the Indian in the child". Canada's hopes to be a shining example of a tolerant and multicultural country in the community of Nations have been seriously undermined by this overriding and regrettably shameful past. This apology provides us with a unique, historic and monumental opportunity to move forward in a progressive way recognizing and building on respect for fundamental human rights. The survival, dignity and well being of all of our peoples are critically important to our people.

APOLOGY

We had a dream that one day we would be here.

Today we listened intently to the Prime Minister's statement of apology waiting to hear sincere, meaningful and truthful words which would bring comfort and solace to our peoples and in particular the thousands of residential schools survivors.



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Grand Chief Edward John

Today we want to know and hear that the Prime Minister feels this historic injustice in a deep and understanding way.

Today we listened closely for the Prime Minister to say the policies behind the 140 years of residential schools were racist and wrong and that the many atrocities at these schools were evil and seriously harmful to the well being of countless individuals and communities.

Today we listened earnestly to hear the Prime Minister say that Canada will work with our people in a serious and meaningful way to rectify the substantial damage caused to individuals, to families and to communities for the devastating breakdown of families, for the concerted attack on Indigenous languages and cultures, and for the subsequent social and economic marginalization in a country where most of the wealth comes from lands, territories and resources taken from our peoples.

Today we wanted the Prime Minister to say sorry to the countless survivors who suffered serious emotional, cultural, linguistic, spiritual, physical and sexual abuses at the hands of those in residential schools to whom they were entrusted as children.

Finally today we wanted to hear the Prime Minister say sorry to those courageous survivors who were dragged through the indignities of the criminal and civil courts processes.

In short we wanted to hear a full acknowledgement from the Prime Minister and of these past injustices, unequivocal acceptance of responsibility, genuine remorse and a sincere commitment not to repeat these traumatic and culturally crippling actions.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

As children we all experienced, and felt deeply, our removal from our siblings, from our mother and father and grandparents and from our people, communities, languages and cultures. We grew up in brutal atmospheres completely devoid of the recognition of and respect for who we were as Indigenous children with languages and cultures. The 1996 Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples concluded that Indian residential schools were aimed at "severing the artery of culture that ran between generations and was the profound connection between parent and child sustaining family and community." Federal legislation made it mandatory for all children to attend these schools. In BC there were 16 such schools. In many cases 2, 3 and up to 4 generations of children from the same families were moved to these schools. Some of these children were as young as 4 and 5 years.

In such an institutional setting how (and what) parenting skills were you to learn from men and women in black robes, however well intentioned? Today we find that over 50% of all children in government care are aboriginal and in the north region of the province the percentage is a staggering 77%. Most of these are cases of neglect. Most of these children are placed in homes away from the family members and community further "severing the (cultural/linguistic/community) artery". It is estimated that there are three times the number of children in government care now than there were children in residential schools at the height of their operations. As well, recent reports from the federal and provincial Auditors General conclude that federally-funded First Nations-operated child welfare agencies, when compared to those of the province, are chronically underfunded. There is also another reality - resources are provided only where there are court orders to remove a child from a family.

We call on the federal and provincial governments to act immediately to help keep children with

their families. The authority of communities to care for their children and families must be recognized and respected - not denied as is the case currently. As well as recommended by the federal and provincial Auditors General, adequate levels of resources need to be provided to these communities to properly and fully discharge this responsibility. This is an important foundation for true and meaningful reconciliation to be shaped and built - because the reality is that past federal policies were designed to take children away and isolated from their families and communities, with one of the long term consequences being the fragmentation and breakdown of families. Now governments must work with us to re-build.

LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

In residential schools children were prohibited from using Indigenous languages among themselves and they were certainly not languages of instruction. In fact we learned more Latin (even then a dead language) than our own language. In our early days at Lejac Indian residential school, in a boys' shower a friend of mine innocently asked his older brother, in our language, whether he should wash the dirt between his toes. He was reprimanded and told emphatically he was not to speak this language.

Many of our indigenous languages are now virtually on life support. These languages are dying or dead. Many languages have very few fluent speakers and are on the verge of becoming extinct. Governments should put as much effort in restoring our languages as they put into destroying them.

BRINGING GOVERNMENT AND CHURCHES TO ACCOUNT

Except for the Prime Minister's apology today, the actions of government and churches were in direct response to criminal and civil actions brought before this country's courts by survivors. For years prior to these cases we raised this as a political issue with successive government only to be told that neither the churches nor governments had any legal responsibility or obligation. It wasn't until the issue came before the courts did they pay any attention.

The following stories of courage and determination need to be told for they were the genesis for the apology we now have. In 1988 the first survivor of an Indian residential school prosecuted charges against Derrick Clark for sexual abuse at St. George's in Lytton, B.C. This was the first public trial of abuse arising from incidents in a residential school. In 1989 seven of Clark's victims, including Terry Aleck and Gilbert Spinks, commenced the first lawsuit in this country against Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada for abuses they suffered. Both Canada and the Church vigorously fought off these claims until they were finally resolved in 2000, 11 years later.

In 1995 Willie Blackwater, Leroy Barney and 28 survivors of the Alberni Indian residential brought a lawsuit against Canada and the United Church of Canada. Again, both Canada and the Church vigorously denied any responsibility whatsoever and defended their case hard even as former Minister Jane Stewart offered a statement of "regret" to former students of residential schools. In the end some of these students, in difficult circumstances, settled out of court. Leroy Barney took his case to the Supreme Court of Canada which in 2005 held, for the first time in this country, that both Canada and the Church were legally liable. Following this decision, and the numerous class action lawsuits filed by survivors, governments were forced to sit down and negotiate agreements. This responsibility, which was by then a national issue, was stick handled by the Assembly of First Nations, leading to the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement.

Even though there were many others involved, I refer to Gilbert Spinks, Terry Aleck, Willie Blackwater and Leroy Barney because they suffered extreme victimization in these schools but

would not remain silent. They were humiliated in the courts by the Churches and Canada as every aspect of their personal and family lives were scrutinized mercilessly in a public forum.

In the criminal courts, the case by 8 Shuswap women who attended the Williams Lake Mission Indian residential school and who were sexually abused by a priest who was later known as Bishop O'Connor is well known. There are many other cases which have gone to the courts which I have not mentioned.

We collectively owe a deep sense of thanks and respect to all of these courageous women and men whose dignity was put on public display and ridiculed by unbelieving government and churches. Their brave actions paved the difficult road to today's apology by the Prime Minister.

Sadly many survivors could not cope with their pain and suffering and died prematurely under many different circumstances. A high school friend of mine who attended the residential school in Williams Lake tragically took his own life, unable to find his way out of the deep trauma resulting from sexual abuse at the hands of those to whom his care and life were entrusted. Today as friends and relatives we can only bear witness on their behalf to the Prime Minister's apology. We recognize, remember and honour their stories and their lives.

In the end Canada and the churches stepped forward. The churches to their credit and to the utter relief of our people extended sincere apologies.

We do not recount this to garner the sympathy of Canada or Canadians. We cannot afford to continue to be victims because we have not fared well in that place. Rather we seek to explain a difficult and painful chapter in our own history and in the history of our relations with Canada. This impact on our people is real, it is deep, it is multi-layered and it is multi-generational. Remember for a moment that our people are recovering from an aggressive past government policy to "kill the Indian in the child". We ask only that Canadians acknowledge and understand that this is a part of your history too. It is our shared history and our collective knowledge and understanding is vital to ensure this never happens again. We must reach out to each other - across age and gender, across languages and cultures, across spiritual and religious beliefs - and lift each other up.

RESPONSE TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S APOLOGY

We have waited a long time for this apology and we should not be faulted for taking our time to respond fully today. We have our individual and collective survival, dignity and well being to consider. The apology, however well-intentioned, cannot wipe away history nor can it wipe away the deep impacts and effects of what are in reality policies of cultural and linguistic genocide. Apologies should be more than just words. Action is a significant part of any apology.

That being said we can honestly say today is an important and historic day for us and for all Canadians. We should collectively cherish this moment. The Prime Minister should send a letter and a copy of the apology statement to each of the residential schools survivors.

For individual survivors and their families the 'acceptance' of an apology is a highly personal matter and should be respected. Because the giving of forgiveness is an essential element of an apology, this too is highly personal. We cannot dictate how survivors should respond. Every survivor's experience is unique, and as they each consider the apology we should respect their space. Apology, acceptance and forgiveness are essential parts of a process of grieving and of letting go. It cannot be rushed.

The issue of 'reconciliation' is another important and serious matter in the process of apology. In my view it is this aspect which will indicate to what extent the government is truly committed to adopting and implementing a principled approach to reconciliation for now and for the future.

Our history is most often described in terms of widespread and persistent violations of fundamental human rights. As an integral part of the reconciliation process it is critical for Canada to demonstrate unequivocal respect for the human rights of our peoples as Indigenous peoples. The United Nations has adopted a set of minimum standards for relations between a State and Indigenous Peoples. These minimum standards are reflected in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 13, 2007. This Declaration is the most comprehensive universal international instrument to address Indigenous human rights issues, including issues giving rise to policies leading to institutions like residential schools. Numerous provisions in this Declaration will prevent the recurrence of such damaging actions and policies. As well the Declaration provides a principled framework for addressing State -Indigenous relations and Indigenous human rights issue. As a measure of goodwill Canada should adopt and implement the Declaration. Already the majority of the members of Parliament have approved a resolution to that effect.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION (TRC)

The TRC must be proactive in inspiring all Canadians to take part in the apology and reconciliation process. We recommend that an important and significant way to achieve this would be for the Commission to encourage government ministries/departments, private sector and industry, faith groups, labour, environmental groups, churches etc. to develop meaningful "Apology to Action" plans to help in implementing the Prime Minister's apology. These plans would set realistic and achievable commitments and goals to build lasting and productive relations with Indigenous peoples. These action plans have a tremendous potential to contribute to ongoing reconciliation efforts and would create a positive legacy for survivors which we can all be proud of. This should be an immediate "win" for the Commission-to engage Canadians and to assist, monitor and share these plans.

As well, the TRC must be an early part of the truth-telling process. We wait cannot for 5 years until the end of its mandate. The TRC must go into our communities and tell the truth to our people about what was behind the residential school policies. Subject to limited privacy issues, survivors must have full and complete access to files and records on residential schools which Canada has deemed to be inaccessible and unavailable to us.

Finally, the TRC process is not just for survivors and our communities to tell our stories. It must go into all communities and raise awareness among all Canadians so that the full truth of the policies underlying residential schools is known. The lack of knowledge amongst Canadians about Aboriginal peoples (and why this is the case) is a part of the truth in Canada.

CONCLUSION

We want all Canadians to know we have survived and that we will celebrate this.

We stand on the dignity of our being and on strength of our cultural teachings, beliefs and practices.

And we will work on the ongoing development of our individual and collective well being.

With the Prime Minister's commitments, let us move from apology to action with dignity and pride.

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