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Harper 'sorry' for native residential schools

Tears fall in hushed House of Commons as Prime Minister apologizes on behalf of nation for ordeal

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LINDA DIEBEL
NATIONAL AFFAIRS WRITER

OTTAWA—Three little words: "We are sorry."

But these were history-making words yesterday, uttered in a hushed House of Commons by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples for their suffering in the once-obligatory residential school system.

As he spoke, school survivors wept in the public galleries, their tears a tribute to the tears of every mother who cried for a child forcibly taken from her over generations.

A man in the gallery held a lone eagle feather aloft for more than an hour, throughout the apology and subsequent speeches by opposition and aboriginal leaders.

The day began with the lighting of a sacred fire on an island in the Ottawa River in view of the Parliament Buildings where native peoples were legislated as "inferior" in 1874 and, in 1884, mandated by law to send their children away to residential schools.

It wound down after the apology with drumming and a ritual cleansing, the "smudging" ceremony in another part of the Centre Block.

"These are happy tears," said Holly Danyluk, a James Bay Cree.

The atmosphere among the many native families who had gathered on Parliament Hill was almost festive early in the afternoon, like a big family picnic. Old friends and family members reunited, pinched babies' cheeks and shared cold drinks and ice cream. Music played in the background in the form of traditional drumming and chanting.

But the crowd stilled and the mood turned solemn as the giant TV screen came to life and the Prime Minister began to speak.

As 11 aboriginal guests of honour sat before him on chairs arranged in a native restitution circle, Harper called the residential schools "a sad chapter in our history."

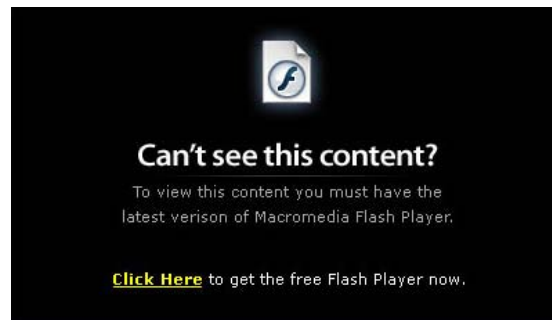
Wearing full Ojibway regalia and headdress, Assembly of First Nations chief Phil Fontaine was close to tears when he responded to Harper's speech. A survivor of sexual abuse in the residential school system, he was lauded for his courage when he went public with his story in the early 1990s.

"The memories of residential schools sometimes ... " he began, pausing to regain his composure, "cut like a knife at our souls."






"This day will help us to put that pain behind us."

Fontaine was belatedly allowed to respond to the apology in the Commons after days of contentious resistance by the Conservatives. He made it one of his finest moments.

VIDEO: After decades, apology for First Nations



BILL GRIMSHAW FOR THE TORONTO STAR
Assembly of First Nations national chief Phil Fontaine is hugged by his daughter Maya after Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology on June 11, 2008.

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"Brave survivors, through telling their stories, have stripped white supremacy of its legitimacy," he said to jubilant shouts. "Never again will this House consider us the Indian Problem just for being who we are. We are, and always have been, an indispensable part of the Canadian identity."

In his speech, Harper said the infamous goal of the residential schools was "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."

While some have spoken positively about their experience at these schools, said Harper, "these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children."

Amid the praise for the apology, Mohawk Beverly Jacobs best summed up the wait-and-see reaction of aboriginal leaders who believe that, without action, it could be rendered meaningless.

"What is it this government is going to do in the future to help our people?" she bluntly asked Harper from her seat of honour with other leaders on the Commons floor.

Jacobs, president of the Native Women's Association of Canada, said aboriginal people must deal with "major human rights violations" that have afflicted generation after generation. She challenged the Prime Minister: "So what is going to be provided?"

Danyluk, who also works with the women's association in Ottawa, reiterated the point that it all comes down to money. "Let's see how much there will be for our future," she said.

NDP Leader Jack Layton, his voice breaking, described reserves with abysmal housing, poor educational facilities, unsafe drinking water, substandard health care and even a lack of beds for children.

"We can no longer throw up our hands and say, 'There is nothing we can do,'" said Layton, whom Harper thanked for his energy in pushing for yesterday's official apology.

Two weeks ago, when children from the Northern Ontario community of Attawapiskat flew to Ottawa to beg Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl for money for a new school, he refused, saying his priorities are the many other reserve schools in worse shape.

As well yesterday, Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe criticized the Conservative government for having voted last year against the United Nations declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples.

Still, the apology packed an emotional punch and most of the residential school survivors and their descendants on Parliament Hill for the event expressed joy.

"It took great courage for you to express your sorrow and apology to our people, to the Inuit, the First Nations and to Métis and we thank you for it," Mary Simon, president of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, told Harper in the Commons.

She spoke first in her language of Inuktitut to make the point that "our language and our culture is still strong."

Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion also gave an emotional speech, saying: "I am so very sorry we took away your children. I am sorry we did not value you as parents, or trust and respect you."

Cindy Deschenes said she was most impressed by the words of Dion and Layton.

"They dug down deeper into the history of what happened. It seemed more sincere," she said, watching the proceedings on the big screen. "I don't feel that Harper did that."

With files from Stuart Laidlaw and The Canadian Press

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