

School-abuse apology widely backed

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FROM SATURDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

JUNE 14, 2008 AT 2:16 AM EDT

OTTAWA — The Conservative government's apology for the residential schools program marked a rare phenomenon in Canadian politics, a new poll has found: a government decision that not only garnered near-universal awareness among Canadians but also very broad support.

A survey conducted by Innovative Research Group between June 11 and 13 found that 83 per cent of those surveyed were aware of the apology to native victims of the residential schools abuses. Among those who were aware, 71 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the government should apologize, while only 18 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. The majority of respondents were supportive regardless of their political affiliation, the survey found.

Greg Lyle, a pollster with Innovative Research Group, said it's very rare to find such consensus on any issue, especially one that could have proved divisive such as native affairs.

“There are very few events that get that high a level of awareness,” he said. “Clearly this was a moment for Canadians.”

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Ironically, the least supportive respondents were those who intended to vote Conservative. Among Conservative supporters, 66 per cent agreed that the federal government should apologize, compared with 75 per cent of Liberal supporters. Among NDP voters, 82 per cent agreed that an apology should be made. Geographically, respondents from Alberta were the least supportive of an apology.

The majority of respondents – although to a lesser degree – also supported the way the government delivered the apology. About half approved or strongly approved, compared with 13 per cent who disapproved, and 26 per cent who expressed neither view. About a third said they were left with a more favourable view of the government, while 13 per cent were left with a less favourable view. About half of respondents said the apology made no difference in their view of the government.

The Conservatives also appear to have made headway with younger Canadians – the apology had the greatest positive impact among young people, whereas older respondents had more entrenched views.

Another piece of good news for the government is that the controversial remarks of Tory MP Pierre Poilievre – who was forced to apologize for remarks he made about the residential schools settlement the same day of the apology – did not appear to have much traction.

Mr. Lyle said this week's apology is an example of the kind of things that could prove positive for the Conservatives.

“This is a case of the government dealing with a long-standing problem where a whole lot of people probably had very little expectations that anything positive could be done, and they made something happen,” he said.

“If this becomes a pattern – if the government takes on more of these sticky issues, and moves forward with this touch of diplomacy, it's going to cause people to think again of them.”

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