

School apology stirs debate

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Black Press

The Prime Minister's apology to victims of the residential school system was a milestone in the healing journey for many Bulkley Valley Aboriginals, but some are couching their hopes for a prosperous future until this first step — tantamount to reconciliation — leads to the next.

"I believe we can't be quiet after this. We have to hold them to it. I believe that keeping ourselves in the spotlight, so they say, is going to be the way to get true reconciliation — to get recognized as a nation. A nation with lands and a nation with culture," said Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chief Alphonse Gagnon (Kloum Khun).

"This is a first step. I'm glad I heard what I heard today."

Gagnon and more than 200 people crowded in the Dze L Ka'ant Friendship Centre in Smithers last Wednesday for the live broadcast of Harper's historic apology from the House of Commons. Several survivors of residential schools offered tearful testimony of their childhood experiences. As Harper's noon address neared, staff scrambled for extra tables and chairs to seat an overwhelming surge of last-minute arrivals.

"Today we recognize this policy of assimilation was wrong," Harper said. "It caused great harm and has no place in our culture.

"This policy was profoundly negative... it has had a lasting and damaging impact on Aboriginal culture.

"The absence of an apology has been an impediment to the healing and reconciliation. Therefore on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you... to apologize to Aboriginal peoples for the role the government of Canada played in the Indian Residential Schools system."

Garret William, of the Fort Babine Wit'at First Nation and force into the Lejac residential school at age seven, accepted the Prime Minister's apology at face value. He added, however, that the apology has come too late for some, particularly his elders.

"A lot of them didn't want to come here today. This apology was a long time coming. But it opens up an old wound that many of us are still healing from now. One elder from our community was [in a residential school] for 12 years. He's still struggling with what he was taught, and forced to learn. He's dealing with it today in his own way. Many elders were destroyed so many years ago as a child, and they didn't want to bring any of that back and talk about it today. It's too hard."

James Naziel, from Moricetown, embraced the apology without reserve.

"I wanted to hear this for the longest time of my life. Every time I watched [the news] we've been neglected time after time. Finally, somebody walked in and apologized for what happened. This won't erase what happened, but eventually it will work, slowly, it will work. Forgiveness is good."

As in Ottawa, the apology seemed to resonate positively with political leaders in the Bulkley Valley.

Skeena Bulkley Valley MP Nathan Cullen, seated in the House of Commons, called into the Friendship Centre after the Prime Ministers' address.

"The apology is an important step towards reconciliation, it is a beginning, not an end," he later stated to the press. "True reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples will only be built through positive steps that show respect and restore trust...: nation-to-nation governance, water, health care, safety, land and rights."

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