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## Move to Investigate Residential School Deaths Intensifies

[Truth Commission preparing to hear from former students](#)By [Joan Delaney](#)

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The year 2007 witnessed an historic first in Canada: the public acknowledgement by a senior government official that criminal deaths occurred in the church-run Indian Residential Schools.

Bob Watts, head of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on the schools, said that while some of the children may have died from influenza and tuberculosis, other deaths were "more criminal in nature."

Watts said in a *Globe and Mail* news report last month that he had met with police three times in 2007 to advise them of accusations former residential school students are preparing to make before the commission.

Set to begin in the spring, the TRC will provide a national forum for the schools' survivors to tell their stories, many of which are expected to go beyond the physical and sexual abuse known to date to have been rife in the schools.

The commission is part of last year's landmark settlement between former students, the churches that ran the schools and Ottawa. Three commissioners, who will travel the country, listen to survivors and record their experiences and accusations, are in the process of being selected.

"If you look at the history of the compensation package and the commission, First Nations people in this country have scored a huge victory," says John Milloy, professor in Canadian Studies at Trent University and author of *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System*.

Milloy, who was a researcher for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, is part of a working group set up to provide information to the commission on the children who went missing in the residential school system, how many died, where they were buried and what sort of investigative process will be required.

"We will make recommendations to the commissioners and they decide what they're going to do about it. Or say sorry but the job's much too big a task and ask the government to start a judicial inquiry or some other approach to it," says Milloy.

And it may well be too big a task.

Dean Brown, executive director of the Canadian Native Friendship Centre in Edmonton, says he has heard numerous stories of deaths over the years, including that of babies who were the result of sexual abuse by priests of female, or of sex between priests and nuns. Bodies were either burned in school incinerators or buried in unmarked graves.

"All the truth hasn't come out yet, we're just scratching the surface," says Brown "There's going to be a floodgate opening up soon because wherever I go people are talking about it. People read the paper and are calling here and asking, 'how do I get the legal process going so they're accountable.'"

Ex-United Church minister Kevin Annett of Friends and Relatives of the Disappeared (FOD) says that the while "airing things is always good," the commission is toothless because it doesn't have the power to subpoena evidence or bring wrongdoers to trial.

Last week Annett delivered a "letter of demand" to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, asking that he identify the cause of death and the burial sites of the children who died in the schools. A similar letter has been sent to Queen Elizabeth, Pope Benedict, and the heads of the United, Anglican and Catholic churches.

"If Harper doesn't respond positively by March 4, we will take him and others to the International Court of Justice, and we'll start occupying his government offices and these churches," says Annett.



Aboriginal protesters gather outside the Catholic Church's Archdiocese of Toronto where a "letter of demand" was delivered to church officials regarding deaths that occurred in the residential school system. (Friends and Relatives of the Disappeared)

Annett claims that up to 50,000 children died or were murdered over the course of a century, alleging that the government, the churches and the RCMP colluded to commit genocide through the schools.

He doubts that "full disclosure" will be achieved through the TRC and is skeptical that the churches that ran the schools will surrender all their records to the commission.

"You're going to hear a fairly watered down version of how they've acted up until now is any indication. I seriously doubt whether you'll ever hear the churches come forward and say, 'Yes our people committed murder, here's their names,' because then they would be opening themselves up to massive lawsuits."

Annett wants "a more arms-length kind of body" such as the UN to investigate the deaths and locate the burial sites. FOD also wants the remains of the children disinterred and returned to their homes and territories for a proper burial.

However, Milloy says that decision rests with the relatives of each child and with each community.

"The idea of a physical repatriation of the bodies is pretty loose and to a certain extent irresponsible. Those bodies belong to those families in those communities, not to some aboriginal activist organization which says they have to be physically repatriated.

"To suggest that aboriginal people across the country are banging their drums saying they want the physical remains removed misrepresents the feelings of many people."

Milloy says some communities and elders are considering adopting the approach that was taken with aboriginal soldiers who were killed in WW II.

On the 50th anniversary of the war, aboriginal organizations traveled to the soldiers' grave sites in Europe, conducted ceremonies, and brought the soldiers' spirits home and delivered them back to their communities.

Milloy says that while it's obvious that a cultural genocide took place — "the whole system was designed to do that" — Annett's allegations of an overall plan to eliminate Canada's indigenous peoples doesn't bear out.

"I can get them for neglect. I can get them for carelessness. They didn't feed or clothe them properly, deaths went unreported, children were buried three, four, five to a grave — every horror you could imagine took place.

"But to truly argue that this was a conscious federal policy to wipe out the Indian population genocidally with the cooperation of the Christian churches — the documents don't prove it. The evidence just isn't there."

Genocide or not, only a fraction of the indigenous peoples who populated the country when Europeans first arrived remains today says Anthony Hall, associate professor in Globalization Studies at the University of Lethbridge.

"In a way, North America represents the most ethnically cleansed part of the world — no other part of the world has been this totally re-engineered," says Hall, who was in Native American Studies for 20 years.

Securing real justice for residential school survivors requires "some sort of international process" says Hall, because the governments and the courts are in a conflict of interest. "When it's national crimes that are being looked at, who's going to be the judges and who's going to be the arbiters?"

Annett complains that the selection panel charged with choosing the three commissioners includes "church and government people." He says many aboriginals he's talked to don't want to speak before the TRC due to a lack of trust.

"They've been through really terrible things at the hands of these institutions so why would they then go in front of those same institutions and talk about what these institutions already know they did."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has promised an apology to survivors of the residential school system — another historic first. This, says Brown, is a start.

"We're really big on healing. Instead of giving people money there needs to be circles and there needs to be people owning up to what they did instead of just continually trying to bury the truth, so that all of Canada gets to hear the truth."