

Native leaders demand campaign attention

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OTTAWA — In full native headdress on the floor of the House of Commons, Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine had a historic seat last June to hear the Prime Minister's apology for Canada's Indian Residential Schools.

He also heard the three other party leaders make impassioned pledges to right the wrongs of the past.

Now, in the midst of a federal election campaign, Mr. Fontaine is wondering where all those words went.

“The current campaign [has] what seems to be a serious absence of any discussion on aboriginal issues,” said Mr. Fontaine in an interview at his Ottawa office.

The Conservative government has promised the June apology will be followed up with a five-year Truth and Reconciliation Commission. That body will research and document the decades-long federal policy that removed aboriginal children from their homes to attend far-away schools.

But Mr. Fontaine said there should be more follow-up than that.

“As far as we're concerned, reconciliation includes the issue of First Nation poverty and we are anxious to hear from each of the parties on their plans to eradicate First Nations poverty,” he said.

To that end, Mr. Fontaine and native leaders across the country are holding a “National Day of Political Action” Monday to encourage natives to vote. The day will feature local discussions with area candidates about party platforms and discussions about increasing voter participation among aboriginals. Native leaders will also call for their issues to be discussed by party leaders in the televised debates.

Mr. Fontaine said the day is not about marches and protests, as was the case with two previous AFN-sponsored National Days of Action.

He will be releasing a video Monday morning showing Liberal leader Stéphane Dion, NDP leader Jack Layton, Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe and Green Party leader Elizabeth May pledging to “make poverty history.” Conservative leader Stephen Harper has not made the same public pledge.

The AFN leader is hoping that through higher voter turnout, Canada's growing native population will come to be seen as a key constituency to be wooed by political parties.

“We want [the parties] to take notice as they do with the ethnic vote and the very serious attention that's placed to the ethnic vote,” he said. “We want the political parties to look to us in the same way.”

The AFN's campaign is called “Vote '08, Change Can't Wait.” Mr. Fontaine insists the slogan is not a veiled call to turf the Conservatives.

“We will not place ourselves in a position where we can be attacked by anyone that we're being partisan,” he said. “We are being partisan in favour of First Nations issues.”

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