

Government to hold talks over future of residential-schools commission

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[CBC News](#)

CBC has learned the federal government will hold a meeting next week with survivors of residential schools as well as aboriginal and church leaders to determine a course for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A spokesman for Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl confirmed the meeting, which follows the sudden resignation of the commission's chair, Justice Harry LaForme, less than six months into his mandate.

In his resignation letter this week, LaForme wrote that the commission is on the verge of paralysis and doomed to failure. He cited an "incurable problem" with the other two commissioners, whom he said refused to accept his authority as chair and were disrespectful.

The two commissioners have hit back, saying they were stunned by LaForme's resignation and that any disagreements could have been overcome if LaForme had been willing to sit down and talk with them instead of through intermediaries.

Since LaForme's resignation, former students, aboriginal leaders and the churches that ran the government-funded schools have urged the government to meet with them to ensure the commission resumes as quickly as possible.

Sources told CBC News that the respective parties will talk about how to fill the commission's chair and discuss whether the remaining two commissioners will also have to be replaced.

Strahl has already asked for advice from the three justices supervising the settlement agreement.

The Assembly of First Nations said that was the wrong thing to do, insisting the minister should have come to them first.

"The idea of going back to the courts or engaging the courts in this process is entirely premature," John Phillips, a lawyer working for the AFN, told CBC News.

'It's part of once again feeling betrayed'

Meanwhile, survivors have watched with disbelief as the process for healing has unraveled in recent days.

"This would be a perfect opportunity to tell their story and maybe also possibly express forgiveness to the government of Canada," said Elijah Harper, a former Cree chief and the provincial MLA partly responsible for the failure of the Meech Lake accord in 1990.

Harper himself attended a residential school in northern Manitoba and said too much is at stake for the commission to be sidetracked by political in-fighting and controversy.

"We need to hear these people," he said. "It's part of once again feeling betrayed."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created as a result of the court-approved Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement that was negotiated in 2006 between former students, churches, the federal government, the Assembly of First Nations and other aboriginal organizations.

About 150,000 aboriginal children attended Canada's 130 residential schools from the late 1800s to 1996, when the last school closed. About 80,000 former students are still alive, but an estimated five or six die every day.

The commission, which was established in June with the aim of completing its work in five years, is not charged with determining innocence or guilt but with creating a historical account of the residential schools, helping people to heal and encouraging reconciliation.

A year ago, the government formalized a \$1.9-billion compensation plan for victims, and in June, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a historic apology for the residential school system, calling it a "sad chapter" of Canadian history.

With files from Karen Pauls

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