

# Proposal tabled to restart residential schools commission

Last Updated: Wednesday, October 29, 2008 | 6:12 PM CT

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A proposal to revive the commission into Indian Residential School abuse was put before federal government lawyers Wednesday, although no details are being released about how it may move the stalled process forward.

During a closed-door meeting in Toronto, lawyers for First Nations groups, the churches that ran the government-funded schools and survivors presented a plan for replacing Justice Harry LaForme, who resigned as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission last week.

"We have had fruitful discussions. I would call them — they were called by others — constructive potential solutions that would that would make it possible for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to have a new chair as soon as possible," said Pierre Baribeau, who is representing the Catholic groups.

None of the lawyers would provide details of the proposal while it is being reviewed. However, some expressed optimism that an agreement could be reached soon. Another meeting to discuss the proposal has been scheduled for next week.

"There's two things at play — we want to make sure that the right person takes the chairmanship of the commission, and we want to make sure that it happens as quickly as possible," said Assembly of First Nations lawyer John Phillips following the four-hour meeting.

If there is agreement on how to proceed, the process of replacing LaForme and restarting the commission could still be drawn out if Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl is shuffled out of his portfolio.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper is expected to announce his new cabinet Thursday morning in Ottawa. If a new minister is appointed, he or she will need time to be briefed on what has become a controversial and politically sensitive problem for the Harper government.

Canada's first aboriginal appellate court judge, LaForme resigned as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission less than six months into his mandate. Since then, former students, aboriginal leaders and the churches have asked for meetings with the federal government to get commission proceedings going again as soon as possible.

In his resignation letter last Monday, LaForme wrote that the commission was 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.

## Questions about future of 2 commissioners

LaForme's criticism has raised questions about whether the other two commissioners will also have to be replaced, after their reputations were tainted by his accusations.

However, Baribeau on Wednesday said he doubted that was necessary.

"We have no reason that would lead us to think that they had not been exercising their responsibilities with diligence and competence," he said.

The other two commissioners have responded to LaForme's accusations with shock, saying any disagreements could have been resolved had LaForme spoken to them directly instead of through intermediaries.

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.