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Tories delay healing as wait drags on for native truth-telling panel: critics

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OTTAWA — Critics say the federal Conservatives are taking too long to officially apologize and launch a truth-and-reconciliation commission on native residential schools.

A chairperson and two commissioners for the \$60-million, five-year panel were to be named early this year to lead hearings across Canada. Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl now says the much anticipated healing effort will begin sometime "later this spring."

"I'm hoping to be able to announce something but . . . I can't give you a date because I'm not ready yet," he said in an interview. The commission is partly inspired by a South African process that helped close the wounds of apartheid. Its work is to follow an official government apology promised in last fall's throne speech.

It's all part of a massive compensation package that's expected to top \$4 billion. Most of the 80,000 surviving students have already received cheques averaging \$28,000 for cultural and language losses at the once-mandatory schools.

Others will receive much more through an adjudication process or lawsuits to settle harrowing claims of physical and sexual abuse. Ottawa admitted 10 years ago that abuse was rampant in the church-run schools.

There have also been reports that thousands of children died of tuberculosis when staff didn't segregate sick pupils.

Many former students have said the importance of cash payments is dwarfed by the need to hear the prime minister say he's sorry. Many also want a forum to officially record what happened to them as children and teenagers.

Strahl says the commissioners will work on behalf of all Canadians to reconcile native and non-native people. There's much speculation that the panel will include an aboriginal judge. Among the names circulating are justices Murray Sinclair, Harry LaForme and Leonard Mandamin of the Manitoba Court of Queen's Bench, the Ontario Court of Appeal, and the Federal Court respectively.

"In the end, it's a government appointment," Strahl said of the three, five-year jobs. "But I want to make sure this is an appointment that passes muster obviously in aboriginal circles and that I, for sure, don't do anything arbitrary."

The chairperson and commissioner are to be named from a short list whittled from 300 applications by a panel of aboriginal, church and government advisers. Salaries for the postings won't be confirmed until they're announced.

It has been a delicate selection process, Strahl said. "A commission takes on the life and character of the commissioners. And in this case, because this commission really will stretch out for the next five years, these people are critically important."

Strahl wouldn't tip his hand before the names are released, but hinted they won't all be aboriginal.

"This is a commission that will involve residential schools but it's for all Canadians.

"I think it's important actually to have, as much as you can on a three-person panel . . . representation where people see themselves reflected in that."

New Democrat aboriginal affairs critic Jean Crowder says the government has had months to prepare.

"The delay means that healing can't start," she said. "And I know that some of the elders in communities that I've been in have been asking: 'What's going on? We need this process in order for us to be able to kind of close that gap for our communities, for our children, for our grandchildren.'"

Crowder's Liberal counterpart, Anita Neville, says the appointment of commissioners was expected weeks ago.

"There's no question I'm hearing concerns about delay," she said. "I'm hopeful that it's not politically motivated. I'm hopeful that the government will act in a spirit of true reconciliation with aboriginal people."

That's more than the Liberals did in 13 years at the political helm, Strahl retorted. "The Liberals had many years to do this. Our Conservative government is getting it done ."