

# Lengthy battle for public apology

**Native man who took lawsuit to top court will hear PM's statement from seat in House**

**BILL CURRY**

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OTTAWA — Willie Blackwater's phone rang yesterday morning with a message from the Prime Minister.

It was an invitation to sit on the floor of the House of Commons today, just a few feet from Stephen Harper as he delivers Canada's official apology for its residential schools for natives.

"I was hoping I'd get a call. I wasn't expecting one, though," Mr. Blackwater said.

It's a much happier phone-call story than the one Mr. Blackwater has told police, lawyers and judges all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada.



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Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl. (*Chris Wattie/Reuters*)

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Robert Lovelace, retired First Nations chief and professor at Queen's University, discusses Ottawa's plan to apologize for residential schools

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As a 10-year-old boy recently arrived at a residential school in Port Alberni, B.C., he was told late one night by the dormitory supervisor that his father was on the phone.

That was the lure Arthur Henry Plint used to draw young boys into a bedroom for oral sex and vicious, weekly, rape.

After years of silence, Mr. Blackwater went public and took action. By 1997, the elderly Mr. Plint was imprisoned for assaulting 30 native boys over two decades.

Mr. Blackwater, now 53, did not stop there. He took his case to civil court and ultimately the Supreme Court of Canada, which ruled in 2005 that both Ottawa and the churches are liable for residential-school abuse.

In the early days of Mr. Blackwater's lawsuit, there were about two dozen former students. By 2005, Ottawa and the churches were facing thousands of lawsuits from residential-school students across the country.

By 2006, the federal government and churches settled with the vast majority of students in a multibillion-dollar, out-of-court settlement.

"That case and the results were extremely important," said University of Saskatchewan professor Jim Miller, an expert on residential schools.

Prof. Miller said the Supreme Court decision, combined with the mounting lawsuits, all came together at once to move Ottawa toward settling the residential-schools issue.

"It was such a sensational case and it got a lot of attention," he said.

Several former students have said today's apology is just words; that it means little when there are still so many aboriginal issues that require attention.

But Mr. Blackwater disagrees.

"An apology means quite a bit to me. I'm surely looking forward to it," he said. Mr. Blackwater, who has worked to help other former students, said he's concerned there may not be enough counselling and support available for an event that will trigger deep emotions.

"There should have been a lot more time to plan and prepare," he said. "Some are going to be happy. Some are going to be sad. Some are going to be pissed off. Some are going to be rageful. Most importantly, what's left out is this apology is going to affect every survivor right across our great nation. It will trigger a lot of emotions."

When Mr. Blackwater arrives on Parliament Hill today, there will be no Question Period or committee meetings. MPs agreed yesterday to let the afternoon apology stand as the only business of the day.

The government has said the Prime Minister's apology will be longer than the one given by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in February for that country's version of residential schools. Mr. Rudd's apology was less than four minutes long and was about 360 words. Mr. Rudd simultaneously moved a more detailed motion of apology that was 3,874 words, but Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl's office clarified that the Prime Minister will give an apology similar to, though longer than, Mr. Rudd's but will not be offering a more detailed motion.

In spite of what he and the other Port Alberni students accomplished with their Supreme Court case, Mr. Blackwater says he has no idea what happened to the others.

"None of us keep in touch with each other. That's the norm for all residential school survivors," he said. "It's the same way with our families. We don't keep in touch with our families. I haven't heard from my family since my father died in 2001. That's the norm. That's what we've been taught."

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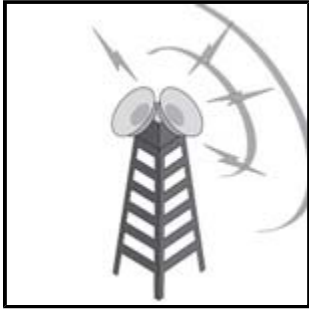
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