

House set to apologize for residential schools

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OTTAWA — The House of Commons will issue an apology this week to former students of Canada's Indian residential schools as a majority of MPs are declaring support for a Liberal motion.

Today is an Opposition day in the House of Commons for the Liberal Party, which it will use to trigger a day-long debate on the issue. The motion comes on the heels of a investigative series by The Globe and Mail highlighting how federal officials ignored decades of internal warnings that children were dying in alarming numbers at the boarding schools due to unsanitary conditions.

There had been speculation the Liberals would use their opportunity to move a motion on either climate change or Afghan detainees, the two dominant issues currently dogging the Conservative government.

NDP Leader Jack Layton had urged the Liberals to debate climate change today, but the Liberals said the request came too late.

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"By no means is it ever a waste of a day to talk about aboriginal Canadians in the House, but that said, I think there are more pressing issues," NDP spokesman Ian Capstick said. "If you popped up to the Far North, they'd have one or two things to tell you about melting glaciers and changing caribou herds."

Saskatchewan Liberal MP Gary Merasty, whose mother attended a residential school, will move that: "This House apologize to the survivors of Indian residential schools for the trauma they suffered as a result of policies intended to assimilate first nations, Inuit and Métis children, causing the loss of aboriginal culture, heritage and language, while also leaving a sad legacy of emotional, physical and sexual abuse."

Officials from both the Bloc Québécois and the NDP confirmed their parties will support the motion when it is put to a vote this week. That support ensures the non-binding motion will pass.

Deirdra McCracken, a spokeswoman for Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice, would not say how Conservative MPs will be voting.

She noted that it was Mr. Prentice who gave final approval to the Indian residential schools settlement - worth well over \$2-billion - and is a strong supporter of the settlement's call for a truth and reconciliation commission to examine the century-long federal policy.

"One of [Mr. Prentice's] proudest moments as minister was announcing that this government had concluded the residential schools agreement," she said. "It's this government that did that. ...

"We put the money in the budget."

Mr. Prentice has regularly been under fire in the House for refusing to give an apology and for saying the fundamental objective of the schools was to provide an education.

"The comment riled many natives, who say the policy was primarily to assimilate aboriginals and spread Christianity.

"To me, [the comment] was a real affront to the survivors," Mr. Merasty said. "But also to those who didn't survive."

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