

# House apologizes to residential school survivors

**BILL CURRY**  
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OTTAWA — The House of Commons apologized unanimously yesterday to former students of Canada's Indian Residential Schools, but the federal government wants at least five more years before issuing its own apology.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative MPs voted in favour yesterday of a Liberal motion that the House apologize to the survivors of the boarding schools, which Ottawa supported for over a century starting in the 1870s. The motion, which passed 257-0, makes reference to the trauma suffered as a result of policies intended to assimilate First Nations, Inuit and Métis children into mainstream society. The loss of aboriginal culture is cited, as well as the “sad legacy of emotional, physical and sexual abuse.”

Phil Fontaine, the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said he was pleased with the vote.

“We desperately need this expression of apology from the place that brought forward the residential school experience where so many people were harmed,” he said. “It's an important moment for us.”



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Indian children hold letters that spell 'Goodbye' at Fort Simpson Indian Residential School, 1922. (*J.F. Moran / Library and Archives Canada*)

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Mr. Fontaine said he will continue to press for a federal government apology as soon as possible.

Indian Affairs minister Jim Prentice gave a detailed – and at times personal – speech yesterday outlining why the federal government will not immediately apologize.

The minister has been under fire for weeks for rejecting calls for a government apology as part of the multibillion-dollar settlement with former students that will conclude this summer.

In a bid to ramp up that pressure, the Liberals used their opposition day yesterday to trigger a day-long debate on a motion calling on the Commons to apologize.

Mr. Prentice argued that because governments of several stripes bear responsibility for the schools policy, it is appropriate that an apology comes from all parties in the House of Commons.

As for a government apology, the minister said it is better to wait until a new Truth and Reconciliation Commission completes its five-year mandate to tour the country and issue a definitive report on the history of residential schools. Mr. Prentice told the House that his decision to attach “enormous significance” to such a commission dates back to his experience working as a constitutional adviser in South Africa in the early 1990s as the country worked to dismantle its apartheid structure.

“I watched as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was struck in South Africa unfold. I watched how it assisted South Africa in coming to grips with a very sad chapter of its history,” he said.

All of the facts and stories are not yet known, he said, in explaining the need for the \$60-million Canadian commission. “The executive branch of the government at that time will have a heavy responsibility to follow through with what I hope will be the closing chapter of this era in Canadian history and deal with the [commission's] recommendations. I would be very surprised if those recommendations at that time did not deal, as the South African commission did, with the context and the concept of an apology.”

The opposition parties welcomed the Conservative party's support for the House of Commons apology, but continued to press for an immediate government apology.

In his opening speech, Saskatchewan Liberal MP Gary Merasty, a former Cree Grand Chief who moved yesterday's motion, painted a dark picture of the residential schools experience.

“I stand here for numerous victims whose stories will never be told, whose remains are scattered across our land in unmarked graves, scars on the land and even larger scars on our nation's psyche,” he said. “According to some reports, students in the early to middle part of the last century often had to help bury their classmates, their friends, their relatives. Yes, children buried children.”

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