

## 6.11A

# Background to residential schools



### Historical context

Before 1500 CE, Aboriginal societies in the Americas and societies in Europe developed separately from one and were largely unaware of one another's existence. Encounters between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples began to increase in the 1500s. Early contact was largely characterized by:

- mutual interest and curiosity;
- gradual increase in the exchange of goods;
- barter, trade deals, friendships, intermarriage, all of which created bonds between individuals and families;
- military and trade alliances, which encouraged bonds between and among nations.

While the early relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples was more or less equal, this began to change in the 1800s. As the number of settlers increased, their power began to grow. As European settlers dominated the land, they also began to dominate its original inhabitants. Colonial and Canadian governments established reserves of land for Aboriginal people. Sometimes without treaty arrangements, these reserves generally lacked adequate resources and were often small in size. Increasingly, European settlers in Canada brought with them the belief that their own civilization was superior and had reached the pinnacle (height) of human achievement. They began to believe that the cultural differences between themselves and Aboriginal peoples proved that European civilization was superior, and that it was the responsibility of Europeans to provide guidance to the "ignorant and child-like savages." In other words, they felt the need to "civilize" the Aboriginal peoples. Education became the primary strategy to achieve this goal. Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, advocated a policy of "aggressive civilization" which led to public funding for the residential school system.



Residential school students taking part in a class in penmanship at the Red Deer Industrial School (1914 or 1919).

Source: "Looking Unto Jesus." United Church of Canada, Archives, 93.049P/850N.

### Details about residential schools

In 1849, the first of what would become a network of residential schools for Aboriginal children was opened in Alderville, Ontario. Church and government leaders concluded that the problem of "Aboriginal savagery" needed to be solved. This would be done by taking children from their families and communities at an early age, and teaching them the culture of the dominant society during eight or nine years of residential schooling. The main goal of the residential school system was to assimilate (absorb) and integrate Aboriginal people into Canadian society.

These photos portray the words of one government official who said that the residential school system was designed "to kill the Indian in the child."



Thomas Moore before and after his entrance into the Regina Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan in 1874.

Source: Library and Archives Canada / NL-022474.

With the passage of the *Indian Act* in 1876, residential schools became active. The federal government and churches operated over 130 residential schools across Canada. Attendance at residential schools was mandatory for Aboriginal children across Canada. Parents could be punished (and even imprisoned) for not sending children to these schools. Children were placed in schools far away from their parents and communities as part of a strategy to alienate (separate) them from their families and culture. Many Aboriginal children were taken from their homes by force. Those that attended residential schools near their communities were only occasionally allowed to visit their families, if at all. Students were not permitted to speak their language or practise their culture. If they did, they were often severely punished for doing so. There was a lack of nutritious food and many students were forced to do manual labour. Survivors of residential schools have reported that they experienced sexual and mental abuse, beatings and severe punishments. Overcrowded living conditions were common and children were forced to sleep outside in winter. Some reported cruel and inhumane punishments such as forcing children to wear soiled underwear on their head. Students suffered diseases and, in some cases, died while in residential schools. The last federally administered residential school was not closed until 1996.

### **Significance of residential schools**

There were 132 federally-supported residential schools across Canada. This number does not include residential schools that were administered by provincial/territorial governments and churches. Approximately 80,000 survivors of these schools are alive today. As indicated by various statements of apology issued by the churches and by the Canadian government, students received a sub-standard education and most suffered extremely negative experiences.

In many cases, the abuses, and hardships associated with attending residential school have caused impacts such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Many survivors have struggled to engage in family, social and professional activities. Being away from their parents for long periods of time, survivors were not able to discover and learn valuable parenting skills. Taking children from their homes meant that transmission of language and culture was denied. As a result, many Aboriginal people no longer speak their native languages or are aware of their traditional cultural practices. Abusive behaviours learned from residential school have resulted in a cycle of abuse and trauma passed from one generation to the next. As a result, Aboriginal communities continue to experience some of the highest rates of substance abuse, violence, crime, disease and suicide in Canada.

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# Response to residential schools



### The movement for redress and early government responses



A residential school survivor celebrated the historic class action lawsuit to seek redress for abuses.

Source David P. Ball, *The Tyee*.

Until recently, the history of neglect and abuse in residential schools was largely unknown in Canada. Beginning in the late 1980s, Aboriginal groups filed lawsuits demanding compensation from the federal government for residential school abuse. This continued in the early 1990s, when Aboriginal leaders began to speak about their own experiences of violation at the schools. Only after this pressure did the Canadian government and churches begin to confront the issue. The possibility of a lawsuit that might result in a large settlement was also crucial in motivating a government response.

As a result of growing social problems in Aboriginal communities throughout Canada, in the early 1990s the federal government created the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). This commission reported that residential schools played a large role in creating a social crisis in Aboriginal communities, and that the schools had left a legacy of trauma on generations of Aboriginal peoples. In response, the federal government created the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) in 1998. The AHF supports initiatives to help heal the scars left from physical and sexual abuse suffered in residential schools.

### Government apology and the redress agreement

Following many years of work by survivors, Aboriginal communities and organizations, the government of Canada implemented the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) in September 2007. The following is a summary of the main elements:

- *Common Experience Payment* (CEP) set aside \$40 million to pay eligible former students of residential schools up to \$3000 each which they can use to further their education.
- *Independent Assessment Process* (IAP) is an out-of-court process to resolve claims of sexual abuse, serious physical abuse and other wrongful acts suffered at residential schools.
- *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) was established to inform all Canadians about what happened in residential schools and their impact on the survivors, their families and communities. Over the course of



National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Phil Fontaine accepting Canada's official apology for residential schools in the House of Commons on June 11, 2008.

Source: Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Harper, Government of Canada.

its five-year program, the TRC will provide former students and anyone affected by the residential school legacy with an opportunity to share their individual experiences in a safe and culturally appropriate manner.

- A \$20 million initiative that supports local, regional and national activities that honour, educate, remember, memorialize and/or pay tribute to residential school students, their families and their communities.
- Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program (IRSRRHSP) provides mental health and emotional supports for eligible former students and their families as they participate in the components of the Settlement Agreement.
- As part of the Settlement Agreement, the government of Canada provided \$125 million to the AHF to support community-based healing initiatives.

In June 2008, the federal government apologized for its role in the residential school system. By saying he was sorry on behalf of the government, Prime Minister Stephen Harper acknowledged the Canadian government's central role in carrying out this historical injustice, and in inflicting untold pain and suffering on generations of Aboriginal children. Harper called residential schools a "sad chapter" in Canadian history and indicated that the policies that supported and protected the system were harmful and wrong.

#### **Reactions to the apology and redress agreement**

Assembly of First Nations (a leading political organization) National Chief Phil Fontaine stated in his acceptance of the government's apology,

... for all of the generations which have preceded us, this day testifies to nothing less than the achievement of the impossible.

... We heard the Government of Canada take full responsibility for this dreadful chapter in our shared history. We heard the Prime Minister declare that this will never happen again. Finally, we heard Canada say it is sorry.



... The memories of residential schools sometimes cut like merciless knives at our souls. This day will help us to put that pain behind us.

... I reach out to all Canadians today in this spirit of reconciliation—Meegwetch [thank you].<sup>1</sup>

First Nations abuse survivor Charlie Thompson, who watched the apology from the House of Commons gallery said he felt relieved to hear the prime minister acknowledge the horrible legacy.

Today I feel relief. I feel good. For me, this is a historical day.<sup>2</sup>

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (Inuit political and cultural association) President Mary Simon said,

I am one of these people that have dreamed for this day and there have been times in this long journey when I despaired that this would never happen. I am filled with hope and compassion for my fellow aboriginal Canadians. There is much hard work to be done. We need the help and support of all thoughtful Canadians and our governments to rebuild strong healthy families and communities. This can only be achieved when dignity, confidence and respect for traditional values and human rights once again become part of our daily lives and are mirrored in our relationships with governments and other Canadians.<sup>3</sup>

Native Women's Association of Canada President Beverly Jacobs said,

Prior to the residential schools system, prior to colonization, the women in our communities were very well respected and honoured for the role that they have in our communities as being the life givers, being the caretakers of the spirit that we bring to mother earth. We have been given those responsibilities to look after our children and to bring that spirit into this physical world. Residential schools caused so much harm to that respect and to that honour. We have given thanks to you for your apology. I have to also give you credit for standing up. I did not see any other governments before today come forward and apologize, so I do thank you for that.<sup>4</sup>

Tom King, Canadian author, Governor General's Award nominee and survivor of a U.S. residential school, said:

It is a symbolic act and it is really in the end no more than that. It is not going to change the history that we have had to live with and that many people will have to deal with. It is not going to change the damage that was done to native families, to reserves, to tribes across Canada. Today is just one day. What I am looking forward to is what tomorrow brings.<sup>5</sup>

Most believe there is still much to be done. Grand Chief Edward John of the First Nations Summit, an umbrella group of B.C., said,

The full story of the residential school system's impact on our people has yet to be told.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Transcript of Chief Phil Fontaine (National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations), Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> About Residential Schools, Legacy of Hope Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Transcript: Day of Apology, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Canada.

<sup>4</sup> Transcript: Day of Apology, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Reaction to the federal government's apology to Canada's Aboriginal People for the residential school system. Canwest News Service, June 11, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> About Residential Schools, Legacy of Hope Foundation.



***Apology delivered by Prime Minister Stephen Harper on June 11, 2008  
in the House of Commons***

Mr. Speaker, I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools. The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history. In the 1870's, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools.

Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption that aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child." Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. Most schools were operated as "joint ventures" with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United Churches.

The government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities. Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed. All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities. First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools. Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home. The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on aboriginal culture, heritage and language.