

CMS OPENING REMARKS AT QNE

Good afternoon. Welcome to the Quebec National Event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. All of us who are involved in this journey of truth and reconciliation are honoured to be here. We are honoured by your presence and grateful for your participation.

I begin by acknowledging that we are in the traditional territory of the Mohawk Nation.

I want also to acknowledge the presence of

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This is the TRC's fifth National Event, of seven mandated by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. We have held events in Winnipeg, Manitoba; in Inuvik in the Northwest Territories; in Halifax, Nova Scotia; and in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Each of those events has been special in its own way, and we fully expect that this National Event will also be unique, because it involves people and communities with unique residential school knowledge and experiences.

Let me remind you about the settlement agreement. It was signed in 2006 – by Survivors of the schools and their representatives; by Inuit and other Aboriginal organizations; by the Government of Canada, which funded Indian Residential Schools; and by the churches that operated them. It settled the largest class-action lawsuit in Canadian history.

Survivors of the schools had gone to court seeking compensation for the injuries and losses they had suffered. Those losses were significant. Children as young as five years of age had been forcibly removed from their homes and families. They were placed in institutions that denigrated their languages, customs, families, communities, traditions, cultures and history.

Many lost the ability to speak their language. They lost their connection to family and community. They lost their ability to earn a living from the land. They lost their culture and spirituality. They lost their knowledge of traditions. They lost their stories which told them where they came from, where they were going, why they were here, and who they were.

In short, they lost the things that, together, make up a person's identity.

Many also suffered serious physical and sexual abuse as well. Of the 80,000 survivors who attended the schools listed in the settlement agreement, about 37,000 have filed claims for serious bodily harm while there. That's almost 50 per cent. For those of you who are not survivors of those schools, imagine what it would be like to attend a school where 50 per cent of the children you went to school with had suffered physical and/or sexual abuse. Imagine, if you are a parent or a grandparent, what it would feel like to have to send your child or your grandchild to a school like that today.

The Settlement Agreement was intended to redress all of that. It had a number of facets. The 80,000 Survivors of the schools who were included in the agreement were awarded monetary compensation.

Money is important. But financial compensation to individuals did not address two of the biggest needs that the Survivors identified. It did not enable them to share the truth of their experiences with other Canadians. And it did not address the need for reconciliation – reconciliation within families and communities; reconciliation between victims and perpetrators; and reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country.

As a result, the Survivors set aside 60-million dollars of the compensation they were awarded to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And they gave the Commission two main obligations – to reveal to Canadians the full and complete story of residential schools; and to inspire and guide a process of healing and reconciliation across this country. Those two obligations bring us here this today.

Each of our National Events is dedicated to one of seven sacred teachings – those teachings are wisdom, love, respect, courage, honesty, humility, and truth. The Quebec National Event is dedicated to the sacred teaching of humility. I want to say a few words about what that means.

As Aboriginal people, we have often been fed shame in the guise of humility. We were told to humble ourselves before God and to be ashamed of our pagan existence;

- To be ashamed of who we were and who we are;
- To be ashamed of our irrelevant history;
- To be ashamed of our inadequate traditions;
- To be ashamed of our woeful and impoverished way of life;
- To be ashamed of our evil spirituality;
- To be ashamed of the clothes we wore, the length of our hair, and the colour of our skin.

We were told directly, and indirectly, to be ashamed of pretty much everything about ourselves.

But shame and humility are not the same thing. Shame is about humiliation. Humility is not. Humility has nothing to do with having a low opinion of yourself or putting yourself down. It has nothing to do with shame.

I am Ojibway - Anishinaabe. I have made it my life's work, not to be a better judge, but to be a better person. My answer, I have found,

lies in understanding and applying the teachings of the Elders of my people. My Elders' teaching about humility puts it this way:

Humility is to know oneself as a small and sacred part of all of Creation.

Let's think about that for a moment.

Humility is to know oneself as a small and sacred part of all of Creation.

For a start, it means knowing personally and profoundly that Creation is huge and it is sacred, and that all aspects of Creation are sacred. If Creation is sacred, and if all parts of it are sacred, and if each one of us is a unique part of a sacred Creation, then each one of us is sacred.

Each one of us.

We are called on to live our lives with this understanding, with respect for ourselves and for all we interact with, because they too are sacred parts of Creation. The teaching of humility tells us that, as human beings, we are not here to dominate or change or destroy Creation, but to be part of it, and to live in balance with all of its parts. Imagine a world in which all people had a profound conviction of the sacredness of Creation, of the sacredness of all peoples and of themselves, and of the importance of that obligation to live in balance. We would think differently. We would act differently. We would do business differently. And we would govern differently.

Humility is also about perseverance, for it teaches us that we cannot always control those things which come into our lives. If things happen contrary to our hopes and plans, humility teaches us that we still must do something with what we have left. We must stand up when we have been knocked down. We must push forward when we have been knocked back. And we must never let such setbacks make us lose sight of our obligation to live life in balance with all of Creation.

I am proud to be Anishinaabe. I thank the Creator that our sacred teachings were not wiped out – despite a lot of hard work on the part of

others – government officials, church leaders and schoolteachers who believed that we had nothing and they had something better to offer. They were wrong.

In this Province, I know that many of you will join with me in finding hope in the fact that the recently selected Pope Francis is an advocate of humility and that he is known for his own humility, his concern for the disadvantaged, and his commitment to dialogue among people of all backgrounds and beliefs. Most of the Indian Residential Schools in Québec, and in Canada, were run by Catholic orders.

I am grateful that the new leader of the Catholic Church that was involved in the administration of schools in Québec and elsewhere in Canada is a believer in dialogue. Reconciliation is simply not possible without humility and dialogue.

Let me remind you about the residential schools in this province. The first residential school for Aboriginal children in what is now Quebec, was opened in 1620 by Récollet missionaries. It was located near what is now the City of Québec. The Récollet missionaries, however, found that students were hard to recruit and even harder to retain. They kept running away. The school closed in 1629. Other orders tried to re-establish it but they failed too. By 1760, there were no

residential schools for Aboriginal children in Québec. And in fact, when the Canadian government got serious about setting up Indian Residential Schools, they didn't start in Québec. The proliferation of Indian Residential Schools that began about 150 years ago took place mostly in Western Canada.

About 140 schools and residences are covered by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Eleven of those were in Quebec. The first was established in 1933 – St. Phillip's Anglican school at Fort George, on the eastern shore of James Bay. Four years later, there was also a Catholic school at Fort George: Sainte-Thérèse-de-l'Enfant-Jésus. In the 1950s, Catholic schools were established just outside of Sept-Îles and in Amos. In the 1960s, Pointe Bleue Catholic school and La Tuque Anglican school were opened. In the 1960s and 1970s, federal hostels were established at George River, Great Whale River, Payne Bay, Port Harrison and Mistassini. Almost all of the schools and hostels were closed by the late 1970s. Pointe Bleue was the last Indian Residential School to close in Quebec – in 1978.

But not all Quebecers were sent to those schools. In addition to those schools and hostels, many Inuit in Northern Quebec were sent to schools across the North. Southern First Nation students were sometimes sent to schools in Ontario or to the Shubenacadie School in Nova Scotia. Some were sent to schools in Newfoundland-Labrador, a part of this country excluded from the Settlement Agreement, and where litigation is still pending.

In preparation for this event, the TRC has held public hearings in six Quebec communities: Inukjuak, Kuujuaq, Sept Îles, Val D'Or, La Tuque and Chisasibi. In these communities, we have heard stories of tragic loss and heroic recovery. We heard of desperate partings as children were taken forcibly from their parents. In the North particularly, children were often sent so far away – thousands of kilometers – that they could not return even in the summer months. We heard of traditional clothing being stripped from children, of sacred beliefs trampled, of identities lost and names changed, of the devastation of being plucked from loving families and cast into loveless institutions. We heard of harsh discipline and sexual abuse, of death and disease. We heard of the terrible loneliness of both the children taken and the parents left behind. Some of the most tragic stories we have heard were about children who never learned the first thing about parenting – and yet, of course, they grew up to become parents themselves.

But as in other parts of the country, we have also heard stories of relationships formed and friendships that have never diminished over lifetimes. We've heard stories of students falling in love and getting married and of the families they have raised.

We have heard of teachers and nuns and priests whose teaching inspired students to excel in sports, and art and work and in academics. We have learned, as has Canada, that while much about the schools has brought shame to this country, much has also been taught about the perseverance and beauty of the human spirit.

If it isn't already obvious to you, let me say that the legacy of Indian Residential Schools is very much alive throughout Canada. But it is a complex one. It lives on in Survivors' attitudes about themselves and in the opportunities that are and are not open to them. It lives on in their children who do not know their languages or their cultures. It lives on in children who were and are denied the opportunity to participate in any kind of normal family life. It lives on in the statistics we hear about: the poverty, the enormous health issues, the incarceration rates, the child welfare rates, the school dropout rates, youth suicides, and the numbers of murdered and missing Aboriginal Women. And it lives on in daily lives of the children of those children who still are with us.

We see it in the faces of the young people who dance and sing and talk and walk as part of the Idle No More movement, a movement which is not so much about overcoming idleness as it is about taking focused action. We heard it in the voice of 18-year-old David Kawapit Jr. and the other Nishiyuu Walkers whose journey of 1500 kilometers from the edge of Hudson's Bay to Ottawa inspired hundreds of others to join, and thousands of others to cheer, myself included.

But it also lives on in the strength of faith that many Survivors continue to have in the teachings of the churches which ran the schools for those many years. It was seen in the tears and celebration of thousands of Indigenous people on the canonization of St. Kateri Tekakwitha on October 21, 2012. It was seen in the joy and celebration of Indigenous Catholics everywhere on the selection of Pope Francis just last month.

It is these things and these complexities that bring us here.

I want to close with a few words about the difference between blame and responsibility, and the challenge ahead.

Most of the people who worked to set up and operate the Indian Residential Schools in Canada have died. There are very few who remain. It's entirely possible that no-one here today had anything to do with designing the Indian Residential School system in this country or administering it on behalf of the Churches. Clearly, you are not to blame for everything that happened to Aboriginal children over the course of a century and a half. If you're a Survivor or the descendent of a Survivor, you are not to blame either for what happened in the schools, but we know from some of the stories that we have heard, that many of you feel a huge sense of responsibility about how you have lived your lives since leaving the schools under the burden of what happened to you there. You too must learn not to blame yourselves for struggling under that burden. You should never have been given it to carry.

But though, in one way or another, we can avoid or shed a sense of blame for the past, we cannot avoid the fact that we are all responsible for the future. This is true whether we are Aboriginal or not, whether our families were part of this past, or whether we immigrated to Canada last week.

In the wake of the Indian Residential Schools, it is up to all of us to help build a country where a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people exists. I say this particularly to the young people who are here today because you ARE the future.

That mutually respectful relationship is what reconciliation is all about. But reconciliation will not happen overnight and it will not happen without hard work. It took us seven generations to get to where we are today, and it may well take us seven generations to get to where we want to be.

During the next few days at this historic Quebec National Event, we will spend time thinking about a better future and how we plan to get there. Here are some words to take to heart as we do this. They are the words of my young friend Wab Kinew. You may know him from the 8th Fire television series.

“The truth about reconciliation,” says Wab, “is this: It is not a second chance at assimilation. It should not be a kinder, gentler evangelism, free from the horrors of the residential school era. Rather, true reconciliation is a second chance at building a mutually respectful relationship.”

Listen well over these next few days. Participate fully. Think about that second chance at building a mutually respectful relationship and how you will embrace it.

Stand up.

Be proud.

Take action.

Thank you...