

# **Truth and Reconciliation Canada Chair. Justice Murray Sinclair**

## **Remarks at Witnessing the Future Ceremony**

**Thursday, October 15, 2009**

**Rideau Hall, Ottawa**

Your Excellency, the Right Honourable Madam Jean, Elders, survivors, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my privilege to serve as the Chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and to be here in your presence today along with fellow Commissioners, Chief Wilton Littlechild and Ms Marie Wilson as well as the valued members of our Residential Schools Advisory Committee. I would like to introduce the members of that committee to you. I would ask them to stand as I say their name:

Mr. Eugene Arcand

Mr. John Banksland

Ms. Terri Brown

Ms. Lottie May Johnson

Mr. John Morrisseau

Mr. Barney Williams Jr.

Mr. Gordon Williams

Rebekah Uqi Williams

Doris Young

And not with us today due to illness is Mr. Raymond Arcand

On behalf of the Commission, Excellency, we thank you for your invitation to host this important event here at Rideau Hall.

We are thankful for the collaboration and the effort shown by your staff, in assisting our staff, to prepare for this day.

I also respectfully acknowledge the presence of our many special guests and dignitaries here today, from the Aboriginal organizations, from governments, from the churches and from the public.

Most importantly, I pay tribute to the many residential school survivors who are in our midst, and those joining us through various media outlets.

Your Excellency, the idea of a Truth Commissions is not new.

Increasingly this is a mechanism used by countries around the world where there is a need to look deeply into one's reality, where something from a nation's past may be standing in the way of its ability to achieve its full potential.

But while such commissions are not new, *our* Truth and Reconciliation Commission is unique in two important ways:

First, it was not solely a Government decision to create it. Our Commission was created because a number of courageous former residential school students took legal action on behalf of all former students against the Government and the churches who ran the schools, on the basis that what had happened to them while in the schools was wrong.

When the courts of this country found that the students had a reasonable cause of action, the defendant government and churches agreed to settle several of those class actions.

The resulting Settlement Agreement was approved by all of the parties, including the students.

The government, the churches and the students have agreed that legal wrongs occurred and have resolved to establish a process by which those who attended residential schools would be compensated for the wrongs that had been done.

The nature of those wrongs do not need to be detailed by me – we will hear about them from the students themselves in the time to come.

But those who have studied this sad experience have all remarked that it was through law and with law that the human rights of the children and their parents were most startlingly undermined. Armed with the power of laws that no Canadian today would tolerate, government and church officials systematically attacked Aboriginal societies in a most vulnerable way – through their children.

Behind the shield of laws of intolerance, children were removed from their families and kept apart from them, and raised in institutions where further intolerance was encouraged and practiced and where, almost as an inevitable result, abuses occurred.

It is important to keep in mind therefore, that it was for the benefit of those child victims that the Residential Schools Class Action Settlement Agreement had to and did receive court approval and it is for their benefit that the courts of this country continue to maintain a hands-on supervisory role over the agreement's implementation and the work of this Commission.

From a history where, for Aboriginal people, law was used to abuse, the rule of law now finally been raised as the shield and protector of the powerless it was always meant to be. Those of us from the Aboriginal community who have struggled – given this history - to believe in the rule of law, take some comfort from that fact.

Secondly, this Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to our knowledge, is the first of its kind in the world to focus specifically on something that happened to children of a specific race: the Aboriginal children of Canada.

While the schools they went to are referred to as Indian Residential Schools, it was the Inuit, Métis and First Nations children collectively who all went to them. For purposes of our mandate, we do not distinguish.

Our mandate has many complicated parts to it. But in the end all its various parts will be tied together for the same key purpose: the Commission will gather together all the

information it can about Residential Schools in Canada, including the first-hand accounts of anyone involved in it, or affected by the Schools. Through that process, we will learn important things about ourselves and about each other:

We will learn about how we treated each other during a period in our history...and...how we want to treat each other now, and in the future, because of what we have learned from our past.

One of the stated goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is to: “Witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation events at both the national and community levels”.

In Aboriginal and European traditions one of the most significant honours one can bestow is to invite a person to bear witness to an important occasion or event or process.

The event may include a ceremony, such as a wedding or a naming, with the witness being asked to observe and to account to others in the future for the significance and the validity of the event. Indeed the status of the witness often enhances the event even further. In agreeing to bear witness to an event, the witness undertakes to verify not only that it occurred but that it was important and that it was undertaken with appropriate solemnity. Being asked to fill such a role demonstrates mutual respect, and establishes important relationships.

Over the next five years, it is our great hope that the work of our Truth and Reconciliation Commission will bring together many peoples from many territories within our country through new and better ways of understanding.

Today it is in this spirit and understanding that we are honoured that our Governor General, Her Excellency, The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean, has accepted our request to serve as our Honourary Witness today and to bear witness for us into the future.

Excellency, your agreement recognizes and enhances the significance and the validity of the endeavour which we undertake. It is with great respect that we acknowledge and thank you for acknowledging the Commission in this way.

Our theme for today is “Witnessing the Future”.

We chose it, because we are asking all of you, those in this room, and those who are joining us from afar, to see where we are at, and to begin thinking about what it might mean for *you* to serve as “Witness” to meaningful Truth and Reconciliation.

What *could* it mean?

Our Truth and Reconciliation Mandate document says:

“The Truth of our common experiences will help set our spirits free, and pave the way to Reconciliation”...

“La Revelation de nos experiences communes aidera a liberer nos esprits, et a ouvrir la voie a la reconciliation.”

Well, to know the Truth, we must begin by telling it.

In an important way, that started a year and a few months ago.

On June 11, 2008, our Prime Minister on behalf of the Canadian people issued an Apology to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada for the fact that residential schools were founded on the principle of racial intolerance.

On behalf of the people of Canada, the Prime Minister admitted that what the Government had allowed to happen to Aboriginal children, through the running of the residential schools and the laws of the day, was wrong.

And on behalf of Canadians, he expressed sorrow for what it had done.

For me, as the child of a residential school survivor, I heard that apology, and the other apologies by the leaders of Canada’s Parliament, and I embraced them as sincere, important gestures, and an important part of the Truth about residential schools.

Not the whole truth, but an important part of it, and an essential place to start.

As we all know, saying you're sorry for something is not enough, unless it is followed by steps to make things right.

Yet how can you make things right without knowing, and understanding fully, exactly how things went wrong, and how far things have gone wrong, *despite* the many good things that also happened in those schools, and *despite* the best intentions of many people associated with them.

To those of you who would say, "It's in the past. Why don't they just get over it?", I would say this: "we - and you - are not out of the past yet. Our families were broken apart, and must be rebuilt. Our relationships have been damaged and must be restored. Our spirits have been stolen and must be returned. Our love for life was turned into fear and we must work together now to learn to trust once again."

We have so much left to learn about the lasting legacy of the schools.

Every story told is another opportunity for one individual to be freed from the burden of carrying that story, alone.

Today, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we hope, will present that opportunity to all who wish to speak up.

The Whole Truth can only come from You... the Witnesses to this part of our history:

From those who were students at the schools;

From those who ran them,

From those who taught there and worked in them,

From all members of your families and your communities who experienced the consequences of that role and those schools, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse.

We hope to hear from anyone in Canada who feels they have been affected one way or another by the reality of Canada's residential school system.

We want to know what you know...and we want to know how you feel about it.

The sadness...yes...but also we want to know about the triumphs, the courage, the friendships, the accomplishments, the relationships formed and the joy that you have felt through those relationships

These things are all part of the Residential School story in Canada...

As Commissioners, we believe these things are at the very heart of our work, and our purpose.

Over the next five years we will be working with you to find meaningful and safe ways for you to share those stories with Canada.

One of those ways will be through a series of National Events.

As with today's gathering, each national event will include opportunities for Truth Telling, as well as meaningful acts of Reconciliation.

Today I am pleased to announce that the Commission has accepted this recommendation from our Survivors Advisory Committee...

The first National Event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be held in the springtime in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

While we still need to confirm times, and exact locations of all other national events, I *can* tell you today the *regions* where those other national events will be held (in alphabetical order) are:

- Alberta
- British Columbia
- The Maritimes
- Northern Canada
- Quebec; and
- Saskatchewan

I am also pleased to announce that we can spread these important National Events out over our full five-year mandate.

We no longer have to squeeze them all within a two-year period. The Parties who have met with us and discussed this with us have indicated that they are prepared to allow our mandate to be amended to that these important events can be held over an appropriate period of time.

This will give us more time to plan each one carefully.

We want each national event to make it possible to receive your stories in many ways: through individual statements, through sharing circles, through poetry, through song, through dance, video....whatever means may be possible and through whatever means may be meaningful.

I am also announcing today that our Website, which will be revised shortly, will feature the Truth and Reconciliation Memory Book.

This is a new tool that may help you to collect and organize your thoughts and memories about the residential school experience as you prepare to participate in the processes that we will be organizing.

At the Commission, it is our job to share what we hear from you with all of Canada, so that as a country, we learn from our past.

One of the things we like to believe about ourselves as a country is this:

That we take a stand, and that we pitch in to do our bit, if we feel there is something that should be better in the world around us.

As fellow Commissioners, we believe it is the sharing of these stories that will prompt such actions by the people of Canada, and make Reconciliation possible.

As I have said, we have many residential school Survivors as our special guests here today.



We know that the use of the term “Survivor” is a controversial one for some of you, as so many are still struggling.

We want you to know that when the Commissioners and I use this term, we use it to refer to the strength and courage it has taken you to arrive at this day, and we honor the healing journeys you have begun

Commissioner Littlechild will have more to say to you as Survivors, and he’ll be coming up next.

But first I want you to know that *we* do need to hear from *you*.

A number of survivors have agreed to share your stories with us, as representative Survivor voices from the North, the South, the East and the West. You have also generously agreed to involve your own grandchildren in the telling of those stories.

It is our deep hope that by joining voices in this way, we can begin to build deeper understanding across the generations within families, and within society as a whole.

We are looking to build a new understanding about what’s been done in the past, and about what great hope there is for what can still be done in the future.

But as we begin to listen to these stories I want to issue to you a small word of warning.

As we prepare to hear what has been recorded I want to remind all of you that these stories are sometimes difficult to hear and you should all prepare yourselves to hear them.

I want you to understand the importance of hearing them, the importance of sharing them. For it is only in doing that that we are able to allow the burden of them to be lifted from the shoulders of all of us. I especially want to ask all of those survivors who are with us and who are at home to remember that listening to these stories may cause you to recall events in your own life and they may cause you some difficulties. And if are in any way to blame for that, we apologize. We know that sometimes they may trigger past trauma. Please be sure that you have supports ready nearby or know how to access them today and in the next few days if events overwhelm you.

Now, it is time for us to listen.