

SPEECH - Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission "Witnessing the Future" Ceremony

Rideau Hall, Thursday, October 15, 2009

What we are about to experience together, right here, in this room where we hold every official ceremony, is of paramount importance.

I am pleased that we have gathered together under the favourable auspices of the Thunderbird, of all living life forms and all *Manitou* spirits that inhabit the water, earth and sky.

This monumental work, born of the generosity and talent of one of our greatest painters, Ojibway artist Norval Morrisseau, opens a window on the perspectives of the ancestors, of the peoples who are our deepest roots, and whose presence on this vast and generous land dates back thousands and thousands of years.

Morrisseau's work, by virtue of its imposing presence in this clearly European-style room, is also an invitation to dialogue.

As though the civilizations that shaped our history were encountering one another, not in conflict this time but in harmony.

And it is in that spirit that we have come together today, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, brothers and sisters of the extended human family, in a circle, the circle of life, where every region and race of the world is represented, bound to one another, interconnected.

Within this circle are a number of elders, spiritual leaders and officials, survivors, youth and children, citizens from every

background.

We have a great deal in common: a country, values, a memory, a history.

A history filled with pages that are at once luminous and glorious, dark and troubling.

We are now shedding light on the painful chapter of Aboriginal residential schools, a chapter that spanned over a century.

It was on June 11, 2008, in front of millions of Canadians, that words of sorrow and profound regret resonated in the heart of Parliament.

I was there.

And I remember quite vividly the images brought to mind by those words.

Those words born of indignation brought about by the tragic history of the measures imposed to force assimilation and the violence wrought upon Aboriginal children torn from their families.

I thought about the devastating archival photos that I saw for the first time in the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation Cultural Centre, which welcomed me in June 2007, in Dawson City, Yukon.

Those photos were heartbreaking, infinitely sad, showing Aboriginal children forced by the dozens onto the backs of trucks, eyes wide with alarm, terrified.

You know what I am talking about.

They were so small—some younger than five years old.

I could not help thinking about all of those parents and

grandparents who were told that they had nothing to teach them, nothing to offer them; that they were being taken away.

I could not help thinking about those women and men who had their most priceless treasure taken away: their children, their life, their future. How many never saw them again; never found out what happened to them?

But beyond the images and archives, beyond those silent witnesses, we need to consider just what all Canadians lost.

Because in one way or another, we have all been deprived.

Through the massive deportation of their children to residential schools, the Aboriginal peoples have been dispossessed of their languages, their cultures, their dignity; of the precious, vital and emotional bonds between generations; of the handing down of ancestral knowledge.

Non-Aboriginals were also dispossessed: of a priceless opportunity to learn and grow through contact with these varied cultures, to appreciate and share the spirit, beauty and sound of their languages, their deep understanding of the land, their world vision, their journey, their timeless experience.

In their place were built walls of denial and ignorance that perpetuate indifference.

The time has come to speak up. The time has come for us to work together to listen and shine a light on the gaps in this memory, difficult though it may be.

Now is the time for us to travel the road of truth and reconciliation together.

I and the institution I represent have made a commitment to act as the witness of this journey that we must take with courage and responsibility, because I believe in the luminous promise of

the truth, which we have chosen to embrace.

When the present does not recognize the wrongs of the past, the future takes its revenge.

For that reason, we must never turn away from the opportunity to right an historical wrong.

Let us open our hearts. Let us open our minds.

Let us allow words to flow freely between us and let us be open to them, in a true spirit of sharing and dialogue.

Let us rebuild our history together, for we have a responsibility to acknowledge its every aspect.

That is what this Commission urges us to do, and wherever it may go, it must seek to rebuild relationships rooted in trust to better bring people together.

To all those who survived this contempt, or those who took part, and will have the courage to speak up, I thank you for stepping across that difficult but essential threshold.

To all those who will help to re-establish the facts and nuances, I thank you for contributing to this long voyage from recognition to reconciliation.

To all those Canadians who, across the country, in our provinces and territories, will seize this opportunity given to us by the Commission to learn, listen and reach out, I thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Each of you will help to break down the wall of indifference, to break down solitudes, to imagine how we hope to live together.

This is not just a dream. It is a collective responsibility.

This is how we will come to achieve all that is possible between

us.

For I believe that what is possible is indeed the highest and most just expression of our human dignity.

For what is possible is the guarantee of a brighter future for us and for future generations.

Today, let us make a pact.

A pact of solidarity.