

Speech for

The Honourable Denis Coderre, P.C., M.P.

On the occasion of the

Residential School Legacy Conference

Calgary, Alberta

March 13, 2004

Introduction

- q Good morning. Thank you Phil for the introduction and thank you for inviting me to speak today. I would like to recognize - including AFN Grand Chief, Phil Fontaine - Georges Erasmus, the President of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation whose wisdom helps guide the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in its good work.**

- q I see that many others have made the journey here - I would like to welcome all of you who have made the effort to join us in continuing to seek and improve shared solutions to achieving reconciliation.**

- q We need to work together and I agree with the National Chief's mind set when he stated that there is a need to focus on healing and move forward. The government wants to be involved in that journey, to build bridges and move forward.**

- q There is no doubt that one of the largest challenges being faced by the federal government is addressing the legacy of Indian residential schools.**

- **It is an emotional and difficult story that is a bleak chapter in Canada's history. We should not forget that to move forward that we must remember where we have come from.**

Reconciliation

- **Over the first day of this conference, we learned more of the history and the harm caused by residential schools. At this time, I would want to especially recognize the former students of Indian residential schools whose courage in revealing their experiences are helping others face their past, and to seek just compensation for the abuse they suffered.**
- **I believe on this second day, it is time that we move to the question posed by this conference, is reconciliation possible?**
- **I answer with a resounding yes! It is possible - not only possible - but necessary.**
- **It is only through reconciliation that we can all take our rightful place in this great country that we share.**

Overview

- **Today, in the spirit of reconciliation, I would like to give you an overview of the steps we have taken, and are continuing to take, to ensure that the Government of Canada does its share to help healing and reconciliation take place.**

- **I will focus on our residential schools response, but I will also mention other steps that the Government of Canada is taking to return to Aboriginal peoples whatever has been taken away in terms of their pride, their dignity, and their right to self-determination.**
- **I will mention these other things along with residential schools because of one of the lessons we have learned from Aboriginal people is that everything is connected - that we cannot focus on just one issue in isolation.**
- **One of the most important objectives of today's federal government is to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Improving the lives of Aboriginal people on, and off, reserves means improving access to health care, increasing opportunities and helping nurture young children and families for better futures.**
- **As Minister responsible for Indian Residential Schools Resolution - I recognize this to mean alleviating the pain of former students who suffered abuses and humiliations inflicted upon them as children far away from home.**

- **To open pathways to closure through healing and reconciliation - by apologizing, by compensating, and by making that process a more comfortable one for those who have suffered physical and sexual abuse.**
- **Aboriginal peoples have told us that there are very specific needs of those people who were physically or sexually abused at residential schools. Representatives from my department including Deputy Minister Mario Dion will provide details about the National Resolution Framework to resolve claims of physical and sexual abuse later this morning.**
- **However, in addition to the need to address the needs of these former students, there are also the needs of the wider Aboriginal communities.**
- **Today, I will talk about our part – the Government’s side – only. I recognize that reconciliation is not something that can be forced on someone.**
- **It can only be accomplished by the good will of both parties. I would like to show you what we as a government are doing behind the scenes with the advice that we have received from former students, their lawyers and the churches over the years.**

And, I understand that in the end - all we can do as a government is offer our hand in the spirit of support, and wait for that hand to be taken.

Historical Reference

- **It was the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples that told us that real change could only emerge after a meaningful reconciliation of historic grievances.**
- **In 1998, in our response to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples - ably co-chaired by Mr. Erasmus, who earlier gave you a history of residential schools - the Government of Canada acknowledged that our historical treatment of Aboriginal peoples is not something in which we can take pride.**
- **Our response, *Gathering Strength*, called for a renewed partnership with Aboriginal people based on recognizing past mistakes and injustices and the advancement of reconciliation, healing and renewal.**
- **As part of *Gathering Strength*, we acknowledged our role as a government in the development and administration of Indian residential schools.**

- **And, we are sorry for the heavy burden that former students have had to carry – and that for some – this burden was carried in secret.**

- **What happened was not their fault and those who breached the trust that was given to them, must now work to relieve former students, their families and their communities of the burden that has had to be carried.**

- q **I'd like to quote part of the "Statement of Reconciliation" document to you, because I believe that it is important that it is heard as often as possible, especially by people who went through the residential school experience, and by people who have felt the continuing pain of those who were abused:**

- q **["Particularly to those individuals who experienced the tragedy of sexual and physical abuse at residential schools, and who have carried this burden believing that in some way they must be responsible, we wish to emphasize that what you experienced was not your fault and should never have happened.**

- q **To those of you who suffered this tragedy at residential schools, we are deeply sorry.”**

- q **We are deeply sorry...we recognize, first and foremost, the importance of an apology and the recognition that wrong was done.**

- q **It is from here that we hoped to move on, to do whatever we can to right those wrongs, and repair the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canada.**

Aboriginal Healing Foundation

- q **We began with the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, set up in 1998. We supplied those funds - \$350 million dollars, not as a form of compensation for abuse but to help people, families and communities to become healthy.**

- q **We then put that money into the hands of people who would know how best to use it. It is run by a board representing people from all over the country, and diverse aboriginal backgrounds.**

- q **The Foundation has supported the journey of many individuals, families, and communities on the path toward healing and reconciliation**

- q **As of February 2004, there were 1,248 signed contracts for healing projects, for a total disbursement of more than 330 million dollars.**

- q **But the numbers don't tell you the whole story, let me give you some examples of the sorts of things the foundation has supported:**
 - o **Healing and training a core group of community caregivers in Cape Dorset, Nunavut. Two thirds of the people trained were elders;**
 - o **Delivering a play that honours Survivors and addresses the Legacy of physical and sexual abuse in residential schools. "Every Warrior's Song" reached an estimated 4,000 people in British Columbia;**
 - o **Activities to increase awareness of Métis history and pride in being Métis in the community of Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan;**
 - o **Parenting skills program combining traditional and western models and approaches;**

- o **Healing circles, fasting and healing retreats for Aboriginal women; and**
 - o **An urban alternative justice project that incorporates healing and sentencing circles in Ottawa, where there are an estimated 35,000 Aboriginal people.**

- q **The Foundation has not only supported these community-based projects, it has also taken a look at the bigger picture of effects from residential schools.**

- q **It has commissioned reports on such difficult topics as family violence, elder abuse, and resilience in aboriginal communities.**

- q **So how successful is this approach? There are many positive stories:**

- q **An independent assessment found that people who had taken part in foundation programs described cultivating a stronger sense of self, becoming more attentive to their families, committed to passing on cultural teachings, spending time with elders and personal wellness. They felt less alone, more forgiving and returned to school or made career moves.**

Listening and Learning

- While the work of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation got underway, we began listening hard during the series of exploratory dialogues held between 1998 and 1999. These dialogues brought together survivors of residential schools, healers and leaders, lawyers, and senior officials within government and the churches.
- What we heard is that it would require more than an apology and goodwill to help people deal with a history of abuse – it would also require funds, to be directed in a non-political fashion for cultural training.

Loss of Language and Culture

- I would like to pick up on the point about passing on cultural teachings. Although we do not include claims for loss of culture in our dispute resolution mechanism, the government recognizes that Aboriginal people are concerned about the possible loss of their wonderful, unique cultures.
- There are many reasons for cultural loss, the pressures of living next door to a different culture that can seem at times overwhelming – as a Quebecois, I know something of that – as a Canadian living next to America, I know something of that.

- **This is not simply a residential schools issue, and we have chosen not to simply take a residential schools response.**
- **We share the concern of Aboriginal peoples about their loss of language particularly, because that is so bound with a culture.**
- **We know of the projections that of Canada's more than fifty aboriginal languages only three, Cree, Inuktitut and Ojibway – have enough speakers to be considered truly secure from the threat of extinction.**
- **We have already taken action to try to help Aboriginal people in Canada to avoid that prediction.**
- **The Minister of Canadian Heritage, in December 2002 announced an Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Centre.**
- **This includes a commitment of more than \$170 million over 11 years toward the establishment and operation of such a center.**

- **We hope the center, with the efforts of aboriginal people will not only preserve, but also revitalize and promote Aboriginal languages and cultures.**
- **This will certainly help to meet the needs of former students at residential schools, who were denied the chance to learn their language, and participate in their culture.**
- **It will also respond to needs of a broader aboriginal population who are looking for a way back to their ancestral languages and cultural practices.**
- **As a responsible government, we must deal with the specific needs, and we are responding - You will hear more this morning about how we're doing that.**

Addressing the Broader Needs

- **But first, we also need to deal with the general needs of an aboriginal population, that we recognize is lagging behind the general Canadian population in some key respects.**
- **We are conscious that Aboriginal peoples are not to blame for this, and that Canada played a significant role in their situation.**

- **In the area of health for instance, we know that there are specific problems afflicting Aboriginal people.**
- **It is well-known that some regions and communities are suffering mental health problems, rashes of suicides.**
- **Diabetes is another particularly alarming problem in many aboriginal communities, as changes of diets came along with erosion of culture. Aboriginal people are three times as likely as other Canadians to suffer from diabetes.**
- **While the federal government is providing the resources to deal with the symptoms of such illnesses, we also want to find ways to cure or prevent these diseases that are disproportionately affecting Aboriginal people.**
- **We have established and funded the Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health, one of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The Institute, in turn, has set up Aboriginal Capacity and Development Research Environments across the country, including one not far from here in the University of Alberta in Edmonton.**

- **These regional centers conduct research into Aboriginal health under the direction of a board mostly composed of Aboriginal people. The institute is also supporting the work of aboriginal students who want to enter the field of health research.**
- **Education is another field where the federal government is trying to help improve outcomes for Aboriginal people.**
- **As you have heard – or should I say we have heard - we have made some big mistakes in the past. Today we are trying to learn from those mistakes, starting at the preschool level.**
- **Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) in Urban and Northern Communities is a Health Canada-funded early childhood development program for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and their families.**
- **The program funds locally controlled and designed strategies to provide Aboriginal children with a positive sense of themselves, and a desire for learning. There are 114 head start sites in urban and northern communities across Canada.**

- **The projects typically provide half-day preschool experiences that prepare young Aboriginal children for their school years. All projects provide programming in six core areas: education and school readiness; Aboriginal culture and language; parental involvement, health promotion; nutrition; and social support.**
- **Parents are supported in their role as the child's first and most influential teacher, and the wisdom of elders is promoted.**
- **The government also supports aboriginal controlled schools – more than 490 elementary and secondary schools, serving just under 120,000 children. And finally, we're trying to help narrow the education gaps at the highest levels.**
- **Every year, the Post-Secondary Education Program gives more than 26,000 First Nations students money they need to attend universities, colleges or other recognized post-secondary institutions. There are also hundreds of scholarships, bursaries and awards available to all Aboriginal students.**
- **I'm sure several people here today have been helped to achieve the educational goals, and so helped to meet the needs of their communities, through Canada's post secondary program.**

- **Another challenge for Canada, and for Aboriginal people is to narrow the prosperity gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.**
- **In major western cities, four times as many Aboriginal people as other citizens are below the poverty line.**
- **Education is one way to help narrow the gap, but we recognize that's not the path for everybody.**
- **That is why the government recently announced that it will renew the Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy for another five years. The strategy helps Aboriginal people to get the skills they need to find work.**
- **When she made the announcement, my Cabinet colleague Ethel Blondin-Andrew said, "By renewing the strategy, we are helping to build the skilled Aboriginal work force that Canada needs to prosper in the 21st century. And we are tapping into the potential of Aboriginal youth to embark on exciting career paths in every sector of the economy."**

- **This is important to us as a government – we know that particularly in Western Canada, the aboriginal population is the fastest growing sector of the population. As a government, we have to equip those youth with either the education or skills they require to play an active role in society.**
- **The renewed strategy is expected to help 100,000 Aboriginal people enter the workplace in the next five years. That’s about one-tenth of the current estimated aboriginal population. I mentioned earlier the poverty gap in cities – we see that the aboriginal population is becoming increasingly urbanized.**
- **In the city of Calgary, for instance in 1996 (the last year for which we have figures), about 14,000 people said they were Aboriginal. This can complicate the delivery of programs that were originally designed for reserves or predominantly aboriginal communities.**
- **Last November, the government launched the \$25-million Urban Aboriginal Strategy pilot projects. This funding will allow aboriginal organizations and communities to work with the federal and provincial governments to test new ideas on how to better respond to the needs of urban Aboriginal people.**

- **These pilot projects are being implemented in eight cities, including Calgary. The lessons learned from these projects will help the Government of Canada determine how to address urban Aboriginal issues in the longer-term.**

Governance

- **The final area I want to talk to you about is governance.**
- **As mentioned in the most recent *Speech from the Throne* the Government will, in co-operation with First Nations, establish an independent Centre for First Nations Government.**
- **The centre will support governance capacity in Aboriginal communities, it will help to exchange ideas and promote discussion between governments, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.**
- **Again, as was mentioned in the throne speech, we want to engage other governments and Métis leaders on the place of Métis in government policies.**
- **Governance sounds like such a dry subject – but it is at the bottom of all the public policy choices that are made.**

- **An aboriginal government would NOT have sent its children away, cutting them off from their parents and their cultures.**
- **We hope that by supporting aboriginal governments, we can help them to make better choices for their people and for the future.**
- **As a sign of the importance that our government is attaching to all Aboriginal issues, we have established a new Cabinet Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, chaired by the Prime Minister, Paul Martin; a Parliamentary Secretary; and an Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat in the Privy Council Office.**
- **We had a historical moment with the three Aboriginal leaders meeting with the Prime Minister. By doing this we can tackle some of the tough issue.**
- **We are not on a walk, but a right step in the right direction.**
- **In plain language, this means a lot of powerful people trying to improve the government's dealings with Aboriginal people.**

Alternative Dispute Resolution

- **This brings us full circle, back to what is happening with my department, Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada. One of the ongoing charges we face is that we are doing nothing while elders die and the court cases gather dust.**
- **But please – consider our National Resolution Framework. Look at what has come from the days and weeks of dialogues. Look at what has been created from advice received from people in this very room.**
- **Please consider the alternatives to the court system that were created in partnership with former students, with their counsel and with the churches.**
- **Think about what we have done to build practical and humane solutions to achieving settlements – travel money for family members or elders as personal support at hearings and in court, financial support for legal fees, counseling to provide safe and comfortable environments, and traditional healers.**
- **Commemoration – an entire program to honour and pay tribute to all former residential school students, whether they pursue a**

claim for compensation or not. Commemoration allows survivors to embrace their past and to deal with their history and memories in ways which permit a greater opportunity for closure.

- It includes public acknowledgment of survivor experiences and could include an activity in which family, friends, and community participate.**
- It also provides an opportunity to bring their interests to the attention of the broader population and for Canadians to acknowledge survivors' experiences and needs.**
- We, with former students, their lawyers and the churches, laboured to build the commemoration aspect in a way that advances individual and community healing, closure and reconciliation so that former residential school students can resolve their claims with a sense of personal satisfaction and move forward.**
- It contributes to former students' sense of belonging to their communities by giving them an opportunity to share experiences, support one another, strengthen community relationships and recognize and celebrate their strengths.**

- **Our work is not done, but the job will be easier with all of us joining forces and moving forward together.**
- **Most Canadians, that's a shame, don't know or understand the stories and experiences. They need to better understand what those experiences mean for Aboriginal people today. Not an easy picture to look at, but if we are to move beyond victimization and toward healing and reconciliation, all Canadians must understand this history. Through supportive action from all of us, we can achieve this, as well.**
- **Maybe what we should do is recognize the anger. Churches do have a responsibility in these claims, not everyone in the church should pay necessarily.**
- **We need to find a balanced way for healing initiatives for former students because we have to share these solutions together.**
- **We are as committed as you are when it comes to moving into the future with our heads held high. It is a commitment by all parties to try and build a future that will be better; that brings an end to the racism, the hurt and the pain, and the personal suffering.**

- **It is my genuine hope that the path we all travel together will be smooth and that the dignity and strength of those who have had the courage to come forward and tell their stories, will be reflected in your good work, that of my department, of agencies like the Healing Foundation and the churches.**
- **We don't have all the answers, but if we have hope than we can accomplish lots.**
- **I agree with Phil that it's a matter of political will to help those who have suffered, those who are hiding.**
- **As a father with two children we, I understand the need to focus on the children.**
- **Like Phil said, let's not be angry, let's work to the future – maybe we just need a good shoulder.**
- **It is with a lot of humility that I am here today, as a politician, as a father, to deliver this speech. I spoke from the heart.**

Thank you.

