

Speaking notes for an address by

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Canada

to the

Preparing for the Truth Commission:
Sharing the Truth about Residential Schools Conference

Calgary, Alberta
June 14, 2007

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Thank you Dean Levy for that kind introduction, and thank you Elder for your prayer.

National Chief, Chiefs, leaders, honoured guests - let me first of all express my appreciation to the University of Calgary and the Assembly of First Nations for hosting this important conference. This conference brings together international and national expertise, First Nation, Inuit and Métis representatives and survivors, Church representatives and government officials.

This sounds a bit like a negotiation. But of course it isn't, in some ways its more like a celebration. As Minister responsible for Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada I am pleased that we were able to make a contribution to bring this conference about.

The theme of my speech tonight is "Truth and Reconciliation as Nation Building", a theme that is near to my heart given my keen interest in both Truth and Reconciliation and Nation Building.

I would like to frame my speech by identifying some broad themes of Aboriginal policy in Canada and then focus specifically on the theme itself.

As some of you know, I have had some history on this file. My underlying philosophy on Aboriginal issues has always been that in order to move forward, we need to deal with the mistakes of the past. Resolution and reconciliation of rights is becoming a cornerstone of Canada's New Government's approach to dealing with Aboriginal issues.

While in Opposition, I became increasingly interested in the issue of residential schools and how the previous government was handling this file. I wanted a much better resolution that truly brought about real reconciliation.

When I think about the children in residential schools, I think of my own daughters and the mere thought of my family having to experience the pain and loneliness of the residential school legacy. I am moved by the former students of Indian residential schools, and I want to honour those here tonight, and from across Canada.

How have we got here? We arrived at this point, the brink of the implementation of one of the most important agreements of this time in history through a couple of key reasons:

1. Some very determined individuals who championed this effort - most notably the National Chief who is here with us tonight; and
2. The will and resiliency of the survivors themselves who are beginning a process of healing and reconciliation.

For far too long Aboriginal policy and its associated history has been largely ignored by the political process. Courts have become the forum for sorting out issues that governments have been reluctant to deal with. Aboriginal people are left wondering why their issues are not important enough for serious consideration by the federal government.

I believe that over the past several months Canada's New Government has demonstrated its willingness to engage in some of the really difficult issues that have burdened the relationship between Aboriginal people and the federal government for far too long.

One of first issues we tackled when we became the government was the issue of Residential Schools. As a government we ratified and ensured that money and other resources were provided to implement the Historic Settlement Agreement. This comprehensive agreement was negotiated with the Churches, lawyers representing survivors and importantly, the Assembly of First Nations.

This Court-approved Settlement is the largest class action settlement in Canada's history and includes: a Common Experience Payment for all former residential school students who were alive in May of 2005; a vastly improved Adjudicative Process to settle claims for physical, sexual and psychological abuse; Commemoration; and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In addition, we have moved forward on trying to find solutions to the issue of matrimonial property rights which is often viewed as a barrier to equality between many First Nation women and their male counterparts, and to Canadians generally.

Earlier this year we tabled legislation to remove an exemption which prevents the application of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* to the *Indian Act*. The effect of this exemption is that for many matters which affect the lives of First Nation people, there is no protection available under the Human Rights Act.

We've also taken new steps to address housing with our First Nations. Recently I announced the First Nations Market Housing Fund, which will help people living on reserves build equity in their homes and experience the pride of home ownership.

We launched a new Urban Aboriginal Strategy that emphasizes employment training as the key to self-reliance for native people and their families.

Last year we achieved a landmark agreement with the government of the province of British Columbia and B.C. Assembly of First Nations that will give the First Nations in B.C. unprecedented control over their children's education.

And just recently, we signed the first trilateral First Nations Health Agreement with the province of B.C. and B.C. Assembly of First Nations. It's a first-of-its-kind agreement that will strive to close the gaps in health between First Nations people and other British Columbians, and ensure First Nations are fully involved in decision-making regarding the health of their peoples.

Canada's New Government has also announced three Wait Times Guarantees pilot projects for First Nations communities for diabetes and prenatal care. And earlier this year, my colleague Tony Clement, Minister of Health, unveiled Canada's first Aboriginal Food Guide.

I'm very pleased to say that here in Alberta, we reformed First Nations child welfare policy so there will be more emphasis on protection and prevention, and fewer child apprehensions.

And we're investing in education so our fast-growing Aboriginal youth population will be able to take full advantage of the jobs and opportunities created by Canada's robust economy.

In Budget 2007, our Government made a commitment to achieve fair and timely resolution of specific claims. And, as you know, this week the Prime Minister and I joined with the National Chief to proudly announce that we are moving forward with a comprehensive package of reforms that will revolutionize the land claims resolution process. Our plan includes three measures: first, finally creating a fully independent Claims Tribunal; second, transforming the ISCC into a neutral dispute resolution body; and third, introducing practical measures to speed up resolution of small claims and increase flexibility in the handling of large claims.

All to say, we are engaged, we are moving forward and we are committed to finding solutions to issues that are important for the future of Aboriginal people specifically and the country generally.

Permit me to now turn to the specific theme of this speech. Oftentimes when we think of nation-building in democratic countries we think of constitutions, law-making power and the ability to enforce law. We think of the role of the judiciary, economic policy, citizen participation and how different levels of government will interact.

Sometimes we fail to recognize that nation-building is not only something that happened in the past; nation building, in my view, is an on-going exercise. When we become complacent we fail to recognize that our actions as governments and citizens are part of a continuous exercise in nation-building.

Similarly, many First Nations and other Aboriginal people are in the process of nation-building and re-building. In doing so they examine the social, cultural, economic, legal and political foundations of self-government.

Many First Nations cite a Harvard University study when speaking about Indigenous nation-building. The study identified four core elements of a nation building model: 1) genuine self rule - meaning First Nations making decisions about resource allocations, project funding and development strategy; 2) effective governing institutions - meaning non-politicized dispute resolution mechanisms; 3) cultural match of governance structures that give First Nation institutions legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens; and 4) the need for a strategic orientation and long-term planning.

So how does a Truth and Reconciliation Commission fit in to these dynamic definitions of nation-building? Before I offer some thoughts on this, let me talk about the evolving Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As you may know I spent some time in South Africa in the days after apartheid, as South Africa moved from apartheid to its current form. I was a constitutional adviser to an organization that was dealing with the dismantlement of the apartheid structure. I watched as the truth and reconciliation commission that was struck in South Africa unfolded. I watched how it assisted South Africa in coming to grips with a very sad chapter of its history. I became a believer in the importance of that kind of approach as a method for this country to come to grips with the sad chapter of Indian residential schools in our Canadian history.

The upcoming Commission will be a forum that would allow First Nations citizens who had been victimized by Residential Schools an opportunity to come forward to ensure that their stories are recorded in Canadian history. It could be a method, at the end of the day, for all of us to come to grips with a chapter in Canadian history that belongs to no single party, to no single government, but to all of us as Canadians as a result of over 100 years of history.

I have believed, from the time I became involved in this chapter in Canadian history as an Opposition member in the House of Commons, that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the key to the way forward for us as a nation. It is there that we will come to grips with what happened. It is there that we will come to understand the damage done to aboriginal people and to the country by the misguided efforts that were undertaken.

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be unique. It is part of a Class Action Settlement - which is unique. The courts will have a role in over-seeing the implementation of the Settlement Agreement - which is unique. The issues and historical period being examined are unique. And most importantly, Aboriginal people will have a key role in helping to establish the Commission and in its implementation.

So I don't need to be convinced about the important role that a TRC can play in nation-building. When I look at the Settlement Agreement I see some important principles that must guide the development of the Commission. As in nation-building, process is important. I support the idea that "in terms of process you must manifest the outcomes you are trying to achieve".

For example, I support an inclusive process for the selection of Commissioners. Stakeholders must feel included and respected in the selection process. This in turn will help to ensure support for the Commissioners once they are appointed, and it is consistent with an outcome the Settlement Agreement calls for - inclusiveness.

Nation-building also means understanding where we have come from, and where we are going. One of the primary roles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is to help the country understand the Residential Schools era and its impact on the lives of real people. This sad chapter in our history is generally unknown and the legacy not understood. I recall as a Member of Parliament, participating in the Aboriginal Affairs Committee hearings regarding Residential Schools.

Even after working on Aboriginal issues for a number of years I was still saddened and shocked to learn of the levels of abuse so many of our neighbours suffered. I believe that the role of the TRC in helping us understand our history, but more importantly to develop a shared history and a shared understanding of the legacy of Residential Schools will help create a firmer foundation for a shared future.

An important role for the TRC in this regard will be the development of an Archives and Research Centre so that we will have a permanent repository of the stories as told by survivors, the Churches and government officials about Residential Schools. It is my hope that curriculum and books will be written which will become sources of knowledge for all Canadians.

One issue of particular importance that I want to touch on is that of children who never returned home from Residential school, and those who were buried in unmarked graves. Some people have said I should have waited until the TRC was up and running and then ask the Commissioners to make this a priority. When this issue was brought to my attention I thought of how not knowing what happened to a family member must feel like, how I would feel if I was in the shoes of someone who was left with no answers about the fate of a loved one.

Bob Watts, the Interim Executive Director of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has agreed to lead a group of representatives from the AFN, Churches, survivors and Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada to identify policy and research options with respect to this issue. I have asked my officials to participate fully with this Ad Hoc Working Group. I understand that the committee is ready to begin its work. Hopefully the work being done now will be of benefit to the TRC when it is up and running. I want to acknowledge all of those participants for your leadership on this issue.

Another issue that impacts on the work of the TRC and is fundamental to nation-building is the matter of healing. I want to commend the Aboriginal Healing Foundation for all of its good work and the many communities and individuals who ensure projects and services are there to benefit survivors and their families.

I am pleased that we were able to secure resources for the Foundation at this time. Clearly this work is fundamental for nation-building and is consistent with the objectives of the TRC. I would expect that the network of support services that the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has, combined with the network of services through Health Canada will be there to support the work of the Commission.

As we turn our minds to the matter of reconciliation and its role in nation building we can't ignore issues like apology, forgiveness and commemoration. Archbishop Desmond Tutu masterfully tied these concepts together when he said "True reconciliation is never cheap, for it is based on forgiveness which is costly. Forgiveness in turn depends on repentance, which has to be based on an acknowledgement of what was done wrong, and therefore on disclosure of the truth. You cannot forgive what you do not know."

I was pleased when I was able to join fellow Parliamentarians in the House of Commons when we unanimously supported a motion which reads “That this House apologize to the survivors of Indian Residential Schools for the trauma they suffered as a result of policies intended to assimilate First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, causing the loss of aboriginal culture, heritage and language, while also leaving a sad legacy of emotional, physical and sexual abuse.”

This apology combined with apologies from the Churches are important signals that people are beginning to understand the importance of this issue for reconciliation to happen.

I believe the work on reconciliation will be fundamental to nation-building. In his usual visionary way, the National Chief said “we must not pass on the burden of residential schools to another generation”. I couldn’t agree more. The question for us and for the Commissioners to consider is: What do we pass on to the next generation? We are seeing a glimmer of what is possible.

I have read reports of the National Day of Healing and Reconciliation and understand events are being planned like a massive walk for reconciliation in British Columbia. We see First Nations and their neighboring communities talking about reconciliation events. For me, this is the stuff of nation-building.

Clearly there are systemic and legislative changes that need to be made to foster reconciliation, but those efforts in families, in communities, between communities are what will make real change possible. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will have the chance to participate in and encourage such events.

The process of nation-building is not always comfortable. As a nation we will hear reports from the TRC that will make us uncomfortable with our past. That may be a good thing; it is often times difficult to change when you are too comfortable. It is clear that nation-building cannot be done on a foundation of guilt or shame because of events that were not of your making. Nation-building requires us to look at each other as equals, as partners, as people; maybe uncomfortable with our shared history, but confident that together we can write a better future.

My hope is that the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will help us to look at each other differently, to treat each other better, to understand how we arrived at this moment in time and how we move together into the future.

I want to wish Bob Watts and his team the very best in the challenging task of setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I also want to thank Peter Harrison and Gina Wilson for their leadership on this file. I offer my support and whole-hearted endorsement of your efforts.

Thank you.