

# Backgrounder

### TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA

On June 10, 2009, The Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, Marie Wilson and Chief Wilton Littlechild were appointed as Commissioners to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC).

As a component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the TRC is an independent body that will oversee a process to provide former students and anyone who has been affected by the Residential Schools legacy, with an opportunity to share their individual experiences in a safe and culturally appropriate manner.

Canada's TRC is unique from other commissions around the world in that its scope is primarily focussed on the experiences of children. Its focus of research spans more than 150 years, one of the longest durations ever examined. It is also the first court-ordered truth commission to be established. As such, the court plays an ongoing role in the implementation and supervision of the commission.

Over the course of its five year mandate, the Commission will:

- Create an accurate and public historical record of the past regarding the policies and operations of the former residential schools, what happened to the children who attended them, and what former employees recall from their experiences.
- Complete a public report that will include recommendations to all parties of the Settlement Agreement concerning the Residential Schools System.
- Host seven national gatherings in regions across Canada to promote awareness and public education about the Residential Schools System legacy and its impacts.
- Support a Commemoration Initiative that will fund initiatives that pay tribute to survivors.
- Support community events designed by communities to meet their unique needs.
- Establish a national research centre that will be a permanent resource for all Canadians.
- Guide and inspire Aboriginal peoples and Canadians in a process of truth and healing on a path leading toward reconciliation and renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

#### **Historical Overview**

Indian Residential Schools date back to the 1840's. The policy behind the government funded, church-run schools attempted to "kill the Indian in the child". Over 130 residential schools were located across the country, with the last one closing in 1996.

More than 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were taken from their families and placed in these schools. Many were forbidden to speak their language and practice their own culture. Today, there are an estimated 80,000 former students still living.

While some former students had positive experiences at residential schools, many suffered emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and others died while attending these schools. The unresolved trauma suffered by former students has been passed on from generation to generation.

The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) report recognized that the future must include a place for those affected by the Residential Schools System, so as to enable them to stand with dignity, to remember, to voice their sorrow and anger and to be listened to with respect.

Following the RCAP report, *Gathering Strength, Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* was unveiled. This included a Statement of Reconciliation acknowledging the Government of Canada's role in the development and administration of Indian residential schools.

In 2001, the federal Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada was created to manage and resolve the large number of abuse claims filed by former students against the federal government. In 2004, an Assembly of First Nations *Report on Canada's Dispute Resolution Plan to Compensate for Abuses in Indian Residential Schools* lead to discussions to develop a holistic, fair and lasting resolution of the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. This resulted in the negotiated Settlement Agreement that was approved by all parties and implemented on September 19, 2007.

The IRSSA was approved by the Courts and came into effect on September 19, 2007. It includes the following individual and collective measures to address the legacy of the Indian Residential School system:

- Common Experience Payment to be paid to all eligible former students who resided at a recognized Indian Residential School;
- Independent Assessment Process for claims of sexual and serious physical abuse;
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission;
- Commemoration Activities:
- Measures to support healing such as the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Health Support Program and an endowment to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

On June 11, 2008, the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Government of Canada, issued an apology in the House of Commons to former students, their families and communities. The apology is considered by many as a step towards reconciliation.

The work of the TRC will further contribute to a forward looking process of truth, healing and reconciliation.

## **TRC Activity Report**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has made considerable progress on several fronts over the last 15 months. Highlights include:

- An active outreach program within Aboriginal communities that has already enabled us to capture the experiences and perspectives of thousands of individuals impacted by residential schools from coast to coast.
- The official opening of the TRC headquarters in Winnipeg, allowing for independence and responsiveness to the needs of survivors.
- A senior management team in place as of last February.
- The first TRC national event, in Winnipeg this past June, which drew more than 40,000 people to participate, observe and share their experiences. The Winnipeg national event drew an overwhelming public response and provided an invaluable opportunity for healing between individuals and communities alike.
- The welcoming of a new Indian Residential Schools Survivor Committee Member in June the Committee once again has 10 representatives.
- The development of infrastructure that would enhance the established in-person statement gathering process, permitting statements to be received electronically and by telephone. Statement gathering has taken place in both private sessions and public sharing circles, in community halls, homes, hospitals and tipis.
- The support of community events across the country to facilitate dialogue, statement gathering and gestures of reconciliation on a local level.
- The witnessing of gestures of reconciliation from governments, churches, police forces, universities, musicians, performing artists, media and Canadians from every walk of life.
- The initiation and implementation of a Missing Children and Unmarked Burial Project.
- A call for research proposals this summer that drew an overwhelming response from scholars and researchers from across the country.
- The launch of public education tools that includes posters, videos, brochures, specialized maps, social media and other resources intended to broaden public understanding of residential schools and their legacy.
- Recognition of the TRC by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as a model of best practices and an inspiration for other countries.
- The creation of an Inuit Sub-commission to ensure that the voice and perspective of Inuit peoples are reflected in the work of the TRC.

## **Looking Ahead**

The road ahead for the next twelve months of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission includes:

- The opening of seven Regional Liaison offices to coordinate TRC initiatives across the country.
- The initiation of a Call for Submissions for a National Research Centre to provide an international focal point for the collection of research into residential schools and their impact.
- The collection of Residential School System documents from the churches, governments and other members of the Settlement Agreement.
- The launching of a Call for Proposals for commemoration projects designed to stand the test of time and promote the spirit of reconciliation long after the TRC has gone.
- The second national event, to be held in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, in June, 2011.
- The hosting of an international conference intended to conceptualize a model for a
  national research centre and archive that will preserve and make accessible all that we
  gather throughout the Commission's mandate. In addition, the conference will reinforce
  our relationship with the worldwide truth and reconciliation community, allow us to share
  best practices and pool our understanding as we move forward towards healing and
  peace in our families, our communities and our world.
- A multi-faceted process of reconciliation initiated to allow Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike to move forward together on a collective journey that fully supports the realization of potential and the healing of wounds.
- Increasing opportunities to provide statements and share experiences about residential schools through community partnerships.