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“Truth and Reconciliation in Canada: Lessons Learned from Canada’s Residential School Experience”

Remarks by
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

She kon. Bonjour, and Good evening everyone.

Let me begin by honouring the Mohawk people, whose traditional homeland this is, and thank them, as the original stewards of this land.

I also want to bring you greetings from my extended family among the Dene Nation back home in Yellowknife, in the Northwest Territories, and to say Mahsi Cho for the invitation to share this time and sacred space with you.

I use that phrase...sacred space... not out of deference to this physical building and its historical church affiliation...

Bur rather I say sacred space out of respect for the namesake of the organization that is hosting us all this evening...Son Excellence Madame Jeanne Sauve...and the

inspirational person that she was to so many of us, and continues to be, through her legacy Sauve Foundation.

I first became aware of Jeanne Sauve when I was a young journalist, seeking female role models from my chosen profession. She was one of them.

I later saw her assume ground-breaking roles in elected leadership and national prominence, as the first female Cabinet Minister representing a Quebec riding, and as Canada's first female Governor General.

I hold dear the memory of finally getting to meet her in person in the 1980's, when she came to the Northwest Territories around the historic visit to the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada by Pope John Paul II.

But more than anything else, I cherish her vision for youth leaders. More than 20 years ago she said,

“Leaders must dream of changing the world. They must have an inspired vision of the changes they want to make and be prepared to consecrate all their energy to that purpose.”

I am certain she would be pleased today to see the visionary calibre of the *international* young leaders who are now selected annually to come together as “Sauve Scholars” under a program aimed “*to equip, empower and enable them to address critical global challenges in their respective communities and countries.*”

I want to salute each and every one of this year’s scholars, and to say how honoured I am to be sharing the program with you this evening.

I am certain that Jeanne Sauve, would also have been pleased to recognize, and honour the emerging leadership that is also being demonstrated *within* Canada today... though often far from the academic world... as indigenous peoples throughout the land struggle to address the critical challenges in *their* respective communities.

The emerging leaders I am particularly talking about are the ones I see on a daily basis from my perspective as one of the three Commissioners of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada...

I am talking about the former students of Canada's Indian Residential School system.

Today they are generally known as Survivors...

Like the Sauve Scholars, the Survivors wanted to change the world... *their* world....

And it is because of them and the courageous leadership and action I will tell you about, that Canada now has an historic opportunity unfolding before us today, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

In 1991 Mme Jeanne Sauve said:

"In this fragile age, it is more important than ever that youth be given the opportunity to interact and to experience; that they be allowed to look through the diversity and multiplicity of cultures, religious beliefs, ideologies and systems that exist around them and discover workable principles and elements that are common and sacred to all mankind."

Back in the 1800's, there was no room for Jeanne Sauve's kind of thinking ...not when it came to the First Nations, the Inuit, and the Metis.

Their different cultures were called “uncivilized”.

Their beliefs were referred to as “pagan”.

Their ways and systems were referred to as “savage”.

None of it was seen as ‘sacred’.

And *all* of it was seen to be fair game for a complete overhaul, through policies specifically aimed at Christianization and assimilation.

According to official government records and correspondence, the fastest, most effective way to do that... was to get at the families through the children.

To take the children away from the pagan, savage influences of parents and communities...

To isolate them in schools where they could be civilized...

To “kill the Indian in the child”...

So that within a generation there would be no more Indians in this country, and no more “Indian problem”.

And so the 150 year residential school history in Canada began. Parents who resisted were threatened or jailed. Laws were passed to prevent aboriginal people from gathering to protest... Their right to vote was taken away.

All the normal standards of democratic voice and expression were removed.

Christian churches were contracted to run the schools for the federal government.

The schools were in every part of Canada, from massive brick buildings that still stand in some regions....to hostels in open air tents in the far north, operating for a few seasons in 40 below weather conditions....

All of them were filled with, lonely, homesick children whose lives were to be altered forever by the experience...and so were the lives of their parents left behind.

I want to pause here for a moment, to make sure you understand the enormity of what I'm talking about...

Try to imagine if those were *your* children...They're beautiful, they're perfect, they're four or five years old, maybe six or seven, and a Priest, or an Indian Agent, or an RCMP officer or more than one of them, come to take that little one away from you; to a place where you could not see them; where they were routinely punished if they tried to speak the language you taught them; where they could not be close to,

or comforted by, their brothers or sisters; where food was foreign, punishment was swift... and abuses, in many places, were rampant. Imagine now a whole community so emptied of its children, that, as one of the Survivors told us, even the dogs cried!

Once they were out of sight and seemingly out of mind from the law-makers, the children were, especially in the early years, poorly fed, poorly clothed, poorly taught, over-worked, under-educated, and, perhaps most damaging of all, under-loved... believing that their own parents no longer loved them either, or they would have come to take them home.

The associated traumas have been severe, and long-term for those who experienced them.

Yet today, many of those same little children are among those I refer to as emerging leaders.

Their worlds had been traumatized, destabilized, and in many ways devastated by the residential school experience. Yet, in the 1980's and 1990's, while the last of the scholls were still operating, they began to rise up and take legal steps to address the harms experienced over the years by

more than a hundred and fifty thousand aboriginal children in Canada.

Their courageous acts led to the largest out of court class action settlement in Canadian history... the 2007 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement.

Today, they are still speaking up, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was created as part of that settlement.

Slowly but surely they are teaching Canada about a devastating part of our own history... a part that almost none of us learned about in our schools.

Their children and grand-children are also starting to talk about it....

They too have been affected as they have been raised by their parents in the very same ways that were treated...the same ways they were taught to act and think about themselves...with shame for being dirty little savages, with violence, anger, humiliation, and neglect.

One woman recently, tearfully, described herself to me as a little girl:

“I went to school at age three. Some of the kids who were at the school before me called me stupid and dumb because I didn’t understand English. This nun put a wrist band on me. It said Pagan. I had to wear that wristband for everyone to see. I thought it must be because of my parents. They practiced traditional sweats and things like that. So I didn’t want to be like them. I tried to eat more communion wafers just so I could get that evilness out of me, that pagan-ness out of me.”

It is the truth-telling...hearing directly from those who have lived the experiences... that is the most emotional, and often the most inspirational part of our work. That same woman went on to say,

“I’ve been helping myself a lot...I laugh a lot...I used to cry a lot but you have to learn to laugh again”

When we hold our hearings, often women are in the lead roles. They are often the ones to offer opening and closing prayers....They make up the majority of those who provide traditional healing and cultural supports...And they’re often the first to find the courage to speak to the Commission.

Perhaps as mothers and grandmothers they feel most profoundly that early rupture between mother and child that is at the heart of so much of the damage caused by residential schools.

But over and over we have seen women's first words open the door in an inspirational way for men to also speak up, including many who did not originally intend to.

Last week I was at a community gathering in northern Ontario, and here's what a young intergenerational survivor told me:

"I can't imagine what they did to him to make him think he couldn't love his own child....I never understood why he left me alone all the time. I always thought it was my fault. I never felt good enough as a young girl. I used to buy food and alcohol so people would hang around me so I wouldn't be alone. All I ever wanted was a hug from my Dad. I used to look all over to find that....This epidemic or genocide or whatever they call it, it affects all of us. Sometimes you don't realize you can live a better life, because you don't know how."

Most of the former students talk about their struggles with alcohol or drugs as part of their story:

“In my second last year, me and my buddies started sniffing gas and lighter fluid. One of the supervisors told me that she cared and wanted to help me. She showed me that she cared...that really got me thinking...so I tried my best to quit”.

Another woman, today an elder in her community, asked herself this question out loud:

“Why did I lose my kids? Because alcohol came first. When my kids were taken away was the saddest time of my life!

I haven't had a drink for about 20 years...I'm very happy today. I feel good about my children. If something bothers me, I pray. If I don't feel good, I pray for the strength to carry on. I don't want to have bad feelings towards anyone. I am what I am today...what I was yesterday is a different story.

So what are the lessons we are learning from the Residential School history? ...a number of harsh truths, and some hopeful signs for reconciliation.

Here are a few of each:

- That we create deep and lasting problems for ourselves when we act as if one group of people knows better than another group of people what is best for them and their children.
- That both English and French have been used as weapons to destroy indigenous languages and cultures.
- That the high rate of addictions and mental health issues among aboriginal peoples, and the epidemic of suicide in many regions, is related to residential school experiences and the continuing trauma of separating children from parents. It is an urgent and national crisis.
- That there is great potential to repeat the betrayal, and worsen relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples... by doing nothing or little in response to the real harms and needs that Survivors are coming forward to describe.
- That indigenous peoples want to believe that the rest of Canada is hearing them, and cares enough about all of this to help do something about it.
- That most Canadians who do learn about the schools share a sense of outrage at what happened, are upset

at not being told about it...and have a genuine desire to help set things right.

- That individual acts of kindness and caring and respect can and do make a positive difference.
- That schools, and all institutions of learning, being a big part of the problem in the past, have a huge role to play to redress the situation now.
- That the human capacity for resiliency is enormous.
- That indigenous pride and the return to spiritual practices is growing.
- That the indigenous capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation is almost beyond belief.
- That there is emerging hope that things can get better.
- That reconciliation will take time.

This is the part of our Mandate that I and my fellow-Commissioners are trying to focus on most in year four of our five year mandate...Reconciliation.

We must do much more than share experiences among survivors. We must engage You!

We must continue to educate the people of Canada, in ways that will inspire meaningful reconciliation for individuals,

families, communities, and between and among the aboriginal and non-aboriginal citizens of society.

We can no longer afford to be strangers to each other in the country that we now share.

We must be honest about the real Two Solitudes in this country,...between indigenous and non-indigenous citizens...and commit to doing tangible things to close the divide in awareness, understanding and relationship.

The Sauve Foundation, McGill University and other members of the learning community are all important to this ongoing work in this city and province, as well as internationally.

Another of the ways we have to educate the public is through the seven National Events outlined in our TRC Mandate. We've held four so far: in Manitoba, the North, the Maritimes and Saskatchewan.

The fifth TRC National Event, with a theme of Humility, will be in the province of Quebec...right here in downtown Montreal, next April.

These events are free and open to the public.

Their success depends on the essential, ever-growing circle of participation from a wide diversity of Canadians...At previous events, those who attended... even those who thought they were well informed before... say they have been transformed by the experience....

The closer you get to this issue, things do start to take on new and deeper meaning, in a very positive way.

It happened to me again just this week, at a ceremony in Ottawa to officially unveil a beautiful stained glass window in the Parliament Buildings....(where Madame Sauve made history as this country's first female Speaker of the House of Commons.)

The window had been commissioned to prominently commemorate the history of residential schools.

There seemed to me a deep irony in this beautiful gesture of reconciliation...

The stained glass...It might remind some of the same old churches that imposed their beliefs with strict and sometimes harsh discipline at the schools...

The window itself...For many, it might represent the deep loneliness so many survivors tell us about, as they sat behind such windows for hours and days at the schools, longing to see the arrival of someone...anyone... from home.

Yet there it was, this beautiful new window, full of its own hopeful symbolism: the starkly coloured images of the past, and the vibrant colours and images of the future.

The artistic vision of Metis artist Christi Belcourt, has transformed a window, a symbol of hurt and longing, into an important, built-in, teaching tool about residential schools....A transformation.

It can now help educate the thousands of visitors who tour the Parliament Buildings every year, shedding new light on a decades-long chapter of Canadian history previously ignored, minimized, or denied altogether.

Engagement with the TRC through such gestures of Reconciliation is a profound opportunity for you as individuals and as community...but also for Canada as a whole to come to know itself in a new way, to redefine itself

in respectful relations with *all* the founding nations officially recognized in the highest law in our land; the Constitution. That law says we have *three* founding nations: the French; the English; and the Aboriginal peoples of Canada; specifically, First Nations, Inuit and Metis.

This is Canada's chance to breathe new life into the spirit of what that law says....

...a chance to see the Treaties signed between the founding nations of our country as they were originally presented...as sacred covenants, intended to bind us together in relationships of respectful co-existence.

In a true spirit of Reconciliation, we would come to understand that we are *all* Treaty people.

And what might your own "emerging leadership" look like? What can *You* do? That 's the question we get all the time. Here are some suggestions.

- Bear witness to this history. Help others learn. There are many who still don't know anything about it, and the awareness in Quebec is lower than anywhere else in the country. And keep talking to others about what you

- have learned. You are all, in your own worlds, people of influence.
- Get to know the indigenous leadership in this province and in this city, if you don't already, to explore *together* what Reconciliation might look like to them.
 - Own this as Canadian history, *not* aboriginal history. The children and families who lived this are *not* the ones who designed it. Canada did.
 - Do what you can to help get residential school history taught to every student in this province, as is now starting to happen in other parts of the country.
 - Let your elected leaders know what you think about all this. Challenge them to think about what else they could be doing to address the legacy of the schools that is still in your midst.
 - Stay in touch with our work at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and read our historical and interim reports at www.trc.ca
 - Get involved as much as you can, by attending community hearings beginning in January, and our National Event in April. Let us know if you can help volunteer at that event.

- Support our interim and final recommendations. Make this imperative for our country.
- Gear up for the long haul. Reconciliation will not come overnight.

To the youth leaders gathered here tonight I want to harken back to the opening words I quoted from Son Excellence Jeanne Sauve:

Remember she said...and I'm paraphrasing now...

She said you need to look through the diversity of cultures, beliefs and ideologies around you in order to discover and understand those things that are sacred to all mankind.

I could not agree more with this...tout a fait d'accord!

Don't miss out on this incredible opportunity you have been given to interact and experience...and not just with each other, but with society around you including the diversity of indigenous cultures right here in the city.

We need you to do that because we are placing great hope in you.... hope as Madame Sauve said, that your own abilities to break through the imposed barriers of the past will

help discover the answers that we have failed to find up to now.

We know you are up to the challenge. Another great leader, another person of firsts, had something very specific to say about that. It was the South African freedom fighter and first black President, Nelson Mandela who said this, and I so often see the proof of it as I watch Survivors inspire other Survivors on their healing journeys. Mandela said:

We ask ourselves: Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are we not to be?...

We are all meant to shine as children do,

It is in everyone...and as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,

Our presence automatically liberates others.

In this season of Christmas and other sacred holidays, I want to end by offering my heartfelt wishes for each one of us here...

May we have open ears and open minds, able to hear and learn, even the harshest of truths about ourselves.

May we have compassionate hearts, able to set down old judgments and ill-informed stereotypes.

May we have steady vision, able to see the windows of opportunity for inspirational leadership.

May we be strong in body, able to journey forward together on the long road of healing our country, and reconciling our peoples.

And finally, as my special gift to you, I want to ask you all out on a date!

Please meet me at the Queen Elizabeth Fairmont on Wednesday April 24, 2013 for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Quebec National Event. I promise you it will be a transformation experience!

Merci Beaucoup

Thank you very much

Migwetch, Nakumik, and Mahsi Cho.