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(HANSARD)

Wednesday, June 11, 2008

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, June 11, 2008

The House met at 3 p.m.

Prayers

• (1455)

[*Translation*]

The Speaker: I invite the hon. members to rise as our distinguished guests enter the House and take their seats.

Applause

• (1510)

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, after the ministers' statements, the representative leaders may provide a response. So this can be done in accordance with the rules, practices and traditions of this House, I would ask unanimous consent for the following motion:

That, notwithstanding any standing or special order or usual practices of the House, after statements by ministers today, the House resolve itself into committee of the whole to allow Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Patrick Brazeau, National Chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, Mary Simon, President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Clem Chartier, President of the Métis National Council, and Beverley Jacobs, President of the Native Women's Association of Canada to make a statement in response to the ministerial statement of apology to former students of Indian residential schools; that the Speaker be permitted to preside over committee of the whole; after these statements, the Chairman shall leave the chair and the House shall adjourn to the next sitting day.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the official opposition, I will say that we are honoured to consent.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Paquette: Mr. Speaker, naturally the Bloc Québécois gives its consent to this motion.

[*English*]

Ms. Libby Davies: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the NDP, I will say that we most certainly give our consent.

The Speaker: Is there unanimous consent to proceed in this way?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

The Speaker: Pursuant to order made on Tuesday, June 10, 2008, the House will now proceed to statements by ministers.

The right hon. Prime Minister.

* * *

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

APOLOGY TO FORMER STUDENTS OF INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before I begin officially, let me just take a moment to acknowledge the role of certain colleagues here in the House of Commons in today's events. Although the responsibility for the apology is ultimately mine alone, there are several of my colleagues who do deserve the credit.

First of all, for their hard work and professionalism, I want to thank both the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and his predecessor, now the Minister of Industry. Both of these gentlemen have been strong and passionate advocates not just of today's action, but also of the historic Indian residential schools settlement that our government has signed.

Second, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my former colleague from Cariboo—Chilcotin, Philip Mayfield, who for a very long time was a determined voice in our caucus for meaningful action on this sad episode of our history.

Last, but certainly not least, I do want to thank my colleague, the leader of the New Democratic Party. For the past year and a half, he has spoken to me with regularity and great conviction on the need for this apology. His advice, given across party lines and in confidence, has been persuasive and has been greatly appreciated.

• (1515)

[*Translation*]

I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools. The treatment of children in these schools is a sad chapter in our history.

For more than a century, Indian residential schools separated over 150,000 aboriginal children from their families and communities.

[*English*]

In the 1870s, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligations to educate aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools.

Statements by Ministers

Two primary objectives of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.

These objectives were based on the assumption that aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal.

Indeed, some sought, as was infamously said, “to kill the Indian in the child”.

[*Translation*]

Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. One hundred and thirty-two federally-supported schools were located in every province and territory, except Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

[*English*]

Most schools were operated as joint ventures with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian and United churches.

The Government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes and often taken far from their communities.

Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed. All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities.

First nations, Inuit and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools.

Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools, and others never returned home.

[*Translation*]

The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on aboriginal culture, heritage and language.

While some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children, and their separation from powerless families and communities.

The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today.

[*English*]

It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors who have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered. It is a testament to their resilience as individuals and to the strengths of their cultures.

Regrettably, many former students are not with us today and died never having received a full apology from the Government of Canada.

● (1520)

[*Translation*]

The government recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation. Therefore, on behalf of the Government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to aboriginal peoples for Canada’s role in the Indian residential schools system.

[*English*]

To the approximately 80,000 living former students and all family members and communities, the Government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes, and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow, and we apologize for having done this.

We now recognize that far too often these institutions gave rise to abuse or neglect and were inadequately controlled, and we apologize for failing to protect you.

Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, and for this we are sorry.

[*Translation*]

The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian residential schools system to ever again prevail.

[*English*]

You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time, and in a very real sense we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.

[*Translation*]

We are sorry.

[*English*]

[*Nimitataynan. Niminchinowesamin. Mamiattugut.*]

In moving toward healing, reconciliation and resolution of the sad legacy of Indian residential schools, the implementation of the Indian residential schools settlement agreement began on September 19, 2007. Years of work by survivors, communities and aboriginal organizations culminated in an agreement that gives us a new beginning and an opportunity to move forward together in partnership.

Statements by Ministers

●(1525)

A cornerstone of the settlement agreement is the Indian residential schools truth and reconciliation commission. This commission represents a unique opportunity to educate all Canadians on the Indian residential schools system. It will be a positive step in forging a new relationship between aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, a relationship based on the knowledge of our shared history, a respect for each other and a desire to move forward with a renewed understanding that strong families, strong communities and vibrant cultures and traditions will contribute to a stronger Canada for all of us.

God bless all of you. God bless our land.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today, Canada comes face to face with some of the darkest chapters of its history.

Forced assimilation of aboriginal peoples was carried out through the residential schools system, a system, sadly, older than Confederation itself: schools aimed at “killing the Indian in the child” and eradicating aboriginal identity; schools built on the removal of children from their families and communities; schools designed to rip out of children their aboriginal identity, culture, beliefs and language.

[Translation]

It was a dehumanizing system that resulted in the worst kinds of abuse.

[English]

Government policy destroyed the fabric of family in first nations, Métis and Inuit communities. Parents and children were made to feel worthless. Parents and grandparents were given no choice. Their children were stolen from them.

[Translation]

And only today are we starting to measure the devastating costs of these terrible policies.

[English]

Today we live in a reality created by the residential schools system, a present that is haunted by this tragic and painful heritage from those first nations, Métis and Inuit children, from their families and their communities, a dark and painful heritage that all Canadians must accept as a part of our history.

For too long, Canadian governments chose denial over truth, and when confronted with the weight of truth, chose silence. For too long, Canadian governments refused to acknowledge their direct role in creating the residential schools system and perpetrating their dark and insidious goal of wiping out aboriginal identity and culture. For too long, Canadian governments chose to ignore the consequences of this tragedy instead of trying to understand them so that the suffering of first nations, Métis and Inuit communities continues to this day.

Let me quote the damning verdict of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:

With very few exceptions, neither senior departmental officials nor churchmen nor members of Parliament raised their voices against the assumptions that underlay the [residential schools] system or its abusive character. And, of course, the memory

did not and has not faded. It has persisted, festered and become a sorrowful monument—

●(1530)

[Translation]

Today, we lay the first stone in building a new monument, a monument dedicated to truth, reconciliation and a better future.

[English]

Today, we, representatives of the Canadian people, apologize to those who survived residential schools and to those who died as a result of the laws enacted by previous governments and parliaments. By speaking directly to survivors and victims today on the floor of the House of Commons, we apologize to those who died waiting for these words to be spoken and these wrongs acknowledged.

Successive Canadian governments and various churches were complicit in the mental, physical and sexual abuse of thousands of aboriginal children through the residential schools system. As the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, a party that was in government for more than 70 years in the 20th century, I acknowledge our role and our shared responsibility in this tragedy. I am deeply sorry. I apologize.

[Translation]

I am sorry that Canada attempted to eradicate your identity and culture by taking you away from your families when you were children and by building a system to punish you for who you were.

To first nations, Inuit and Métis, mothers and fathers, I am so very sorry we took away your children. I am sorry we did not value you as parents. I am sorry we did not trust and respect you.

[English]

Today's apology is about a past that should have been completely different. But it must be also about the future. It must be about collective reconciliation and fundamental changes.

It must be about moving forward together, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, into a future based on respect. It is about trying to find in each of us some of the immense courage that we see in the eyes of those who have survived.

It is about being inspired by the determination of survivors like National Chief Phil Fontaine and Billy Blackwater who had the courage to speak out and pursue justice. It is about building on the work of former first nations member of Parliament Gary Merasty, whose motion calling on the government to apologize to survivors of residential schools was unanimously adopted by members of Parliament on May 1, 2007.

●(1535)

[Translation]

If we are to succeed, we need to be firmly committed to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Justice Harry LaForme, which is responsible for investigating all aspects of the residential school system in Canada.

Statements by Ministers

This means that we will have to listen to testimony from victims of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. This means that we will have to understand why and how Canada let residential schools cause deaths and spread illness, tuberculosis and pneumonia. This also means that we will have to get to the bottom of what really happened to the many children who disappeared into unmarked graves.

This means giving a voice to those who were silenced by Canada. This means giving a name to those whose identities were erased. This means showing our respect to those we humiliated. This means understanding the pain of the parents and families who were abandoned and, as a result of our actions, destroyed forever.

We must listen carefully to the victims who testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and we must be prepared to hear the commission recount a very shameful collective past. We must together, as a nation, face the truth to ensure that never again do we have to apologize to another generation, and that never again is such a tragedy allowed to happen.

[*English*]

I say this as I think of the survivors I met last night. One woman remembers clearly her early days growing up in an isolated community with her family. At age seven, her father took her by canoe to a residential school. She has great memories of life with her parents and siblings up to that day. Yet, she has no memory of the years she spent at the residential school. She survived by erasing all memory of the harsh treatment she endured.

Another survivor, Marion Ironquill-Meadmore, talked about the 10 years she spent in a church-run institution. The first lesson she was taught was that her parents were not worthy. After 10 years, she left the school feeling lost in both the aboriginal and non-aboriginal worlds, ill-equipped to return to the traditional lifestyle of her community, and yet never feeling at home elsewhere.

Reconciliation will require a commitment from Canadian society for action. This means ensuring that all aboriginal Canadians, first nations, Inuit and Métis alike, share in the bounty and opportunity of this country. This means ensuring that we hear the voices of first nations, Métis and Inuit people in their own languages, and that these aboriginal voices and languages continue to enrich the cultural heritage of the world.

We cannot be intimidated by the scale of the challenge or discouraged by the failures of the past. We owe it to all our children to pass along an even better country than we inherited from our parents and we will not do so as long as aboriginal peoples continue to be left behind.

Four years after the conclusion of the five year Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Canada will mark the 150th anniversary of Confederation. On that anniversary, it is my sincere hope that aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples in this country will fulfill the dream voiced in the very building 60 years ago by decorated aboriginal veteran Thomas Prince, a dream of first nations, Inuit and Métis people and non-aboriginal Canadians forging a new and lasting relationship. He said in his own words, "so that they can trust each other and...can walk side by side and face this world having faith and confidence in one another".

Until that day, we humbly offer our apology as the first step on the path to reconciliation and healing.

Merci. Thank you. *Meegwetch. Ekosi. Nakurmiik.*

● (1540)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to be here to witness—at last—the Canadian government's apology to the first nations, Métis and Inuit people who were victims of federally funded residential schools.

Nearly 150,000 people have waited their whole lives for this day of truth and reconciliation; 90,000 of them are still with us. These 90,000 are true survivors. Over 100 years ago, the Bryce report revealed that the mortality rate in residential schools was close to 25%. In the Old Sun's residential school in Alberta, the death rate was as high as 47%. That is why I consider these former students to be survivors.

These 150,000 people were abducted from their mothers and fathers. They were separated from their sisters and brothers. They were forcibly uprooted from their communities and their traditional cultures.

For those who cannot imagine the impact that residential schools had on aboriginal peoples, picture a small village, a small community. Now picture all of its children, gone. No more children between 7 and 16 playing in the lanes or the woods, filling the hearts of their elders with their laughter and joy. Imagine the ever-present fear of watching their children disappear when they reached school age.

Rumours abounded about what happened to the children. All these years later, it is still horrifying to think of these things. Children were torn from their parents' arms to be assimilated. They were taken away and raised by people who had but one goal: to "kill the Indian in the child". Forced to unlearn their languages, these children could no longer communicate with their own parents. All of these things really happened, and they are a part of our collective history.

Between 1934 and 1962, six residential schools were established in Quebec: two in Cree territory, one in Algonquin territory, one in Attikamek territory and two in Innu territory. Just like residential schools everywhere, these ones left wounds caused by abuse, ill treatment and neglect.

Roméo Saganash, himself a survivor of residential schools, told me the story of his brother, who died within a year of entering the school. His family never found out why he died, and it took 40 years—40 long years—for his mother to find the place where he had been buried. It is impossible to erase these indelible scars, impossible to heal the souls shattered by these memories.

Yet this apology is necessary. It is necessary but not sufficient. As Roméo Saganash says, "An apology, once made, is only as good as the actions that come after it." For those who lost their childhood in the residential schools, the best apology consists of real action that will allow their children and grandchildren to hope in the future. This means that the government must take real action now.

Statements by Ministers

For example, the government is not spending enough to help aboriginal children reach their full potential. For example, when problems occur that affect children, the government recommends that the children be taken out of their community for their own protection. In a way, the government is repeating the mistakes of the past.

For more than a year, we and the first nations of Quebec have been calling for more money for first nations so that children can remain in their communities. Does the government not think that enough aboriginal children were removed from their communities in the past?

Here is another example. The Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador has been waiting for over a year and a half for a response from the government so that it can implement its “10,000 possibilities” project.

• (1545)

This 10-year plan is aimed at building 10,000 housing units, helping 10,000 young people graduate from high school and creating 10,000 jobs.

If the Prime Minister's apology is sincere, let him take real action. We will support him.

Finally, there is this disgrace: the government's refusal to endorse the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I am very proud that the Bloc Québécois has given clear support to this draft declaration. By agreeing to endorse the declaration, the Prime Minister can send a clear message to aboriginal peoples that he has learned from past mistakes and is making a solemn promise to the victims that their children and grandchildren will have respect and dignity.

I am speaking to you, the aboriginal representatives present on the floor of the House and watching from the gallery. All the members of the Bloc Québécois join me in reaching out to you so that, together, we can build a better future for our children and grandchildren.

That requires a relationship of mutual respect that can only be forged between nations.

On behalf of the Bloc Québécois, I extend a sincere apology for the past, and I invite us to build the future together, as nations.

• (1550)

[*English*]

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, I rise in this House to add the voice of the New Democratic Party to the profound apology being offered humbly to first nations, Métis and Inuit on behalf of the Canadian people.

I wish to acknowledge and honour the elders who are with us here today and are participating in this ceremony, the length and breadth of this land at this very moment.

[*Translation*]

I wish to pay tribute to the first nations, Métis and Inuit leaders who are here with us and to all of those who are guiding their communities through this difficult, emotional, momentous and hope-filled day.

[*English*]

I wish to recognize the children, here in this chamber today and watching at home in gatherings across the land, who also bear witness to the legacy of the residential schools.

Most importantly, I want to say to the survivors of the residential schools, some of whom have joined us here today, we are sorry for what has taken place.

[*Translation*]

Today we mark a very significant moment for Canada. It is the moment when we, as a Parliament, as a country, take responsibility for one of the most shameful periods in our history. It is the moment for us to finally apologize. It is the moment when we will start to build a shared future, a future based on equality and built on mutual respect and truth.

[*English*]

It was this Parliament that enacted, 151 years ago, the racist legislation that established the residential schools. This Parliament chose to treat first nations, Métis and Inuit people as not equally human. It set out to kill the Indian in the child. That choice was horribly wrong. It led to incredible suffering. It denied first nations, Métis and Inuit the basic freedom to choose how to live their lives. For those wrongs that we have committed, we are truly sorry.

Our choice denied their children the love and nurturing of their own families and communities.

[*Translation*]

It denied children the pride and self-esteem that come from learning one's heritage, language, culture and traditions. In addition to these wounds, they experienced our neglect, inadequate health care, mistreatment and sexual abuse, all of which harmed so many children and even killed some.

Because of Canada's policies, those who survived learned to be ashamed of who they are.

For these terrible actions, we are sorry.

The legacy of residential schools casts a shadow over our country. It tore apart families and communities for generations, and this continues to be felt, and felt very personally.

• (1555)

[*English*]

Nearly every first nations person of my age that I have met is a survivor. Many are also the children of survivors.

[*Translation*]

One of those children told me about her mother, a Cree from northern Quebec, who had 12 of her 14 children taken from her. Her brother died in a residential school, but their mother was never told why or how. She was never told where her son was buried. She did not have the right to pay tribute to his life or his death. She could not mourn or say her final goodbyes to her child, as every mother should.

Statements by Ministers

[English]

Many years later, her daughter was working in northern Ontario and she happened to mention the story of her brother to a local. He said, "I know where your brother is buried". They went to the graveyard and he pointed to a spot beside a headstone, and said, "Your brother is buried here, unmarked".

The pain inflicted by the residential schools is deeply felt by these children, who were forced to attend, and by the parents who had their children stolen from them. It is still felt in first nations, Métis and Inuit communities across the country.

[Translation]

The destruction of family and community ties, the psychological wounds, the loss of language and culture, and substandard education all led to widespread poverty, which remains rampant in first nations, Métis and Inuit communities today.

[English]

The horrors of the residential schools continue to harm even those who never experienced them personally.

There can be no equivocation. The laws consciously enacted in this House put the residential schools into place and kept them going for many years.

It is in this House that we must start the process of reconciliation. That is why we are here together today and why we are here together to say we are sorry. This is a crucial first step.

However, reconciliation must be built through positive steps that show respect and restore trust. This apology must not be an end; it must be a beginning.

[Translation]

What is needed is a commitment to never again allow such a travesty of justice and transgression against equality to occur.

It begins with officially recognizing the rights and cultures of first nations, Métis and Inuit peoples by signing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

[English]

But reconciliation also means that, as a Parliament and as a country, we must take action to address the terrible inequality faced by first nations, Métis and Inuit communities. We can start by restoring the nation-to-nation relationship between the Government of Canada and first nations, Métis and the Inuit.

Even as we speak here today, thousands of aboriginal children are without proper schools or clean water, adequate food, their own bed, good health care, safety, comfort, land and rights.

We can no longer throw up our hands and say, "There's nothing we can do". Taking responsibility and working toward reconciliation means saying, "We must act together to resolve this".

Let us reverse the horrific and shameful statistics afflicting aboriginal populations, now: the high rates of poverty, suicide, the poor or having no education, overcrowding, crumbling housing, and unsafe drinking water. Let us make sure that all survivors of the

residential schools receive the recognition and compensation that is due to them.

• (1600)

[Translation]

We must make a serious, collective commitment. All of us together—first nations, Métis and Inuit, Canadians who have been here for generations and new Canadians as well—must build a future based on fairness, equality and respect.

Meegwetch. Ekosi. Nakurmiik.

The Speaker: Pursuant to order made earlier today, the House will now resolve itself into committee of the whole. I will now leave the chair.

[English]

(House in committee of the whole to recognize representatives of the Assembly of First Nations, Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Métis National Council and Native Women's Association of Canada, Mr. Peter Milliken in the chair)

[And the representatives being present in the chamber:]

The Speaker: I call upon Phil Fontaine, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

Chief Phil Fontaine (National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations): Prime Minister, Chief Justice, members of the House, elders, survivors, Canadians: for our parents, our grandparents, great grandparents, indeed for all of the generations which have preceded us, this day testifies to nothing less than the achievement of the impossible.

This morning our elders held a condolence ceremony for those who never heard an apology, never received compensation, yet courageously fought assimilation so that we could witness this day.

Together we remember and honour them for it was they who suffered the most as they witnessed generation after generation of their children taken from their families' love and guidance. For the generations that will follow us, we bear witness today in this House that our survival as first nations peoples in this land is affirmed forever.

Therefore, the significance of this day is not just about what has been but, equally important, what is to come. Never again will this House consider us the Indian problem just for being who we are.

We heard the Government of Canada take full responsibility for this dreadful chapter in our shared history. We heard the Prime Minister declare that this will never happen again. Finally, we heard Canada say it is sorry.

Brave survivors, through the telling of their painful stories, have stripped white supremacy of its authority and legitimacy. The irresistibility of speaking truth to power is real.

Today is not the result of a political game. Instead, it is something that shows the righteousness and importance of our struggle. We know we have many difficult issues to handle. There are many fights still to be fought.

Statements by Ministers

What happened today signifies a new dawn in the relationship between us and the rest of Canada. We are and always have been an indispensable part of the Canadian identity.

Our peoples, our history, and our present being are the essence of Canada. The attempts to erase our identities hurt us deeply, but it also hurt all Canadians and impoverished the character of this nation.

We must not falter in our duty now. Emboldened by this spectacle of history, it is possible to end our racial nightmare together. The memories of residential schools sometimes cut like merciless knives at our souls. This day will help us to put that pain behind us.

But it signifies something even more important: a respectful and, therefore, liberating relationship between us and the rest of Canada.

Together we can achieve the greatness our country deserves. The apology today is founded upon, more than anything else, the recognition that we all own our own lives and destinies, the only true foundation for a society where peoples can flourish.

•(1605)

We must now capture a new spirit and vision to meet the challenges of the future.

As a great statesman once said, we are all part of one “garment of destiny”. The differences between us are not blood or colour and “the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us”. The “common road of hope” will bring us to reconciliation more than any words, laws or legal claims ever could.

We still have to struggle, but now we are in this together.

I reach out to all Canadians today in this spirit of reconciliation.

Meegwetch.

•(1610)

[*Translation*]

The Speaker: I now call on Patrick Brazeau, the National Chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples.

[*English*]

Chief Patrick Brazeau (National Chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples): Members of the House, it is indeed an honour and a pleasure to be here witnessing this historic day.

Not only is it a historic day, but it is a positive step forward in the history of this great country of ours.

I would like to thank the Prime Minister for his leadership, and for something that none of his predecessors has done, and that is to do the humane, moral and right thing.

Thank you.

More importantly, this day is about the survivors and those of you in the gallery. I am proud to be here on this floor and representing some of you.

I want you to know that even though you have attended residential schools, in my heart and in my soul you are true role models. Because of your resiliency, your courage and your strength, you have made me the strong aboriginal Algonquin Canadian that I am today, as you have others across this great land of ours.

Surely in a country that the entire world knows because of its great opportunities and hope, surely that belongs to those from whom it was taken so long ago. Today for me personally, not only is it a great day to be an aboriginal person or an Algonquin, but I am proud to be an aboriginal Canadian.

Meegwetch.

The Speaker: Order, please. I now recognize Mary Simon, the President of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

Ms. Mary Simon (President Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami): Mr. Prime Minister:

[*Ms. Simon spoke in Inuktitut*]

[*English*]

Mr. Prime Minister, I spoke first in my Inuit language because I wanted to illustrate to you that our language and culture are still strong.

I have to face you to say this, Mr. Prime Minister, because it comes from the bottom of my heart. It took great courage for you to express your sorrow and apology to our people, the Inuit, to first nations, and to Métis, and we thank you very much for it.

[*Ms. Simon spoke in Inuktitut*]

[*English*]

I am one of those people who have dreamed for this day. There have been times in this long journey when I despaired that this would ever happen.

However, after listening to the Prime Minister and the leaders of the political parties, I am filled with hope and compassion for my fellow aboriginal Canadians as I stand among them here with you and your fellow ministers today, Mr. Prime Minister.

I am also filled with optimism that this action by the Government of Canada and the generosity in the words chosen to convey this apology will help all of us mark the end of this dark period in our collective history as a nation.

Let us not be lulled into an impression that when the sun rises tomorrow morning, the pain and scars will miraculously be gone. They will not.

But a new day has dawned, a new day heralded by a commitment to reconciliation and building a new relationship with Inuit, Métis and first nations.

Let us now join forces with the common goal of working together to ensure that this apology opens the door to a new chapter in our lives as aboriginal peoples and in our place in Canada.

There is much hard work to be done. We need the help and support of all thoughtful Canadians and our governments to rebuild strong and healthy families and communities.

This can be achieved only when dignity, confidence and respect for traditional values and human rights once again become part of our daily lives and are mirrored in our relationships with governments and other Canadians.

Statements by Ministers

I stand here today ready to work with you, as Inuit have always done, to craft new solutions and new arrangements based on mutual respect and mutual responsibility.

Thank you. May wisdom and compassion guide our efforts.

• (1615)

[*Translation*]

The Speaker: Order, please. I now call on Clem Chartier, President of the Métis National Council.

[*English*]

Mr. Clem Chartier (President of the Métis National Council): Prime Minister, members of Parliament, friends, and Canadian citizens, it is a great day.

On behalf of the Métis Nation, I want to express a deep sense of thanks and gratitude to the Prime Minister today for offering this most sincere apology to those people who have experienced the Indian residential schools system.

It has been a long time coming, but it has been well received. I hope and I pray that it will resonate in the communities of those people who have been affected.

The Prime Minister and the Minister of Indian Affairs know that although I am very sincere and happy, perhaps, that this is happening, I also feel deeply conflicted, because there is still misunderstanding about the situation of the Métis Nation, our history and our contemporary situation.

We have had serious discussions with the Minister of Indian Affairs. We have agreed, and I believe the Prime Minister is supportive, that we will, based on this apology today, address those issues that are outstanding to our people, the Métis. I believe those statements made today about the dark days of the assimilation policies and I believe those actions that took place in this House will be addressed and hopefully corrected in the future.

I really do feel conflicted, because I am one of the survivors of a Métis residential school, which was no different from Indian residential schools except for the question of who paid. As for who paid, it was those young people who went there, people like Don, people like me. We paid.

I hope and I do believe sincerely in the words of the minister that we will address this. I said that the Métis Nation would be here to share this day with those people who have waited for so long. We want to celebrate, and we do celebrate, with them, with you, with all Canadians, because this is a day for all Canadians. It is a day for us to move forward.

I know deep in my heart that the party leaders and the Prime Minister who spoke today spoke with sincerity, not with the theatrics of the Commons. That has been set aside. I can see that. I can feel that. I know that it is deep and it is real.

Finally, Prime Minister, the Métis Nation of western Canada, which has been excluded from many things by the workings of this House and its policies, wants in.

Thank you.

• (1620)

The Speaker: Order, please. I now call on Beverley Jacobs, the President of the Native Women's Association of Canada.

Ms. Beverley Jacobs (President of the Native Women's Association of Canada):

• (1625)

[*Ms. Jacobs spoke in Mohawk language*]

What I said in my Mohawk language is, "Greetings of peace to you". My nation is Mohawk of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Bear Clan, and my real name is Gowehgyuseh, which means "She is visiting".

I am here to represent the Native Women's Association of Canada and the women that we represent have a statement. It is about the respect of aboriginal women in this country.

Prior to the residential schools system, prior to colonization, the women in our communities were very well respected and honoured for the role that they have in our communities as being the life givers, being the caretakers of the spirit that we bring to mother earth. We have been given those responsibilities to look after our children and to bring that spirit into this physical world.

Residential schools caused so much harm to that respect and to that honour. There were ceremonies for young men and for young women that were taken away for generations in residential schools. Now we have our language still, we have our ceremonies, we have our elders, and we have to revitalize those ceremonies and the respect for our people not only within Canadian society but even within our own peoples.

I want to say that I come here speaking from my heart, because two generations ago, my grandmother, being a Mohawk woman, was beaten, sexually beaten and physically beaten, for being a Mohawk woman. She did not pass that on. She did not pass it on to my mother and her siblings, and so that matriarchal system that we have was directly affected. Luckily, I was raised in a community where it has been revitalized by all of our mothers.

I want to say that as mothers, we teach our boys and our girls, our men and our women equally. That is what I am here to say, that although it may be the Native Women's Association, we also represent men and women because that is our responsibility. It is not just about women's issues, it is about making sure that we have strong nations again. That is what I am here to say.

We have given thanks to you for your apology. I have to also give you credit for standing up. I did not see any other governments before today come forward and apologize, so I do thank you for that. But in return, the Native Women's Association wants respect.

• (1630)

I have just one last thing to say. To all of the leaders of the Liberals, the Bloc and NDP, thank you, as well, for your words because now it is about our responsibilities today, the decisions that we make today and how they will affect seven generations from now.

Statements by Ministers

My ancestors did the same seven generations ago and they tried hard to fight against you because they knew what was happening. They knew what was coming, but we have had so much impact from colonization and that is what we are dealing with today.

Women have taken the brunt of it all.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here at this moment in time to talk about those realities that we are dealing with today.

What is it that this government is going to do in the future to help our people? Because we are dealing with major human rights violations that have occurred to many generations: my language, my culture and my spirituality. I know that I want to transfer those to my children and my grandchildren, and their children, and so on.

What is going to be provided? That is my question. I know that is the question from all of us. That is what we would like to continue to work on, in partnership.

Nia:wen. Thank you.

The Speaker: Pursuant to the order made earlier today the committee will now rise and I do leave the chair.

I now invite hon. members to rise while our distinguished guests leave the chamber.

[*Translation*]

It being 4:35 p.m., pursuant to order made on Tuesday, June 10, 2008, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 4:35 p.m.)

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