

# The Survivors Speak

A Report of the  
Truth and Reconciliation  
Commission of Canada



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# Preface

**O**n June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology to the former students of Canada’s Indian residential school system, calling it a “sad chapter in our history.” That chapter is part of a broader story: one in which the Canadian government gained control over Aboriginal land and peoples, disrupted Aboriginal governments and economies, and sought to repress Aboriginal cultures and spiritual practices. The government, often in partnership with the country’s major religious bodies, sought to ‘civilize’ and Christianize, and, ultimately, assimilate Aboriginal people into Canadian society. The deputy minister of Indian Affairs predicted in 1920 that in a century, thanks to the work of these schools, Aboriginal people would cease to exist as an identifiable cultural group in Canada.

Residential schools were seen as a central element in this project. For their part, Aboriginal people saw the value in schooling. It was at their insistence, for example, that many Treaties required government to provide teachers and establish reserve schools.

The decision to invest in residential schools was based on a belief that the cultural and spiritual transformation that the government and churches sought to bring about in Aboriginal people could be most effectively accomplished in institutions that broke the bonds between parent and child.



Ojibway woman with child in carrier basket. 1858. Library and Archives Canada/Credit: Humphrey Lloyd Hime/National Archives of Canada fonds/C-000728.



The Roman Catholic mission and residential school in Beauval, Saskatchewan. Deschâtelets Archives.

When Canada was created in 1867, the churches were already operating a small number of boarding schools for Aboriginal people. In the coming years, Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries established missions and small boarding schools throughout the West. The relationship between the government and the churches was formalized in 1883 when the federal government decided to establish three large residential schools in western Canada.

According to the Indian Affairs annual report for 1930, there were eighty residential schools in operation across the country.<sup>1</sup> The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement of 2006 provided compensation to students who attended 139 residential schools and residences.<sup>2</sup> The federal government has estimated that at least 150,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students passed through these schools.<sup>3</sup>

The assault on Aboriginal identity usually began the moment the child took the first step across the school's threshold. Braided hair (which often had spiritual significance) was cut, homemade traditional clothing was exchanged for a school uniform, Aboriginal names were replaced with Euro-Canadian ones (and a number), and the freedom of life in their own communities was foregone for the regimen of an institution in which every activity



Students at the Roman Catholic school in Fort George, Québec, 1939. Deschâtelets Archives.

from morning to night was scheduled. Males and females, and siblings, were separated, and, with some exceptions, parental visits were discouraged and controlled.

Hastily and cheaply built schools often had poor or non-existent sanitation and ventilation systems. With few infirmaries in which students with contagious diseases could be isolated, epidemics could quickly spread through a school with deadly results. Because schools were funded on a per capita basis, administrators often violated health guidelines and admitted children who were infected with such deadly and contagious diseases as tuberculosis. Often, parents were not informed if their children became sick, died, or ran away.

For the first half of the twentieth century, the schools were on what was termed the “half-day system,” under which half a day was spent in the classroom and the other half in vocational training. For the boys, this was largely restricted to farming and the crafts that a farmer might have need of, while the girls were trained in the domestic sciences. In reality, this was not so much training as child labour, undertaken to subsidize the ongoing operation of the schools.



Boys cutting wood at the Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories, school. Canada, Department of Interior, Library and Archives Canada, PA-048021.

The government mandated that English (or in Québec, French) be the language of instruction. And, although some missionaries had learned Aboriginal languages and provided religious instruction in those languages, in many schools, students were punished for speaking their language.

For most of the system's history, the federal government had no clear policy on discipline. Students were not only strapped and humiliated, but in some schools, they were also handcuffed, manacled, beaten, locked in cellars and other makeshift jails, or displayed in stocks. Overcrowding and a high student-staff ratio meant that even those children who were not subject to physical discipline grew up in an atmosphere of neglect.

From the beginning, many Aboriginal people were resistant to the residential school system. Missionaries found it difficult to convince parents to send their children to residential schools, and children ran away, often at great personal risk and with tragic outcome.



Students and staff working in the kitchen in the Edmonton, Alberta, school. The United Church of Canada Archives, 93.049P885N.

Although the issue of sexual abuse was largely unreported during the years in which the schools were in operation, over the past twenty-five years, it has become clear that this was a serious problem in some schools.

For most of the history of residential schools, teachers' wages in those schools were far below those offered to other teachers, making the recruitment and retention of teachers an ongoing issue. Although many remarkable people devoted their lives to these institutions, the churches did not require the same level of teacher training as was expected by the Canadian public school system.

Many students have positive memories of their experiences of residential schools and acknowledge the skills they acquired, the beneficial impacts of the recreational and sporting activities in which they engaged, and the friendships they made. Some students went to public schools so they could graduate and attend post-secondary institutions and develop distinguished careers. But, for most students, academic success was elusive and



One of the most northerly schools was at Coppermine in the Northwest Territories. General Synod Archives, Anglican Church of Canada P2004-09-404.

they left as soon as they could. On return to their home communities, they often felt isolated from their families and their culture. They had lost their language and had not been provided with the skills to follow traditional economic pursuits, or with the skills needed to succeed in the Euro-Canadian economy. Worst of all, they did not have any experience of family life or parenting.

By the 1940s, federal officials concluded that the system was both expensive and ineffective. As a result, the federal government began to substantially increase the number of on-reserve day schools and, in the 1950s, to enter into agreements with provincial governments and local school boards to have Aboriginal students educated in public schools. This policy of slowly winding down the residential school system was coupled with an expansion of the system in the Canadian North from 1955 onwards. Once again, children were separated from families for lengthy periods, taught by people who had no understanding of their language or culture, and housed in crowded and makeshift facilities.



Williams Lake, British Columbia, school hockey team. Museum of the Cariboo Chilcotin.

The partnership with the churches remained in place until 1969 and, although most of the schools had closed by the 1980s, the last federally supported residential schools remained in operation until the late 1990s.

In the 1980s, various members of Canadian society began to undertake a reassessment of the residential school experience. Starting in 1986, Canadian churches began to issue apologies for attempting to impose European culture and values on Aboriginal people. Apologies specific to the residential schools were to follow in the 1990s. Former students began to speak out publicly about their experiences, leading to both criminal charges against some sexual abusers and the launching of class-action lawsuits against the churches and the federal government. The cases were eventually resolved in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history, which was reached in 2006 and came into effect in 2007.

That agreement provided for a payment to all former students who resided in federally supported residential schools, additional compensation for those who suffered serious personal harm, a contribution to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, support for



commemoration projects, the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and the provision of mental-health supports for all participants in Settlement Agreement initiatives.

As part of its work, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada provided former students—the Survivors of residential schools—with an opportunity to provide a statement on their experience of residential schooling. This volume of excerpts from those statements is being published as a part of the Commission’s final report.

At the beginning of the Commission’s work, we questioned the use of the word “Survivor.” It seemed to be a limiting, almost pejorative word. We saw it as referring to someone who was “just getting by,” or “beaten down.” We endeavoured to find an alternative, more suitable, word to ascribe to those who came out of the Indian residential schools.

However, over time, we have developed a whole new respect for the word. In “Invictus” (the title means “invincible” or “undefeated” in Latin), the English poet William Ernest Henley (1849–1903) wrote these words:

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

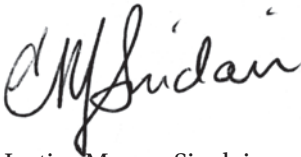
In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.

A Survivor is not just someone who “made it through” the schools, or “got by” or was “making do.” A Survivor is a person who persevered against and overcame adversity. The word came to mean someone who emerged victorious, though not unscathed, whose head was “bloody but unbowed.” It referred to someone who had taken all that could be thrown at them and remained standing at the end. It came to mean someone who could legitimately say “I am still here!” For that achievement, Survivors deserve our highest respect. But, for that achievement, we also owe them the debt of doing the right thing. Reconciliation is the right thing to do, coming out of this history.

In this volume, Survivors speak of their pain, loneliness, and suffering, and of their accomplishments. While this is a difficult story, it is also a story of courage and endurance. The first step in any process of national reconciliation requires us all to attend to these voices, which have been silenced for far too long. We encourage all Canadians to do so.



Justice Murray Sinclair

CHAIR, TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA



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