

Truth and Reconciliation Commission urges Canada to confront 'cultural genocide' of residential schools ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada needs to move from "apology to action" if reconciliation with Aboriginal Peoples is to succeed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission says in its landmark report, which includes 94 recommendations for change in policies, programs and the "way we talk to, and about, each other."

The summary of the final report, released today after years of hearings and testimony from thousands of residential school survivors and many others, makes many bold and potentially costly recommendations — not just to the different levels of government, but to schools, societies, churches and aboriginal governments.

The goal is to repair the relationship between aboriginal people and the rest of Canada.

The recommendations include the creation of a National Centre and Council for Truth and Reconciliation and the drafting of new and revised legislation for education, child welfare and aboriginal languages.

CBC News previously reported some of the recommendations — including the implementation of the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples — during an interview with Justice Murray Sinclair, the head of the commission, on The National on Monday night.

The commission was launched with a mandate to explore the history and legacy of the residential school system, and the process has faced hurdles — including the replacement of commission members and battles with the government over documents.

Tuesday's full release comes after the commission travelled the country, listening to six years of testimony from nearly 7,000 witnesses. The more than 360-page document provides some stories from survivors, including tales of children taken from parents, siblings separated and abuse and neglect at residential schools.

From the outset, the long-awaited summary report blasts more than 100 years of Canada's aboriginal policy, saying in the introduction that the "establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as 'cultural genocide.'"

Speaking to CBC's chief correspondent Peter Mansbridge before the findings were released, Sinclair said the document is not just addressed to government: "Many of our elements, many of our recommendations and many of the calls to action are actually aimed at Canadian society."

Below are summaries of some of the policy recommendations made. Read the full summary report on the TRC website.

HEALTH: An acknowledgement that the current state of aboriginal health is a direct result of previous government policies and the implementation of health-care rights for aboriginal people.

EDUCATION: The creation and funding for new aboriginal education legislation, which protects languages and cultures and closes the education gap for aboriginal people.

JUSTICE: A commitment to eliminate the overrepresentation of aboriginal people in custody and in trouble with the law, along with the collection and publication of data on criminal victimization of aboriginal people.

PUBLIC INQUIRY: The creation of a public inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls.

MONITORING: The creation of a national council for reconciliation, which would monitor and report on reconciliation progress, as well as the introduction of an annual State of Aboriginal Peoples report delivered by the prime minister.

LANGUAGE: The government is asked to implement an Aboriginal Languages Act and appoint a language commissioner in order to preserve and promote it.

FUNDING: The report calls for \$10 million over seven years from the federal government for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

COMMEMORATION: The creation of a statutory holiday to honour survivors, their families and communities – and to ensure "public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process."

MEMORIALS: The report asks for funding for memorials, community events and museums, including a museum reconciliation commemoration program, to be launched in time for Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology to former residential school students in 2008, saying the "policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country."

More apologies are needed, the summary report says, calling on the Pope and clergy leaders to apologize to survivors for the abuse suffered in Catholic-run residential schools.

But apologies alone are not enough, the authors say, noting that survivors and others who have spoken have told the commission that for "reconciliation to thrive in the coming years, Canada must move from apology to action."

Reconciliation, the report says, is not a "one-time event," but is instead a "multi-generational journey that involves all Canadians" in schools and beyond.

Closing the gap

The recommendations also address the disparity between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people and push the government and other organizations to close this gap.

The summary report particularly focuses on the gap in education, with the commission noting the disparity in both aboriginal education funding and in the performance and achievement of aboriginal students. Their recommendations task the federal government with developing a joint strategy to eliminate this discrepancy and present annual reports on progress.

"What we have said to government leaders is that education is what got us into this mess, the use of education, at least, in terms of residential schools," Sinclair told CBC News Monday night ahead of the release. "But education is the key to reconciliation, because we need to look at the way we are educating children."

"That's why we say this is not an aboriginal problem, it's a Canadian problem."

Sinclair said he wants to see change to teaching in public and aboriginal schools to make sure people understand the "full and proper history of each indigenous group and the territories in which they live."

More funding from the federal government is also needed to support aboriginal students who wish to go to post-secondary schooling, the authors say.

The recommendations included in Tuesday's report are non-binding – the government doesn't have to act, but the commission is pushing for the implementation of its recommendations and urging Canadians to do the same.

"Reconciliation is going to take hard work. People of all walks of life and at all levels of society will need to be willingly engaged," the authors say in the closing notes, where the authors thank survivors who "in tears and with anger, shared their pain."

"They came forward to share their stories, not just to ease their burden, but also to try to make things better for their children and their grandchildren."

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