

Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Residential Schools Revisited

Aboriginal judge, Justice Harry LaForme, has been appointed to head the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission aimed at providing a national forum for coming to terms with the abuse of aboriginal children in residential schools.[1]

The panel will hold hearings across the country, helping survivors, church representatives, teachers, and others who were involved to better understand the effects of their participation, and to tell their stories. According to Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl, those who participate in the Commission will not be immune from criminal responsibility[2].

Starting in the middle of the 19th century and extending into the 1970's, approximately 150,000 aboriginal, Inuit and Métis children were forcibly taken from their families and placed in Christian schools.[3] Funding from the federal government supported the schools' efforts in assimilating the children through suppression of their culture, spiritual beliefs and language. Many students reported experiences of sexual, physical and psychological abuse[4].

In 2006, the federal government approved the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement of approximately \$2 billion dollars, which will be divided amongst 86,000 people (the estimated average per recipient is \$28,000).[5] To date, over 1.3 billion in compensation has been claimed.[6] The Commission is considered wholly independent and forms part of the commitments included in the out-of-court settlement. Additionally, it offers unhindered access to government archives.[7]

In June 2008, the federal government plans to deliver a formal apology in the House of Commons for the abuse suffered. The Commission will be formally established on June 1st, 2008 after the appointment of two panel members to work with Justice LaForme. The Commission will last for five years and its estimated cost is \$60 million.[8]

[1] CBC News, "LaForme to lead residential schools commission" (28 April 2008), Online: <<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/04/28/laforme-appointment.html>>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Richard Brennan, "Reconciliation no 'blank slate,' Strahl warns" (29 April 2008) Toronto Star, Online:

<<http://www.thestar.com/News/Canada/article/419396>>

[4] Supra note 1.

[5] Norma Greenway, "Native judge named to lead healing forum" (29 April 2008) National Post, Online:

<<http://www.nationalpost.com/news/canada/story.html?id=478101>>

[6] Supra note 3.

[7] Supra note 5.

[8] Ibid.