Culture As Treatment Symposium

Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health

Ottawa – September 26, 2013

Presentation by
TRC Commissioner
Chief Wilton Littlechild
Belief Statement

For the child taken,
For the parent left behind.

And for the child who came after…
“Earn their bread by...manual labour”
Isolation of children
What were the schools about?

• About children

• Education was important to Indigenous families and leadership, for they wanted their children to be able to participate fully in the new Dominion

• And they saw it as a means to participate as partners in the new relationship that was forming in Canada
What were the Schools about?

• The government attitude was that Indigenous peoples were “uncivilized” and were socially, culturally and intellectually inferior.

• They felt the Indigenous needed to be civilized through education and Christianization.
“In order to educate the children properly we must separate them from their families. Some people may say that this is hard but if we want to civilize them we must do that.”

Public Works Minister Hector Langevin, 1883, Canadian House of Commons.
The Scope of the Commission’s Mandate

- **The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement**
  - Signed in 2007
    - Government of Canada
    - Catholic and Protestant Churches
    - Signatories representing the Residential School Survivors themselves
- **The TRC is authorized and required:**
  - To inform all Canadians about the history and ongoing legacy of the residential schools
  - To give an opportunity to all former students, staff and all those affected by the schools to participate in the telling of that history through national and community events and statement gathering
  - To hold seven national public education and commemorative events as well as regional and community events
  - To collect every record that is relevant to the history and impact of the schools
Scope of Mandate… (continued)

- To conduct original research that builds upon previous research, and to prepare reports based on this work
- To establish a National Research Centre (NRC) that will make accessible to all Canadians all of the statements, research and other materials that have been collected by the Commission
- Last, but most importantly, to guide and inspire a process of healing and reconciliation within Indigenous families and communities, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this country.
Our Mandate is NOT Optional

- It is a court-ordered mandate, a legal obligation involving not only the Commission but the Parties to the Settlement Agreement.
- The largest class-action lawsuit in Canadian history.
- Survivors agreed to set aside $60 million of their compensation fund.
- The Commission to complete its work within five years.
- Mandate ends on July 1, 2014.
What the Commission Has Done So Far to Discharge its Obligation

• At the time the Settlement agreement was signed, approximately 80,000 former students of the Residential Schools listed in the Agreement, still alive – Many were quite elderly

• The Commission has been committed to providing every one the opportunity to create a record of their experience.

• We have collected about 5,200 public and private statements

• Increasingly, we’ve been hearing from the children of Survivors and their children
National Events

• We have held six National Events (Themes)
  • Winnipeg, Inuvik, Halifax, Saskatoon, Montreal & BC

• Two Regional Events
  • Victoria and Whitehorse

• Sixty-nine Community Hearings
  • Significant number of these in the North

• One National Events remain to be held
  • Alberta (Edmonton – March 27-30, 2014)

• Closing Event in Ottawa

• We will have gathered more than 6,000 statements
Missing Children Project

• About 150,000 Indigenous children attended Canada’s residential schools over a period of roughly 150 years
• Thousands of them died at the schools or went missing
• Identified, or discovered details concerning 4,134 children
• Number continues to grow as work on the project continues
A Good Intention Gone Wrong? Or A “National Crime”?
A “National Crime”
A “National Crime”

They came for the children and the parents had no choice

When the nature of the schools were known

They still had no choice
Reconciliation

- Continually emphasize the importance of reconciliation
- About establishing and maintaining a relationship of mutual respect
- Numerous public and private conferences and gatherings with Community, Provincial and National Leaders
- Council of Ministers of Education
- The need to look seriously at curriculum changes of public education
- Teach children appropriately about the history of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada in order to lay the foundation for mutual respect in the future
1951 Prohibitions repealed:

- Potlatch Ban
- Sun Dance and traditional ceremonies
- Ban to raise money to fight land claim cases
- Ban on wearing traditional dress off-reserve without the permission of the Indian Agent

1960 – Right to Vote
Unique aspects of Canada’s TRC:

- Exists because “victims” of harms took action
- Ordered & supervised by Courts, Not Government
- Focus on harms to children…of specific ethnicity
- Period of harms spans most of Canada’s history…almost 150 yrs
- 5-year mandate to record and report IRS history & make recommendations to address legacy of residential schools.
The impact on the Individual

- Loss of Identity (hair, clothing)
- Loss of Language (punishment)
- Loss of Culture (traditional foods, clothing)
- Loss of self-respect (you’re not good, savage, heathen)
- Health and physical well-being compromised
- Poor levels of education (lack of qualified teachers, work 1/2day)
- Lack of respect for education (negative experience)
Lessons Learned: Challenge of Perceived ‘Justice’

Money: ‘Is that all my childhood, my innocence and my identity is worth?’

Rejection and Re-traumatization: ‘They make me remember things I’ve spent my whole life trying to forget…and they still don’t believe me!’

The Perpetrator: ‘Where are the Government and the churches?’… Who is in the room?

The Apology: ‘Was it sincere or just a bunch of words to make the Prime Minister look good?’… Where is the walk behind the talk?
Lessons Learned: Challenge of Public Engagement

No concerted Government effort to inform “the people of Canada” about TRC and their role in it.

Perception of Indian Residential Schools as “indigenous history” rather than as Canadian history.

Government assignment of TRC responsibilities to “Aboriginal Affairs” Department feeds public and government perception of an Aboriginal issue, rather than a Human Rights and Justice issue.

Greater Canadian media reflection of TRC’s in countries such as South Africa than of TRC at home in Canada.

Changing media environment to increasing monopoly by fewer owners with narrowing editorial interests.

Opportunity and unpredictability of social media.
Impact of TRC: Positive Signs

Approx. 4800 voluntary shared experiences to date.
At almost every session we hear someone say:

- *I have never told this to anyone before*
- *I’m “inspired” to speak, by courage and stories of others*
- *I feel so much lighter for setting this down/getting this out*
- *I’m trying to do better with my grand-children*
- *I’m beginning to like me*
- *I don’t feel so alone no*
- *I’ll never forget the past but I don’t need to stay there*
- *I’m learning to forgive myself and others and to move on.*

Approx. 90% tell TRC they have quit drugs and/or alcohol.
Approx. 50% say reconnecting with their culture and identity has been key to healing, or “finding their way home”.
Understanding the legacy

• This is not an Aboriginal problem

• Education is key

• Reconciliation is the goal – that will take the commitment of multiple generations
For the child taken, for the parent left behind.
For the child taken, for the parent left behind.
In the above photo taken by Sid Jones is the Hobbema Hockey team under the direction of Nick Kohlman. The team this season has done very well. They are: Back row, left to right—Dave MacDonald, stick boy; Willie Littlechild, Teddy Hodgson, Joseph Swampy, Raymond Cutknife, George Erminskin, Harry Lightning, George Pipestem, and coach Nick Kohlman. Front row—Floyd Buffalo, Herman Cutknife, Victor Buffalo, goal; Freddie Hodgson, captain; Marvin Littlechild, and Emil Cutknife.
“The treatment of children in Indian Residential Schools is a sad chapter in our history...Today, we recognize this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.”

Prime Minister Stephen Harper
House of Commons, June 11, 2008
Hai! Hai!