BEVERLY JACOBS

RESPONSE TO CANADA'S APOLOGY TO RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SURVIVORS

ON JUNE 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, on behalf of the Canadian government, made a Statement of Apology to former students of residential schools. All Opposition leaders, Stephane Dion, Jack Layton and Gilles Duceppe, also made statements of apology. All Aboriginal leaders of the National Aboriginal Organizations responded to the Statement of Apology. All of the National Aboriginal leaders met with the Prime Minister fifteen minutes prior to the Statement made in the House of Commons, were provided with a copy of the Statement to review, and were advised at that time that we would be providing responses on the floor of the House of Commons.

As the National President of the Native Women's Association of Canada, I was given a responsibility that day to make a statement that the rest of the world would hear. I was honoured to represent Aboriginal women in Canada and speak from the heart regarding the impacts of the residential school system, specifically on Aboriginal women in Canada. It was one of the most powerful experiences that I have ever had not only personally but professionally as well. The following is the statement that I made in response to the Prime Minister's Statement of Apology. After I reviewed the written statement, the effect was not the same, so I have made a few minor additions to provide further context to my statement.

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[I began an introduction of myself by speaking in my 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. Women are the life givers, being the caretakers of the spirit that we bring [in] to this world, Our Mother earth. We [were] given

those responsibilities [by the Creator to bring that spirit into this physical world and to love, take care of and nurture our children].

[The government and churches' genocidal policies of the] residential schools caused so much harm to that respect for women and to the way women were honoured in our communities. There were ceremonies for young men and for young women that [taught them how to respect themselves and each other. These ceremonies] were [stolen from them] for generations.

Despite the hardships, we have our language still. We have our ceremonies. We have our elders. And now 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 in residential school, sexually beaten and physically beaten, for being a Mohawk woman. She did not pass on her traditions. She did not pass it on to my mother and her siblings. That matriarchal system that we have was directly affected. Luckily, I was raised in a community where our knowledge and our ceremonies have been [kept] by all of our mothers.

I want to say that as mothers, we teach our boys and our girls, equally. That is what I am here to say, that although I represent the Native Women's Association, we also represent men and women because that is our traditional 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 and starting to tell the truth. 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.

I have just one last thing to say. To all of the leaders of the Liberals, the Bloc and NDP, thank you as well. I thank you for your words. But it is now about our responsibilities today. Words must turn into action. The decisions that we make today will affect seven generations from now. My ancestors did the same seven generations ago. While they tried hard to fight against you, they knew what was happening. They knew what was coming.

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. In the end it must be about more than what happened in the residential schools. For women, the truth telling must continue.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here, at this moment in time, to talk about those realities that we are dealing with today. But at the end of it, I am left with questions. 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. These violations have impacted on 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."

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I had to prepare emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually to make this statement. I first began to realize the impacts of the residential school system 14 years ago when I made a decision in law school to write a major research paper about the residential school system. It was one of those papers where I read story after story of the most horrific abuses against Aboriginal children. It was a time when residential school survivors were just beginning to open up and to disclose the various forms of abuses.

I then had to reflect on my own personal upbringing and heard about the horrendous abuses that my own grandmother and her siblings had to endure while they attended the "Mush Hole," the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario. I also reflected and reviewed my matrilineal family and the effects that these abuses had on my mother, her siblings and their families. My grandmother and mother had already passed away when I began to realize the intergenerational impact, so I wasn't able to have direct conversations with them about this issue. I am not sure my grandmother would have wanted to talk about it anyway. I was, however, able to sit with my uncle, my grandmother's brother, and he told me many horrible stories. I began to understand how much was stolen from my matriarchal family as a result of my grandmother attending the Mush Hole. It became a reality that our traditional form of educating our children through language and traditional teachings that were supposed to be taught to us by our grandmother was stolen from her; her language was sexually beaten from her and her spirit was beaten by a system designed to destroy her. She was a Mohawk girl whose life was taken from us by genocidal policies of the Canadian government and religious denominations of churches.

The most detrimental effect is that this systemic form of assimilation occurred to thousands and thousands of families throughout at least six generations, a hundred years, a century. As you can imagine, the transference of traditional knowledge and languages was directly impacted and replaced with a violent cycle of abuse. Every Aboriginal person has been affected whether a family member attended residential school or not. When a systemic process is created to destroy a people by erasing a language, a culture and a spirit, every single person is affected. When this system attacked children, the heart of our Nations, the heart of our Mothers and Grandmothers, it attacked every single person.

Despite the blatant attacks on our people to try to erase our existence, the process didn't work. As noted in my Response to the Apology, I believe that we have to celebrate the fact that we still have our grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers and fathers, aunties and uncles, that have been able to keep the traditional values, beliefs and language. Although most Indigenous languages in Canada are becoming extinct, the processes to revitalize has begun. Our

people have survived cultural genocide through their resilience and strength of those people who have ensured that the language and culture continue. We have done this because of our belief in our spirituality and it has been through the strength of spirit that our culture and tradition is alive.

Damage has been done, though. Many generations of families have been affected. Languages are becoming extinct. It is now up to the federal government to provide the resources needed to Aboriginal peoples today and in the future. It is ironic that the Conservative minority government apologized for its wrongdoing in the creation of the residential school system; but yet, it eliminated language revitalization programs. It would seem to me that what is needed now, as noted in my response, is action. This government must provide direct resources to Aboriginal communities to continue programs and services that will enable the continued transference of Indigenous traditional knowledges and languages.

Most Canadians became a little educated on June 11, 2008 about the assimilationist policy of the Canadian government. Being that this is one of the most troubling "black marks" against Canada, every Canadian person should be knowledgeable that the human rights violations that occurred against Aboriginal children is as a result of Canada's genocidal policies. Every Canadian person should know its impacts on Aboriginal peoples, and more specifically on Aboriginal women. Everyone should know that the negative issues of the poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction and the cycle of violence can be traced back to Canada's policies. We can even trace the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women to the residential school system. All of this must be mandatorily taught in all Canadian schools. It shouldn't have taken until the year 2008 for most Canadians to be educated about the residential school system.

When such action is taken by the Canadian government to not only apologize, but to create a process in which it actually acknowledges the harms its done, then we can accept the Apology. A process needs to ensure that the financial resources are in place to deal with all of the impacts we are dealing with today. When our languages are fully revitalized, then we will know that change has occurred. When Aboriginal women are no longer targets of violence, then we know that change has occurred. When our Nations our flourishing and no longer living in poverty, then we know that change has occurred. I look forward to the day when we are no longer fighting for equality because we have reclaimed our way of being.

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