
Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples

May 30, 2016 9:27 A.M.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to express a personal commitment as Premier -- and the commitment of the government of Ontario -- to being full partners with Indigenous Peoples on our journey towards reconciliation and healing.

I first want to thank the other parties for their co-operation in convening this special assembly and recognize those whose presence makes today a historic and hopeful occasion:

Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day and other Chiefs in attendance; Métis Nation of Ontario President, Margaret Froh; Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres President, Sheila McMahon; President of the Ontario Native Women's Association and of the Native Women's Association of Canada, Dawn Lavell-Harvard; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami President, Natan Obed; Cree Elder and residential school survivor, Andrew Wesley; and all of the residential school survivors, Indigenous leaders and youth who are here today. I also want to thank Elder Jim Dumont for his opening prayer with Elder Shelley Charles and Métis Senator Verna Porter-Brunelle, who will provide a closing prayer.

Indigenous Peoples are the original occupants of this land we call Ontario and, over thousands of years, they developed distinct languages, cultures, economies and ways of life. This long history means that we're assembled in a sacred and traditional gathering place for many peoples of Turtle Island. I want to show respect for this by acknowledging that we're on the traditional territory of several Indigenous Nations and pay special recognition to the Mississaugas of the New Credit, and by recognizing the history and contributions of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples.

Our shared history begins around 400 years ago. When Europeans first arrived, the generous partnership of Indigenous Peoples helped them establish profitable enterprises and settlements. In 1763, the Royal Proclamation confirmed the original occupancy of Indigenous Peoples and paved the way for nation-to-nation treaties between the British Crown and Indigenous Peoples. Treaties were negotiated and signed with the intent of delivering mutual benefits.

In Ontario, most of this happened hundreds of years ago. To some, seven generations ago can seem disconnected. Yet we know that our history is always shaping our present. And for some of us, treaties are part of the history that shapes our prosperity. Treaties granted us land to live on and water to drink. They are the foundation on which the short history of our country has carried forward -- a history in which every generation has built a better life by building on the achievements of the past.

But it's only one side of our story. For Indigenous people in Ontario, this same history created a very different reality. Despite the promise of early treaties and the respectful, nation-to-nation partnerships they established, Indigenous Peoples became the target of colonial policies designed to exploit, assimilate and eradicate them. Based on racism, violence and deceit, these policies were devastatingly effective. They disempowered individuals and disenfranchised entire communities. When Canada became a country 149 years ago, the legacy of violent colonialism only gathered momentum.

From coast-to-coast-to-coast, the residential school system set out to "take the Indian out of the child," by removing Indigenous children from their homes and systematically stripping them of their languages, cultures, laws and rights. Children were physically, emotionally and sexually abused. Many died.

These heartbreaking stories are hard to hear. For generations of Indigenous people, these stories were their lives. Canada's residential schools are closed, but they have been closed for not even one generation. Echoes of their racist, colonial attitudes can still be heard. And the echoes of a society-wide, intergenerational effort of cultural genocide continue to reverberate loudly and painfully in the lives of Indigenous people today.

However we measure a person's opportunity and security in life, a disturbing gap exists between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population. It is the gap created by a country that abused and betrayed its Indigenous Peoples. It is a gap that swallows lives and extinguishes hope across generations. For a long time, Indigenous Peoples' calls for justice could not be heard across this yawning gulf because Canada did not want to hear them. It is thanks to the resiliency of those who endured the abuses of the past that we are finally listening.

Thank you for finding the strength and courage to come forward and tell your stories -- and the stories of those who were lost. In opening our eyes, you have given us this chance to move forward as partners and the opportunity to say we are sorry. So before I go on, I want to show my respect for all the survivors and all the victims by offering a formal apology for the abuses of the past.

As Premier, I apologize for the policies and practices supported by past Ontario governments and for the harm they caused. I apologize for the province's silence in the face of abuses and deaths at residential schools. And I apologize for the fact that the residential schools are only one example of systemic, intergenerational injustices inflicted upon Indigenous communities throughout Canada.

By adopting policies designed to eradicate your cultures and extinguish your rightful claims, previous generations set in motion a force so destructive that its impact continues to reverberate in our time. And so I want to apologize for all of this by saying I am sorry for the continued harm that generations of abuse is causing to Indigenous communities, families and individuals.

No apology changes the past, nor can the act of apology alone change the future. In making this apology, as in making the Political Accord last summer, I hope to demonstrate our government's commitment to changing the future by building relationships based on trust, respect and Indigenous Peoples' inherent right to self-government. The act of apology is not the end, nor is it the beginning. It is but one step on the journey to reconciliation and healing that we are committed to walking together.

Last year at this time, we took one of these steps when Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission held its closing ceremonies in Ottawa. I was honoured to participate in the Walk for Reconciliation. I want to thank Justice and now Senator Murray Sinclair, the Commission, and all the survivors who participated for helping illuminate a dark past, for honouring all those who lost their lives and for pointing the way forward.

Ontario has already taken first steps on this journey forward. They are highlighted in The Journey Together, the report we are releasing today. It outlines how Ontario is further responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's findings and calls to action.

Today, Ontario commits to working in partnership with Indigenous leaders and their communities to undertake 26 new initiatives that will help build trust and respect into our relationships and build opportunity and security into the lives of Indigenous people. These next steps begin, as I have today, with efforts to help everyone in our province understand the truth about our history.

We will educate all Ontarians about the horrors of the residential school system, the betrayals of past governments and our rights and responsibilities as treaty people -- because in Ontario, we are all treaty people. This will include the work we are doing to ensure our education curriculum teaches every child in Ontario the truth about our past and what it means for all of us today.

In addition to further actions to commemorate victims and educate Ontarians, Minister Zimmer intends to introduce legislation today that would declare the first week of November as Treaties Recognition Week.

The Journey Together also introduces and enhances programs focused on closing opportunity gaps and ending intergenerational cycles of trauma. It guides our actions to enhance Indigenous voices in the administration of justice, and build a justice system that is responsive to Indigenous legal principles, autonomy and cultures. And because Indigenous languages and cultures are critical to the well-being of communities and to reconciliation itself, we will take a number of actions to support Indigenous communities in protecting and promoting traditional knowledge, languages and oral histories. Finally, we will rename The Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs the Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation.

The commitments Ontario is making in The Journey Together are supported with an investment of more than \$250 million over the next three years. But funding commitments alone cannot undo generations of racism and abuse.

To do that, we truly need to learn from our past, which is why our programs and actions will be developed and evaluated in close partnership with our Indigenous communities -- openly and respectfully. We are also working to incorporate Indigenous elder and youth perspectives into decision-making across government, because reconciliation cannot be compartmentalized. It is a society- and government-wide journey. And so we will also work closely with Canada's federal government, whose commitments to reconciliation are encouraging and vital to our success.

We understand that there will be setbacks as we walk this road, unlearn the patterns of previous generations and replace them with new, healthy relationships. But setbacks will not weaken our resolve to walk together to a place of trust, accommodation and friendship. We do not approach reconciliation as something we need to get over with -- we approach it as something we need to get right.

Mr. Speaker, Indigenous partners, my fellow Ontarians -- there is no more denying the past or hiding from the truth. The duty owed to Indigenous partners is enshrined in our laws and in our values as Canadians.

Building trusting, respectful relationships with Indigenous Peoples and taking steps to end intergenerational cycles of trauma and inequality -- this is our present task. One day, it will be history.

With the steps we are taking together to build a country that lives up to its laws, its values and its reputation as a force for good in the world -- we are walking a path that connects us across generations. We are undoing the harm caused by our past, and building a society where future generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous can walk together as equals -- living in peace and harmony on the land we now share.

Walking this journey together, we will not fail.

Chi miigwetch; Nia:wen; Marsi; Merci; Thank you.

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