



**Truth and
Reconciliation**
Commission of Canada

**Presentation to the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples
By the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair**

September 28, 2010

Mr. Chairman, committee members, distinguished witnesses and guests,

Commissioners Marie Wilson, Chief Wilton Littlechild and I are honoured to have the opportunity today to update you on the progress the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has made on a journey that in many ways began decades ago.

For over 100 years Canada's Indian, Metis and Inuit children were taken from their families and sent to institutional settings called residential schools, sometimes forcibly, sometimes under threat of incarceration if parental cooperation was not forthcoming, and almost always under the deception that what was being done was in their best interests. What occurred to those children is Canada's great shame. Cultures came under attack, children were told that their cultures were worthless and they had to give it up. They were punished for speaking their language, they were prevented from seeing their brothers and sisters, they were prevented from participating in their ceremonies, their names were changed, and inevitably, their relationship with family, community and self, severely damaged.

Worst of all the isolation of the children in the schools led almost inevitably to abuses: psychological, emotional, physical and sexual. Thousands of children died in the schools and their families were not informed of the deaths or the burial sites. In the 1920s, an official appointed by the Canadian government to investigate the state of residential schools termed the treatment of Aboriginal children in the schools a "national crime".

One by one, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit survivors summoned the courage to speak out, and collectively, they revealed the tragic, undeniable truth – that residential schools had betrayed generations of Aboriginal children, robbing them of both their past and their future. Lawsuits were started in the 90s. In 2007, those lawsuits culminated in the landmark Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the largest class action lawsuit in the history of Canada. This agreement gave Canadians a new beginning and an opportunity for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to move forward, together, in partnership.

On June 11, 2008, we reached another profound milestone when Prime Minister Stephen Harper rose in the House of Commons to formally apologize to survivors for all that they had endured, and all that had been done to them. The apology, like the agreement, was a catalyst for change that has inspired considerable progress, progress we are pleased to have the opportunity to share with you today.

The TRC is a cornerstone of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, charged with capturing and preserving more than a century of Canadian history, and bringing about healing through education and reconciliation. The TRC's mandate is without precedent in that its scope is primarily focused on the experiences of children. Its

focus of research spans more than 150 years, and it is the first court ordered Truth Commission to be established.

Briefly stated, the TRC's mandate is to tell Canadians about the history of the residential schools, to give former students, staff and all those affected by the schools the opportunity to participate in the telling of that history through national and community events and statement gathering, to collect all records relevant to that history and impact, to conduct original research that builds upon previous research efforts, to help commemorate this history, to establish a National Research Centre, and to write reports about this history.

In this way, the Commission is intended to play an important role in truth-telling, as well as in healing and reconciliation within Aboriginal families and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, churches, governments and Canadians generally.

Let's acknowledge that the TRC has had its share of start-up challenges. Any organization for which there is no precedent, entrusted with a mandate the scope of the TRC's, is going to need time to find its way. This is undeniable and not the least unexpected. However, in the year since my fellow Commissioners Chief Wilton Littlechild and Marie Wilson and I were appointed, considerable progress has been made and we must not lose sight of all that has been achieved.

However before we begin our discussion with you about the progress we see, we feel it important to ask you and, through you, all Canadians, to keep in the forefront of your thinking a very basic but sometimes forgotten truth. That truth is this: It has taken us a long time and considerable resources and effort to get to this point where we can see that a great deal of damage to Aboriginal cultures, communities and families has been done. Therefore we need to understand that it will take us an equally long time and at least a similar amount of resources and effort to get over it. There are no quick fixes. Uncovering the truth will be difficult, but achieving reconciliation will be more-so, because Canadians are not yet agreed on what reconciliation means or what it will look like. That is a fundamentally important conversation which has yet to happen.

As Commissioners of the TRC, we know now with absolute certainty that the road we travel is equal in importance to the destination we seek. There are no shortcuts. When it comes to truth and reconciliation, we are all forced to go the distance.

I am reminded of a story that was shared at our National Event in Winnipeg. On May 15th, a young man Patrick Etherington Jr. and his father set out on foot from Cochrane, Ontario to attend the TRC's first National Event. Patrick Sr. was a survivor and Patrick Jr. called himself a "survivor of a survivor". They had just over one month to walk almost 1,200 kilometres. Patrick and his father and others who joined their walk, made it to Winnipeg, but their road was long and rough. Patrick Jr. said he walked for the survivors who could not walk themselves, and for the youth whom he felt were lost. He knew it would be hard but he believed it was not nearly as hard as what the survivors had endured.

With its apology, the Prime Minister brought to life the intent enshrined within the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. He also I believe caused us to realize that the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country had floundered on the fundamental flaw of racism and that that relationship must be re-established on a far better foundation. Others believe that as well.

With each community visited, with each sharing circle and sacred ceremony we are joined by those who share that vision. There are those who walked with us but are no longer able, for they have passed into history – their voices can no longer be heard but their spirits remain. And there are those who come and tell us about their experiences: survivors, their families, and staff of the schools. Their courage is humbling and awe-inspiring.

There are national Aboriginal organizations, too, that have tirelessly supported us. And there are the Churches – Catholic, United, Anglican and Presbyterian, and other faith-based denominations that have actively committed themselves to the path of reconciliation.

Equally importantly, we are joined by those who were not involved with the schools, but whose eyes and hearts have been opened to a chapter in our history that plays out to this day in broken homes and violent streets.

There is now considerable momentum behind us, and I am pleased to report that within the past twelve months the TRC has made significant progress on several fronts. Specifically:

1. The creation of an active outreach program within Aboriginal communities that has enabled us to capture the experiences and perspectives of thousands of individuals impacted by residential schools from coast to coast to coast.
2. The staging of the first TRC National Event, held in Winnipeg this past June. We were tremendously pleased with the public response and the invaluable opportunity it provided for reconciliation between individuals and communities alike.
3. The creation of an Inuit Sub-commission to ensure that the unique voice and perspective of Inuit peoples are reflected in our work.
4. The establishment of productive, positive working relationships with Church officials – and all members of the Settlement Agreement – who embrace our mission and actively participate in the process of reconciliation.
5. The development of further infrastructure that will enhance the in-person statement gathering process, permitting statements to be received in writing, electronically and by telephone.
6. The launching of community events across the country to facilitate dialogue,

statement gathering and gestures of reconciliation on a local level.

7. The recognition of the TRC by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as a model of best practices and an inspiration for other countries.

This Commission's first steps have been important ones, and in many ways, the most difficult. In the past year the TRC has visited almost every jurisdiction in Canada. People are talking; the word is getting out. We are earning trust and those with stories to share are coming forward. And communities, too, are coming together to reconcile in ways that make them, and us, stronger.

As I mentioned a moment ago, the TRC's first National Event took place this past summer - It happened in Winnipeg on sacred ground, at the meeting place of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Some 8,000 to 10,000 people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, converged each day for four days of statement gathering, sharing, education, artistic expression and reflection.

The national media attention generated by the Winnipeg event was outstanding. Coverage was energetic and analytical. It contributed to greater understanding of the Commission but more importantly to the experiences of those who have lived under the oppressive weight of their memories for decades, unable to voice the depth of their pain. This growing awareness of the schools' impact, not only on the survivors but on our society, is of crucial importance. The pain these institutions caused is not limited to survivors and their families. Church officials and former residential school staff members, too, can be broken and overwhelmed.

Florence Kaefer told us her story. She told us that in 1957, as a young teacher she went to work at a residential school in Norway House, Manitoba. There she met Edward Gamblin; five years old when he entered the school. She worked at the school only a short time and eventually moved on. Once proud of her teaching career, by 1990 she said she had stopped talking about her work in residential schools, as revelations about abuse began to surface. In 2006 she discovered a country music CD by a singer named Edward Gamblin and wondered if it was the child she knew. Kaefer purchased the CD and was devastated by what she heard – songs about pain and torment and loneliness suffered in the school. She reached out to Gamblin, who remembered his teacher, and her classroom as a place of refuge. She travelled from her home in Courtenay, BC, to visit him and the two became friends. Kaefer visited several times, and she and Edward went through their own reconciliation process.

Edward Gamblin was in Winnipeg during the TRC's National Event, but not at the Forks historic site with us. Instead he was in hospital with a heart condition. Kaefer flew to his side and remained with him on what would be the final leg of his earthly journey. As he lay in the hospital, at Edward's request, she came to the National Event to present Edward's gift of music to the Commission and to share their story with those in attendance.

Edward Gamblin and Florence Kaeyer walked the long road from apology to forgiveness to reconciliation. They recognized that apology is not an end in itself. Reconciliation takes time. But time, unfortunately, is not on our side. The oldest person interviewed by the TRC thus far is 108 years old. The Commissioners, Residential Schools Survivor Committee members and TRC staff all recognize the urgent need to gather statements as swiftly as possible. Edward Gamblin is lost to us now. But his statement was obtained, and his truth will be told.

Let us be clear; a five-year mandate will not right the wrongs. There is no shortcut, no quick fix. It has taken generations to get us to this point and it will take generations to make it right. Much has been accomplished, but there is much left to do.

The road ahead for the next year of the Commission includes:

- The opening of seven Regional Liaison offices to coordinate TRC initiatives across the country.
- The initiation of public discussion about a National Research Centre that will provide an international focal point for the collection of research into residential schools and their impact.
- The launching of a Call for Proposals for commemoration projects designed to stand the test of time and promote the spirit of reconciliation long after the TRC has gone.
- The second National Event, to be held in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, in June, 2011.
- The hosting of an international conference intended to conceptualize a model for a national TRC archive that will preserve and make accessible all that we gather throughout the Commission's mandate. In addition, the conference will reinforce our relationship with the worldwide truth and reconciliation community, allow us to share best practices and pool our understanding as we move forward towards healing and peace in our families, our communities and our world.

Broken families, addiction, estrangement, violence, suicide – This is the corrosive legacy of the residential schools. A tide of despair lasting 150 years engulfs us, and reversing it will require a concerted effort, a commitment that must be sustained for many years to come.

Education, or what passed for it, got us into this situation, and education is what will lead us out. Schools seem to us to be one of the best vehicles to create and sustain a change in the attitude of all Canadians to the nature of the relationship that must exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in this country.

We must above all things put in place strategies that will facilitate reconciliation and

hope within families so that the brokenness bequeathed to us by residential schools no longer dooms our young people and robs them – and us – of their potential.

At the Winnipeg National Event, the most powerful moments were often the quietest. At an exhibition of photographs from the residential schools, you could see people gazing into the small faces in the pictures. In the light of understanding that flickered in their eyes came the realization that these were children. Just children. And in moments like those, when realization gives way to understanding, resolve takes hold. It is then that the truth becomes not only known, but felt. It is then that we move from a state of apology to one where true reconciliation can begin. It is those quiet moments in the hearts of all Canadians that we seek.

In Winnipeg we learned that the National Events could galvanize a people – A Canadian people. In the extraordinary, enormous, diverse crowds it was readily apparent that race is trumped by what is right.

With each event the Commissioners and I attend, each sharing circle we participate in, each hand we hold...we know that the work we have been asked to do is crucial, for all of us, but perhaps most importantly for future generations that will, armed with the truth, ensure that our past is not repeated.

As the Prime Minister said in his apology to survivors, “There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever again prevail. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time, and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey.”

The road to truth and reconciliation is long. Yes we have miles to go, but together, we will get there. As Patrick Etherington Jr. said, “I’m not walking for myself ... I’m just going to take it day by day. Every step I take is closer.”

In one of many sharing circles held in Winnipeg during the National Event, a survivor concluded her statement with the words, “Now we have a voice. Now we can breathe again, start living again, and live together in peace.”

The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is well underway and we are mindful of the exceptional trust placed in us. We look forward to the continued and growing support of more and more Canadians as together we learn about, and from, this chapter of our shared history.

Earlier I referred to the story of Canada’s residential schools as Canada’s great shame. If this country is able to find its true perspective about this story and establish a relationship with Aboriginal people that is fundamentally sound and not flawed, the end of this story can be Canada’s great pride.

Thank you.