Mea Culpa:
Public Apology, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and Indian Residential Schools

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You cannot see the future with tears in your eyes
-Navajo Proverb

The adage that history is written by the victors is becoming increasingly outmoded in a world in which once “voiceless” and/or minority groups are now asserting their rights and demanding acknowledgement of, and apologies for, their past mistreatment. Indeed, the post-Cold War decades have seen a proliferation of apologies issued by heads of state, religious and community leaders, celebrities, and even corporate entities for injustices committed in the past. For example, in 1997 President Clinton apologized to the victims of Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment; in 1995 the Japanese government expressed remorse to the two hundred thousand Asian “comfort women” forced into prostitution and murdered during World War II; in 2000 Pope John Paul II issued a sweeping mea culpa for the wrongdoings of the Catholic Church over its history; and, of greatest interest to this article, in 2008 Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a public apology to victims of the Canadian Residential Schooling system.

Public and collective apologies have captured the interest of many scholars: Roy Brooks has characterized the post-Cold War era as the “Age of Apology;” Emily Mitchell has labeled the 1990s as the “decade of atonement;” and Elazar Barkan commented on the international

“avalanche of apologies.”\(^4\) Barkan further notes that “this desire to redress the past is a growing trend... and is central to our moral self understanding as individuals and members of groups the world over.”\(^5\) Using Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s 2008 apology to former students of the Indian Residential Schools as a lens, this article seeks to examine the rhetorical phenomenon of the apology as part of a growing global movement towards negotiating restitution and facilitating historical reconciliation.

Having recognized the phenomenon, what is the cause behind this seeming “avalanche of apologies”? Historically, international relations have been dominated with the ideology of realpolitik - diplomacy based on power and material considerations rather than on idealistic, ethical or moral grounds. In this light, it is remarkable to note that recent political developments have seen powerful governments and agents apologizing to the relatively powerless. Does the 2008 Harper apology, in the midst of a global increase of apologies, truth commissions, healing, restitution and reconciliatory measures, reflect a new threshold of political morality and human development within Canada?

**The Purpose, Form, Power and Mystery of a Collective Apology**

Elazar Barkan suggests that recent apologies and measures towards reconciliation are part of a paradigm shift in both politics and history,\(^6\) often referred to as the politics of memory. In the distant past, history was considered objective, largely factual and therefore wholly immune to reinterpretation. Increasingly, however, scholars have come to recognize the malleability of history and as a consequence it has “become more central to our daily lives. History informs our

\(^5\) Ibid., Preface XI.
\(^6\) Ibid., Preface X.
identity more intimately today, and, being subject to reinterpretation, it has also become a space for competing perspectives.” In this sense, the apology serves as a bridge between past and present, “a form of political negotiation that enables the rewriting of memory and historical identity in ways that both [perpetrators and their victims] can share.”

Mark Gibney notes further that the recent spate of political apologies can be connected to several political and social movements that occurred in the last several decades: the Civil Rights Movement, women's liberation, Post-Colonialism, Humanitarianism, the politics of multiculturalism and so on. All of these trends towards liberation stress the need for social recognition that “personal narratives [are] a strong route towards empathy.” The transition in international relations toward recognition during the 1990s was particularly dramatic in shaping a new sense of international morality. This decade saw “horrendous wars in Africa and Yugoslavia, as well as the liberation of Eastern Europe and South Africa and the return of democracy in many Latin American countries.” In many of these transitions, truth and reconciliation commissions were implemented to pragmatically determine culpability and negotiate collective reconstruction of social and political relations. The end of the political realism that dominated the Cold War era left Western nations struggling to re-establish their moral image and to acknowledge gross historical injustices and policies that ignored human rights; in this way the apology became the West's version of the truth and reconciliation phenomenon.

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., Preface XVIII.
10 Ibid.
11 Barken, The Guilt of Nations, Preface XVI.
12 Gibney, The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past, 4. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have traditionally been a non-Western phenomenon, one of the few exceptions being Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission created after the 2008 Harper apology for the Residential Schooling System.
This is certainly not to say that all nations and individuals (if any) genuinely share in this ideal of collective self-reflexivity. Caveats abound in the literature surrounding the politics of apology, reconciliation and forgiveness, and many scholars consider apologies as a new form of realpolitik. The agendas of politicians’ apologies are wide-ranging and at times self-serving as “the incentives for false repentance [can be] strong.” Collective apologies themselves are an ambiguous speech act: what constitutes an apology? What is the purpose of such an apology and what is it seeking to accomplish? Are apologies a “cynical type of symbolic politics, meant to erase injustices from public memory and exculpate their perpetrators?”

Sociologist Nicholas Tavuchis ruminates extensively on the power and paradox of the apology on moral rather than political grounds. He notes that the power of an apology lies in its ability to resolve conflicts and restore moral order by expunging the harmful effects of past actions. The paradox of an apology, however, lies in the fact that a mere speech act cannot simply undo what has already been done. Nevertheless, an authentic apology (and subsequent acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation) has the power to transmute offences and “prevent them from becoming permanent obstructions to social relations despite the inexorable fact of betrayal.” Further, Tavuchis elaborates on the broader theme of apology, that of membership in a moral community. A genuine apology, an acknowledgement of responsibility and expression of genuine remorse and regret with the implicit or explicit desire to abide by new moral norms, once accepted, reconciles the victim(s) and perpetrator(s) back into a moral community.

13 Ibid., 5.
14 Ibid., 8.
However, what constitutes a genuine apology? Matt James, in his synthesis of literature surrounding apologies, determined eight criteria of an authentic political apology:

(1) is recorded officially in writing, (2) names the wrongs in question, (3) accepts responsibility, (4) states regret, (5) promises non-repetition, (6) does not demand forgiveness, (7) is not hypocritical or arbitrary, (8) undertakes - through measures of publicity, ceremony, and concrete reparation - both to engage morally those in whose name apology is made and to assure the wronged group that the apology is sincere.17

These criteria will be revisited later in determining whether Stephen Harper's 2008 apology was a genuine, meaningful, and adequate response to the Residential Schooling System. However, a history of the residential schooling system and the events leading up to the 2008 apology will provide deeper context.

**Residential Schools in Canada**

Indian Residential Schools (IRS) were first established in the late 1800s by the federal government of Canada, in order to provide education to children of indigenous peoples. Over the course of the 1800s, the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and European settlers transformed from one of “mutual commercial and military benefit”18 to one of “fear and conflict.”19 The schooling system, therefore, was created in response to the perceived “Indian Problem.”20 After the time of confederation, Aboriginal peoples were considered wards of the federal government and thus, seeking to relieve themselves of the fiduciary responsibility,

19 Ibid.
officials within the government sought to promote assimilation of Aboriginals into the dominant culture. As full Canadian citizens, Aboriginal peoples would no longer be considered wards of the government, an arrangement which would significantly relieve the government of financial responsibility. Residential schools were seen as a means of producing an entire generation of English-speaking aboriginal children adapted to the ways of the dominant settler culture. As such, residential schools were designed as total institutions: children were removed from their families, isolated from their communities, and subjected to physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological abuse including the destruction of their culture, language, and spirituality. By legal agreement, the schools received government funding, but the day-to-day operations were administered by mainly four Christian Churches: Methodist (now the United Church of Canada), Presbyterian, Anglican, and several orders of the Roman Catholic Church. Over one hundred thousand Indigenous children, about twenty to thirty percent of the Aboriginal population in Canada attended residential schools in their almost one hundred year history.

The abuse and trauma of the residential schooling system remained relatively unexposed until 1990 with the appointment of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. The Commission provided many recommendations to the government, including a recommendation for investigation into the history of residential schools, their residual psychological effects, and appropriate legal resolutions. Apart from the creation of a 350 million dollar fund to support community-based healing strategies for individuals who had experienced physical or sexual

21 Ibid., 258.
22 Ibid. The last Residential School completely overseen by the government was closed in 1986 although schools continued to operate under First Nation oversight until the mid 1990s.
23 Ibid., 258. The commission was created in response to a confrontation between members of the Mohawk Nation and the Quebec Provincial Police over a dispute over sacred burial grounds.
abuse within the residential schooling system, the Commission was largely ignored.\textsuperscript{24} The fund was accompanied by a Statement of Reconciliation, or a quasi-apology, issued in January 1998 by Jane Stewart, the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs.\textsuperscript{25} These initiatives did not stem the growing tide of civil action, class action, and criminal lawsuits filed against church groups, the federal government, and other perpetrators of the abuse. Among these cases, however, only a relatively small portion have been brought to trial, as the high cost of legal fees, protracted compensation awards, the logjam of court cases, in addition to the psychological suffering of having to testify under rigorous cross-examination cases of abuse have made the litigation process less than ideal. The Churches involved in operating the residential schools have already paid millions in legal fees and compensation and, as a result, several denominations and orders have been faced with looming bankruptcy.\textsuperscript{26} As well, the government of Canada faces huge costs in administrative court fees and compensation awards.

While civil litigation and compensation is indeed one means by which justice is served, legal scholar Jennifer Llewellyn is careful to specify that “a material transfer does not restore the primary loss to the victim when the loss is immaterial in nature. Instead the result is that the wrongdoer is made worse off without altering the position of the victim.”\textsuperscript{27} Llewellyn clarifies that settling abuse claims are only a minor aspect of the redress victims are seeking; settlements address disputes as individualistic when in fact “the harms suffered in and through residential schools and the disputes arising as a result are inherently relational.”

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 259. The fund didn’t extend to the spiritual, psychological or cultural abuse inherent in the system.
\textsuperscript{25} Matt James, \textit{The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past}, 141.
\textsuperscript{26} Llewellyn, “Dealing with the Legacy of Native Residential School Abuse in Canada: Litigation, ADR, and Restorative Justice,” 270.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 275.
The abuse suffered by residential school students was the result of a relationship of inequality, oppression, and disrespect between the Canadian government, its citizens, the churches, and Aboriginal peoples. The restoration of this relationship to one of mutual concern, respect, and dignity is what victims seek first and foremost, and any process must have this as its goal or it will not resolve the conflict between the parties and may, in fact, make it worse.28

In the nine years following the 1998 Statement of Reconciliation, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development implemented Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) processes as a faster and less costly option over litigation.29 Llewellyn recognized that at times ADR is capable of creative approaches to justice; however, the result of the vast majority of Residential School ADR cases were material transfers to victims.30 ADR, Llewellyn surmised, did not “question the basic understanding of Residential School disputes as isolated incidents limited to the individualistic level.”31 The ADR process met the demands of settling Residential School disputes from a narrow legal perspective but did not address the need for restorative justice - a shift from the Western legal approach to resolving conflict to a decolonizing, transformative response to the Residential School legacy.

On 15 February 2005, Chief Robert Joseph, representing the Indian Residential School Survivors Society addressed the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development (SCAAND) with an eloquent and moving testimony:

There are times when we as men and women are called upon to do the extraordinary, times when we must do the honourable thing, times when we are compelled to rise above the accustomed simple solution and to struggle to reach for the hard, principled one. These are such times. We call upon you and Canada to do this with us... For us and Canada to turn the page on this chapter of our mutual history we need a broader response.

28 Ibid., 288.
31 Ibid.
than the ADR can deliver. So here we must heed the survivor voices. For the past ten years over 40,000 survivors...have told us what that broader response should be: an apology, compensation, funding for healing, and future reconciliation. With respect to an apology, survivors want and need a full apology delivered by the Prime Minister on the floor of the House of Commons...For an apology to work, it must be understood and performed symbolically in terms of the ritual that it is. It must offer the potential for transformation for all involved. With a nationally imposed system like the residential school system, transformation cannot occur unless the key players in the ritual are involved - the apology, the Prime Minister, and the House of Commons. By neglecting to address residential school survivors and forcing them through an onerous process like ADR, Canada accepts the risk of being accused of institutionalism racism yet again...While we struggle with our pain, our suffering, and loss we know that our culture and traditions are embedded in the need for balance and harmony - reconciliation.\footnote{Parliament of Canada. “38th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development EVIDENCE,” Last Modified 15 February 2005, http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=1636789&Mode=1&Language=E#Int-1128319.}

On 30 May 2005, following years of victim testimony, reports, and inquiries into the ADR process, the Government of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations announced that they had reached an agreement regarding the Residential School issue. The political agreement announced the appointment of Honourable Frank Iacobucci as the federal representative negotiating between all parties, a settlement package as redress for former students of IRS, a truth and reconciliation process, and community-based healing initiatives. The agreement further acknowledged that “the current ADR process [did] not fully achieve reconciliation between Canada and the former students of residential schools,” that “Canada and First Nations are committed to reconciling the residential schools tragedy in a manner that respects the principles of human dignity and promotes transformative change and “the Government of Canada recognizes that there is a need for an apology that will provide a broader recognition of the Indian Residential Schools legacy and its effect upon First Nation communities.”\footnote{South Wind, “AFN National Chief Signs Historic Political Agreement to resolve the Legacy of Residential Schools,” Last Modified July 2005, http://www.scoinc.mb.ca/southwind/southwind018.pdf.}
The Apology\textsuperscript{34}

On 11 June 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered a formal apology to former students of the Indian Residential School system on behalf of the federal government and all Canadians before a sitting parliament in the House of Commons. The apology served as the initiation of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and was preceded by the implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement agreement, which began on 19 September 2007. The agreement comprised of a compensation package of close to two billion dollars, settling a class-action lawsuit which consolidated the thousands of individual claims made by former IRS students and relatives.\textsuperscript{35} The apology also followed Canada's vote against and refusal to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007.\textsuperscript{36}

Referring to Matt James’ eight criteria for a genuine apology, a careful reading of the Harper apology reveals that it fulfills the first criterion (it is recorded officially in writing), but only partially fulfills the remaining seven. The second criterion, naming the wrongs in question, is a particularly difficult aspect to determine; the apology provides a limited yet encompassing recitation of the abuses perpetuated within Residential Schools yet does not acknowledge Canada's broader history of colonial violence inherent within the IRS system. Further, the apology does not create a link between the colonial project of cultural assimilation and elimination with the continued present-day desire for “control of Indigenous land and

\textsuperscript{34} For a full transcript of the apology please refer to the appendix.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 28. Canada later officially endorsed the declaration in November 2010.
resources.” Most tellingly, the apology gives no indication as to why the violently assimilative school system was seen as a reasonable recourse, perhaps because any reason would invoke a colonial project. In terms of the third criterion, the apology is very carefully worded in sections, blurring acknowledgement of responsibility. Harper states the “policy of assimilation was wrong” but later apologizes for “failing to protect [Indigenous peoples].” The responsibility of the government is thus constructed “not as their engagement in a project of assimilation but, rather, in the inability to enforce effective oversight and control of those individuals engaged by the state to implement this project. The government apologizes for its inattention and absence not for its actions and intent.” The wording through the last section includes multiple repetitions of the statement “we now recognize,” dismissing the decades of knowledge of the abuse sustained within Residential Schools and endorsing the “wilful ignorance of [Canada's] national subjects, past and present.” Considering the fourth criterion, it is difficult to state regret without acknowledging the violence inherent in the colonial project. The fifth criterion is a promise of non-repetition, which is only superficially assured; however, the apology makes no reference towards the colonialism and racism that has informed Canada's history and, thus, cannot make promises for a future free of colonial assimilationist and violent attitudes. For the sixth criterion, it is true that the apology does not overtly demand forgiveness; however, the cooperation and enfranchisement of the Indigenous peoples of Canada is co-opted slyly through the last section of the apology. The last section begins with “[The Truth and Reconciliation Commission] will be a positive step in forging a new relationship between aboriginal peoples and other Canadians.”

37 Ibid., 33.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 34.
40 At the time of the apology the last Residential Schools overseen by the government had been closed for over two decades.
This is in marked contrast to the separation Harper makes mid-apology between Canadians and Aboriginals by apologizing on behalf of all Canadians to all Aboriginal peoples. “For members of sovereign First Nations in particular, reconciliation by enfranchisement is wholly contrary to their longstanding demands for state recognition of the unceded sovereignty of First Nations.”41

The last statement of the apology, in particular, raises the spectre of assimilation: “the apology depicts Canadians joining Indigenous and Métis peoples, rather than the reverse,” which does not indicate a transformative change in relationship but a reinforcement of the existing colonial relationship. Without further inquiry into the seventh and eighth criteria, it can already be seen that the Harper apology is by no means an adequate response to the call for “transformative pathways towards decolonising Canada.”42 The apology does not constitute a negotiation of the politics of memory, as the apology frequently reinforces assimilationist practices hidden behind the benign Canadian peacemaker myth.

Fifteen months after the 2008 apology, during a press conference at the G20 Pittsburgh Summit, Stephen Harper made the following statement to Reuters correspondents:

We are one of the most stable regimes in history. There are very few countries that can say for nearly 150 years they’ve had the same political system without any social breakdown, political upheaval or invasion. We are unique in that regard. We also have no history of colonialism.

Stephen Harper's apology to Residential School survivors holds significance in the sense that it was the first official statement released by the leader of the Canadian federal government before a sitting parliament using the word “apology” and expressing regret and responsibility for the residential school system, no matter how questionable. Nevertheless, Harper's statement at the

41 Dorrell, 36.
42 Paulette Regan, “Unsettling the Settler Within: Canada’s Peacemaker Myth, Reconciliation and Transformative Pathways to Decolonisation,” (PhD diss., University of Victoria, 2006), 3
Pittsburgh Summit reveals the limitations of the 2008 apology. In stating that “there is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian residential schools system to ever again prevail” Harper fails to identify these attitudes as colonial.

**White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy**

bell hooks well understands the politics of memory and its importance in negotiating a “culture of place” for the disenfranchised. Her essays in *Belonging: a Culture of Place* are strongly thematically connected by a statement she makes in her preface: “We are born and have our being in a place of memory.”43 This historical consciousness has informed much of the thought surrounding decolonisation, the discourse on reconciliation, and transformative relationships. While hooks writes of her experience and ways of thought as a black woman in America, her understanding of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” is relevant to any experience of colonialism. hooks is clear in stating that

it is the telling of our history that enables political self recovery. In contemporary society, [we] believe racism no longer exists. This erasure... allows for assimilation and forgetfulness. The eagerness with which contemporary society does away with racism, replacing this recognition with evocations of pluralism and diversity that further mask reality, is a response to the terror.44

Stephen Harper's apology, while laudable in the sense that it is a step in the general direction towards reconciliation, does not fully confront or recognize Canada’s history of violent assimilation and colonisation. The apology evokes images of plurality and diversity that are part and whole with the Canadian mythology of “benevolent peacemakers.”45

44 Ibid., 95.
45 Regan, “Unsettling the Settler Within: Canada's Peacemaker Myth, Reconciliation and Transformative Pathways to Decolonisation,” 267.
In her doctoral dissertation, “Unsettling the Settler Within: Canada’s Peacemaker Myth, Reconciliation and Transformative Pathways to Decolonisation,” Paulette Regan offers a formidable analysis of the “colonial project” of Canada through the assimilationist agenda of the Residential Schooling system and the continuing cycles of colonial and hegemonic violence inherent in ADR processes, discourse on reconciliation, and “settler” attitudes towards indigenous peoples.\(^46\) Regan, like hooks, agrees that “without facing our true history as perpetrators of violence, there can be no “transformative” new relationship with Indigenous peoples.”\(^47\) Regan believes that decolonising the Canadian consciousness entails “unsettling the settler within,” “facing our true history as perpetrators of violence,” and understanding the importance of myth, history and ritual.\(^48\)

hooks, through narrative essays on an array of seemingly unrelated topics (quilting, ecology, autobiography, feminism, history, etc), transforms the reader’s understanding of contemporary societal relationships; she pays special attention to the importance of ceremony and ritual. In her chapter, “Take Back the Night – Remake the Present”, hooks theorises that through the assimilationist practices of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, we have devalued oppositional ways of thinking and alternative ways of living that emphasize emotional intelligence, connectedness, and rootedness.\(^49\) Chief Robert Joseph, in his speech before the SCAAND, commented on the importance of ritual and ceremony in an apology to the reconciliation process. Regan claims, and is supported by the growing array of literature regarding apology, ritual, colonialism, and identity, that Westerners are just beginning to

\(^{46}\) Ibid.  
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 266.  
\(^{48}\) Ibid.  
\(^{49}\) hooks, \textit{Belonging: a Culture of Place}, 140.
articulate what Indigenous peoples have known for millennia about the power of story, ceremony and ritual to transform us.”

The majority of theories on decolonization and apology can be encapsulated by hooks writings on mutuality. The call for Harper to apologise was not a call for equality (methods of litigation and compensation evoke the fight for equality) but for an acknowledgment of a new relationship of reciprocity, “one that is anti-dominion. With reciprocity all things do not need to be equal in order for acceptance and mutuality to thrive.” Regan agrees that settlers “tend to discount culture and relationship as peripheral to the primary concerns of legal liability and economic efficiency [and] do not take into account the importance of myth, ritual and history in addressing intercultural conflicts.” An authentic apology could potentially be the foundation for a positive and constructive mutuality which allows for “differences in status, power and privilege whether determined by race, class, sexuality, religion or nationality.”

Unfortunately, the 2008 Harper apology to former students of the IRS did not fulfill its potential as a ritualistic negotiation of memory and history; however, Taiaiake Alfred, a professor of Indigenous Studies, is forgiving in his analysis of the “success” of the decolonising processes. He acknowledges that the state concedes power on a cost-benefit calculation (as is demonstrated by the political and historical build-up towards the Harper apology); however, each concession redefines the “moral terrain of politics, creating norms of judgment and expectation

50 Regan, “Unsettling the Settler Within: Canada’s Peacemaker Myth, Reconciliation and Transformative Pathways to Decolonisation,” 270
51 hooks, Belonging: a Culture of Place, 201
52 Regan, “Unsettling the Settler Within: Canada’s Peacemaker Myth, Reconciliation and Transformative Pathways to Decolonisation,” 192
53 hooks, Belonging: a Culture of Place, 201
by which Settlers begin to judge and evaluate their own behaviours and choices. This gradual seizing of the moral high ground makes delegitimizing the state possible”\textsuperscript{55} Harpers apology, while imperfect, sets a new politically moral precedent for Indigenous-settler relationships. The apology was the precursor to the ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which engenders hope for further negotiation of memory and history, for truth telling, and, ultimately, for shaping a sense of mutuality in Indigenous-settler relationships in Canada.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 402
Bibliography


Appendix

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Statement of Apology

Mr. Speaker, I stand before you today to offer an apology to former students of Indian residential schools. The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history. In the 1870's, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools. Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, “to kill the Indian in the child.” Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. Most schools were operated as “joint ventures” with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United churches. The government of Canada built an educational system in which very young children were often forcibly removed from their homes, often taken far from their communities. Many were inadequately fed, clothed and housed. All were deprived of the care and nurturing of their parents, grandparents and communities. First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages and cultural practices were prohibited in these schools. Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home. The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on aboriginal culture, heritage and language. While some former students have spoken positively about their experiences at residential schools, these stories are far overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children, and their separation from powerless families and communities. The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today. It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered. It is a testament to their resilience as individuals and to the strength of their cultures. Regrettably, many former students are not with us today and died never having received a full apology from the government of Canada. The government recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation. Therefore, on behalf of the government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system. To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow, and we apologize for having done this. We now recognize that, far too often, these institutions gave rise to abuse or neglect and were inadequately controlled, and we apologize for failing to protect you. Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, and for this we are sorry. The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country. 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 government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly. We are sorry. In moving towards healing, reconciliation and resolution of the sad legacy of Indian residential schools,
implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement agreement began on September 19, 2007. Years of work by survivors, communities, and aboriginal organizations culminated in an agreement that gives us a new beginning and an opportunity to move forward together in partnership. A cornerstone of the settlement agreement is the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This commission presents a unique opportunity to educate all Canadians on the Indian residential schools system. It will be a positive step in forging a new relationship between aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, a relationship based on the knowledge of our shared history, a respect for each other and a desire to move forward together with a renewed understanding that strong families, strong communities and vibrant cultures and traditions will contribute to a stronger Canada for all of us.