

Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe's address related to the Canadian federal government apology for the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. Ottawa, June 11th 2008.

Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to be here to witness—at last—the Canadian government's apology to the First Nations, Métis and Inuit people who were victims of federally funded residential schools.

Nearly 150,000 people have waited their whole lives for this day of truth and reconciliation; 90,000 of them are still with us. These 90,000 are true survivors. Over 100 years ago, the Bryce Report revealed that the mortality rate in residential schools was close to 25%. In the Old Sun residential school in Alberta, the death rate was as high as 47%. That is why I consider these former students to be survivors.

These 150,000 people were abducted from their mothers and fathers. They were separated from their sisters and brothers. They were forcibly uprooted from their communities and their traditional cultures.

For those who cannot imagine the impact that residential schools had on Aboriginal peoples, picture a small village, a small community. Now picture all of its children, gone. No more children between 7 and 16 playing in the lanes or the woods, filling the hearts of their elders with their laughter and joy. Imagine the ever-present fear of watching their children disappear when they reached school age.

Rumours abounded about what happened to the children. All these years later, it is still horrifying to think of these things. Children were torn from their parents' arms to be assimilated. They were taken away and raised by people who had but one goal: to “kill the Indian in the child”. Forced to unlearn their languages, these children could no longer communicate with their own parents. All of these things really happened, and they are a part of our collective history.

Between 1934 and 1962, six residential schools were established in Quebec: two in Cree territory, one in Algonquin territory, one in Atikamekw territory and two in Innu territory. Just like residential schools everywhere, these ones left wounds caused by abuse, ill-treatment and neglect.

Roméo Saganash, himself a survivor of residential schools, told me the story of his brother, who died within a year of entering the school. His family never found out why he died, and it took 40 years—40 long years—for his mother to find the place where he had been buried. It is impossible to erase these indelible scars, impossible to heal the souls shattered by these memories.

Yet this apology is necessary. Necessary, but not sufficient. As Roméo Saganash says, “An apology, once made, is only as good as the actions that

come after it.” For those who lost their childhood in the residential schools, the best apology consists of real action that will allow their children and grandchildren to hope in the future. This means that the government must take real action now.

For example, the government is not spending enough to help aboriginal children reach their full potential. When problems occur that affect children, the government recommends that the children be taken out of their community for their own protection. In a way, the government is repeating the mistakes of the past.

For more than a year, we and the First Nations of Quebec have been calling for more money for First Nations so that children can remain in their communities. Does the government not think that enough aboriginal children were removed from their communities in the past?

Here is another example. The Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador has been waiting for over a year and a half for a response from the government so that it can implement its “10,000 possibilities” project.

This 10-year plan is aimed at building 10,000 housing units, helping 10,000 young people graduate from high school and creating 10,000 jobs.

If the Prime Minister's apology is sincere, let him take real action. We will support him.

Finally, there is this disgrace: the government's refusal to endorse the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I am very proud that the Bloc Québécois has given clear support to this draft declaration. By agreeing to endorse the declaration, the Prime Minister can send a clear message to Aboriginal people that he has learned from past mistakes and is making a solemn promise to the victims that their children and grandchildren will have respect and dignity.

I am speaking to you, the Aboriginal representatives present on the floor of the House and watching from the gallery. All the members of the Bloc Québécois join me in reaching out to you so that, together, we can build a better future for our children and grandchildren.

That requires a relationship of mutual respect that can only be forged between nations.

On behalf of the Bloc Québécois, I extend a sincere apology for the past, and I invite us to build the future together, as nations.