

The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples emphasized that the restoration of civic trust is essential to reconciliation. It concluded that “the purpose of engaging in a transaction of acknowledgement and forgiveness is not to bind Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in a repeating drama of blame and guilt, but jointly to acknowledge the past so that both sides are freed to embrace a shared future with a measure of trust.” The report added that “the restoration of trust is essential to the great enterprise of forging peaceful relations.”<sup>65</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada agrees with these findings.

For reconciliation to take root, Canada, as the party to the relationship that has breached that trust, has the primary obligation to do the work needed to regain the trust of Aboriginal peoples. It is our view that at the time of Confederation, and in subsequent Treaty negotiations, Aboriginal peoples placed a great deal of faith in the words of those speaking for the Crown that the new relationship would be a positive one for both of them. That faith was betrayed, however, by the imposition of the *Indian Act*, the development of the residential school system, and a series of other repressive measures.

Survivors have indicated that despite the Settlement Agreement and Canada’s apology, trust has not yet been restored. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Indian Residential Schools Survivor Committee member Eugene Arcand said,

I was there at the apology. I thought I was on my way to reconciliation when I heard the prime minister’s words, in a way, when his voice trembled.... It would be remiss of me to the Survivors of Saskatchewan and Survivors across this country to not talk about what’s happened since the apology. It’s been difficult to talk on one side of my mouth about reconciliation and truth, and on the other side of my heart I have very intense feelings about the actions of the federal government, Prime Minister Harper who gave that apology, and the Ministry of Indian Affairs in the administration of this agreement and other acts of government that have been an assault on our people....

[W]e as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, especially residential school Survivors, want to reconcile. We really, really want to. But it’s difficult when we see and feel and read what’s coming out of the House, provincially, federally, in regards to our well-being. First, with the cuts to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and other cuts that have happened in regards to education, in regards to our livelihood.<sup>66</sup>

A government apology sends a powerful symbolic message to citizens that the state’s actions were wrong.<sup>67</sup> As important as Canada’s apology was, it did not simply mark a closure of the past. It also created an opening for Canadians to begin a national dialogue about restoring Aboriginal peoples to a just and rightful place within Canada. In their evaluation of where things stood in the years immediately following the apology, Aboriginal leaders identified a post-apology gap between the aspirational language of Canada’s apology and Aboriginal peoples’ continuing realities. Closing this gap is vital to reconciliation.

Speaking to the Senate on June 11, 2009, the first anniversary of Canada’s apology, Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine, who is also a Survivor, said,