

responsible for those harms, the state and the churches accepted their measure of responsibility. The apologies were a necessary first step in the process of reconciliation.

The history and destructive legacy of residential schools is a sober reminder that taking action does not necessarily lead to positive results. Attempts to assimilate First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples into mainstream Canadian society were a dismal failure. Despite the devastating impacts of colonization, Indigenous peoples have always resisted (though in some places not always successfully) attacks on their cultures, languages, and ways of life.

If Canadians are to keep the promise of the apologies made on their behalf—the promise of “never again!”—then we must guard against simply replicating the assimilation policies of the past in new forms today. As TRC Honorary Witness Wab Kinew said, “The truth about reconciliation is this: It is not a second chance at assimilation. It should not be a kinder, gentler evangelism, free from the horrors of the residential school era. Rather, true reconciliation is a second chance at building a mutually respectful relationship.”⁵⁸

The words of the apologies will ring hollow if Canada’s actions fail to produce the necessary social, cultural, political, and economic change that benefits Aboriginal peoples and all Canadians.

A just reconciliation requires more than simply talking about the need to heal the deep wounds of history. Words of apology alone are insufficient; concrete actions on both symbolic and material fronts are required. Reparations for historical injustices must include not only apology, financial redress, legal reform, and policy change, but also the rewriting of national history and public commemoration.

In every region of the country, Survivors and others have sent a strong message, as received by this Commission: for reconciliation to thrive in the coming years, Canada must move from apology to action.

Canada’s apology

June 11, 2008, was an important day for the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, and for the country as a whole. It has come to be known as the “Day of the Apology,” the day when Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and the leaders of all other federal political parties, formally apologized in the House of Commons for the harms caused by the residential school system. In their presentations to the TRC, many Survivors clearly recalled the day of the apology. They recalled where they were, who they were with, and, most importantly, how they felt. Many spoke of the intense emotions they had when they heard the prime minister acknowledge that it had been wrong for the government to have taken them away from their families for the purpose of “killing the Indian” in them. They talked of the tears that fell when they heard the words “We are sorry.”