

Published | Publié: 2021-06-07
Received | Reçu: 2021-06-07 04:03 (EST)



Hill Times

It's time Canadians, government finally deal with and embrace truth and reconciliation, says Bellegarde

Indigenous leaders say they hope Canadians and the government will finally embrace truth and reconciliation after the remains of 215 Indigenous children were discovered at a former residential school in Kamloops, B.C. two weeks ago. Once one of the largest residential schools in the country, located in Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc territory, the school operated from 1890 through to 1969.

Mike Lapointe

The discovery of the remains of 215 Indigenous children close to the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia two weeks ago has rocked the Canadian political world and shocked Canadians. One week later, **MPs**, Senators, and Indigenous leaders are taking stock of this dark chapter of Canadian history, including Assembly of First Nations Chief Perry Bellegarde, who says "the little ones are speaking to us all, and we're starting to listen and to hear them."

Mr. Bellegarde told The Hill Times that he "hopes and prays that this is truly a moment we can seize and foster a better relationship with Canadians and this government, and finally deal with embracing truth and reconciliation."

"The little ones are speaking to us all, and I think we're starting to listen and to hear them," said Mr. Bellegarde. "But we need truth before reconciliation healing."

MPs participated in a lengthy take-note debate on June 1 addressing the discovery of the remains of the children last weekend. Once one of the largest residential schools in the country, located in Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc territory, the school operated from 1890 through to 1969.

The leaders of the **Liberal**, Conservative, **Bloc Québécois**, and **Green** Party parliamentary leader **Elizabeth May** (Saanich-Gulf Islands, B.C.) all participated in the four-hour debate.

"The discovery last week of 215 children buried on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School is a sad reminder of Canada's genocidal actions against Indigenous peoples," said **NDP** Leader **Jagmeet Singh** (Burnaby South, B.C.). "First Nations, survivors, elders, leaders, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation and others are calling for action to confront this history and help bring about closure."

Mr. Bellegarde questioned why it's taking so long for the federal government to implement the 94 calls for action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

"Why is it taking so long for implementation? It's been six years. Calls to action 71 to 76 talk about the need to identify and document and maintain and commemorate, not only Kamloops in the site there, but all of the 130 residential schools were operated and maintained," said Mr. Bellegarde.

"Greater energy and effort must be done to implement all of the calls to action, but right now, we're focused on the little ones, and there has to be more light shone upon this dark time and what happened to children," said Mr. Bellegarde.

"No one can deny the genocide of our people, no one can deny that the residential schools were a genocide, because the horrific evidence is right there," said Mr. Bellegarde.

"It broke down self, it broke down family, it broke down community, it broke down nationhood," he said. "Everything good about First Nations is no good-your language is no good, your ceremonies are no good, your beautiful long hair is cut, your names are no good. They were killing the Indian in the child," said Mr. Bellegarde, who added that in overcrowded residential schools, tuberculosis was rampant, food was inadequate, and the children were abused mentally, physically, and sexually.

The Indian Act of 1876 was another major destructive force for First Nations people, said Mr. Bellegarde.

"We couldn't leave the reserves without a permit until 1951. We didn't have access to legal counsel until 1951. It was illegal to provide legal advice to a treaty Indian right up until 1951, and we couldn't even vote until 1961.

"We need to educate Canadians. People need to know the real history and why it's difficult," said Mr. Bellegarde, calling this an "intergenerational trauma."

On June 4, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner called on Canadian authorities and the Catholic Church to conduct "prompt and thorough investigations" into the discovery of the mass grave containing the remains of over 200 children at the Kamloops school.

"We urge the authorities to conduct full-fledged investigations into the circumstances and responsibilities surrounding these deaths, including forensic examinations of the remains found, and to proceed to the identification and registration of the missing children," said UN officials in a press release.

The UN called on the Canadian government "to undertake similar investigations in all other Indigenous residential schools in the country."

"The judiciary should conduct criminal investigations into all suspicious death and allegations of torture and sexual violence against children hosted in residential schools, and prosecute and sanction the perpetrators and concealers who may still be alive," it said.

'Every Canadian seems deeply touched and hurt,' says Senator Independent Senator **Dan Christmas**, a member of the Mi'kmaw Nation of Nova Scotia.

Sen. Christmas told The Hill Times that he was amazed how the story has been reverberating through the country.

"It's quite astounding and amazing that every Canadian seems deeply touched and hurt by what happened," said Sen. Christmas. "But at the same time, I'm worried because now a lot of effort and dollars have to go into searching other sites, and I'm worried that there will be even worse mass graves."

"Not only we as Indigenous people will deal with it, but as Canadians as whole, and what that will do to our own psyche? Because this is really very shameful, and I've heard so many non-Indigenous Canadians say this, including Senators, that they are ashamed of their race."

"Canada can get through this, it's just going to take some time," said the Senator.

Independent Senator **Mary Jane McCallum** (Manitoba) was forced into a residential school at the age of five. In an emotional address to the Senate on June 1, she said the children buried near the Kamloops school "were 215 beautiful, innocent, trusting little spirits that believed in their hearts that it would all work out."

"They missed their families and never understood how they came to be where they were," she said.

"One of my most persistent emotions in residential school was overwhelming loneliness and a bewildering feeling of abandonment. It was so unlike my family. I came to realize that abandonment by my parents was not the issue, but that I was abandoned by the system, whether it was the church or the government who initiated and perpetuated the kidnappings."

"This is Canada-our hearts are broken. Canada is broken," said Sen. McCallum.

Green MP Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, N.B.) said in an interview she was "devastated" when she heard the news of the bodies discovered near the Kamloops residential school, and that a "feeling of grief descended upon, I think, all of Canada."

"It hits really hard, it hits close to home, and it's just devastating," said Ms. Atwin. "But to say that I didn't think this would someday be the headline that we're reading would be untrue, because I did an extensive study of residential schools, and so many survivors pointed to the fact that there would be many found in mass graves. It's just heartbreaking."

Federal government must lead by example

Rose LeMay, CEO of the Indigenous Reconciliation Group and a Hill Times columnist, said in an interview that she was "kind of disgusted at Trudeau's lack of response."

"Canadians across the country have probably done more and said more than he has, and I sense there is a bit of tone [deafness] going on, and that he doesn't understand the magnitude of this," said Ms. LeMay.

Ms. LeMay said the federal government needs to lead by example, and that June 21 is an appropriate day for employees to learn more about residential schools.

"Some of the sources of the most abject racism are right in the federal government. They need to drop their defence on St. Anne's residential school immediately," said Ms. LeMay. "It's appalling."

The government has spent more than \$3-million fighting a lawsuit from survivors of St. Anne's residential school since 2013, the CBC reported last year.

The **Prime Minister's Office** referred questions from The Hill Times on the subject to the Department of Justice, which did not respond before deadline last week.

Carleton University professor Jane Dickson, who researches First Nations dispute resolution and restorative justice, told The Hill Times that she believes it is "absolutely imperative" that every residential school site be scoured to determine whether any children remain there, and to return any bodies found to their home communities so that proper burial practices can be held.

The technology exists to locate the burial sites, and it will require significant manpower to exhume the remains, as well as the involvement of elders and spiritual leaders to ensure that the exhuming of the bodies is done appropriately, according to Prof. Dickson.

"But I really think this is absolutely one of those moments where provincial governments and the federal government must not fall into deeply dysfunctional past practices, where all they do is lob a problem back and forth," said Prof. Dickson. "We have to stop that, it's just a different way of denying what's happening here, and a well-practiced way of avoiding responsibility and doing what's right."

NDP MP Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, Man.) said she thinks Canadians have to ask ourselves why we continue to lift up individuals who designed or implemented the residential school system with statues and buildings named after them.

"Can we please do better?" said Ms. Gazan.

The National Indian Residential School Crisis Line is available 24 hours a day at 1-866-925-4419.

mlapointe@hilltimes.com

The Hill Times

Url: <https://www.hilltimes.com/2021/06/07/its-time-canadians-government-finally-deal-with-and-embrace-truth-and-reconciliation-says-bellegarde/300165>