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Pope's apology disappointing, but opens a never-imagined conversation, like 'when the Berlin Wall came down,' say Indigenous Parliamentarians

Senator Mary Jane McCallum and **MP Blake Desjarlais** talk about victories, disappointments, and new motions in the House and **Senate**, following the visit to **Canada** by Pope Francis.

Ian Campbell

For **Senator Mary Jane McCallum**?-the only residential school survivor in the Red Chamber?-the Pope's apology in **Canada** left her disappointed for its failure to address "devastating" sexual abuse and more, but the visit launched a conversation she never thought the country would be having in her lifetime.

"It's like when the Berlin Wall came down," said the non-affiliated Manitoba **Senator** in an interview with The Hill Times.

Pope Francis departed Iqaluit, Nunavut, on July 29 to return to the Vatican after a six-day tour of **Canada** that also included stops in Quebec and Alberta. On the tour, Francis expressed sorrow multiple times for the role the Catholic Church played in operating the majority of **Canadian** residential schools for over a century.

McCallum was on hand for the [initial apology](#) in Maskwac s, Alta., on July 25 along with her two older sisters, who also attended residential school. The event held three major disappointments for her, beginning with the lack of acknowledgement by the Pope of sexual abuse.

"Sexual abuse is the most devastating form of abuse," said McCallum, explaining that at Guy Hill Residential School in Manitoba, which she attended from 1957 to 1968 from the ages of five to 16, at least 80 to 90 per cent of students there suffered this form of abuse. "So when that isn't mentioned-and it's at the root of a lot of the trauma that we still live-I wondered why he didn't acknowledge it."

McCallum said this was especially flagrant when Indigenous communities have been calling for the return of priests who committed abuse in order for them to face justice.

After many voices raised this issue following the initial apology, on July 28 while in Quebec City, Pope Francis described "the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable people" as "crimes that require firm action and an irreversible commitment."

Another major concern for McCallum was that women were not given any prominent role in the apology ceremony in Maskwac s.

"I really need to speak about women being left out of any meaningful interaction with the Pope," she said, emphasizing that Assembly of First Nations National Chief RoseAnne Archibald was not included in the ceremony.

"What I saw with that is the ongoing lateral violence by the church in not encouraging women to come forward-and also the chiefs and how colonized they are that they themselves have kept women out of the process," said McCallum.

Finally, McCallum pointed to the conditions created for the Pope to travel into Maskwac s, which included [paving the way](#) over a dirt road.

"When they paved the road for him, I thought, if he really wanted to know what people are going through, he should have been wheeled through all those ruts and the dust and the reality of Indigenous people on the reserve and what they have to live through," said McCallum. "But they paved it for him. To me, that says so much about the Church and privilege."

She described the visit as "a very, very challenging week," but said she was "absolutely glad" she went to hear the apology. She said it has opened up new possibilities, especially after the Pope called the residential school system a genocide on his

flight back to Rome.

"Now we can work with the Pope on moving forward," she said. "I think that him doing that really shows that he wants change as well, and the bishops in **Canada** will have a lot to do with reconciliation. I really believe that they're committed to reconciliation."

She added that she appreciated Francis personally making the journey, given his frail health having caused him to cancel other foreign visits recently.

Visit and response 'akin to a rainstorm,' says **MP** Desjarlais

NDP MP Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, Alta.), one of 11 Indigenous **MPs** in the **House of Commons**, also attended the July 25 apology in person, and said he has been reflecting on how different audiences have engaged with the pontiff's visit-before, during, and after his cross-**Canada** tour.

"I'd say it's akin to a rainstorm or something like that, where you have a lot of things happening at once, and so people are reacting very differently, said Desjarlais in an interview with The Hill Times.

He said there were "many different audiences," in terms of how Indigenous and non-Indigenous **Canadians** "are going to receive the Pope's visit and his apology," something which he observes in his work as an **MP**. Desjarlais spoke of one constituent in Edmonton who told him that she did not know why the Pope was coming to **Canada**. He said this highlights a "gap in space for **Canadians** to try to understand what this was even about."

<https://twitter.com/DesjarlaisBlake/status/1551671239621480448>

"In my imagination of what reconciliation looks like for Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people in **Canada**, let's say 100 years from now, I hope that we can learn to experience these things together in a way that doesn't silo our experiences from one another, that we're truly in this together," he said. "So I think there was a missed opportunity in some ways for the **Canadian** government, for **Canadians**, to join this discussion prior to the Pope's arrival."

He said within Indigenous communities there were also many different reactions, because the apology "did not go far enough," but the fact that the event took place should still be seen as a victory.

"What we see there is a different story. We have to think of the story of these survivors as really having no resources to challenge their trauma, and they've gathered those resources, their stories, their strength over the many decades, and they want a victory," he said. "We still have to see this, I think, as a victory for Indigenous people, because that's what it is."

"We have survivors, people who are meant to be destroyed by the church, coming back to the church, and the church having to look them directly in the eye and recognize that they failed. They largely failed in their ability to assimilate."

He said the recognition of these events by the Catholic Church is something that can have a long-term meaningful impact.

"I think that is something that these survivors can now give their children?-the full truth and recognition of that truth by the parties who committed that," he said. "And I think that level of truth is important for young Indigenous people to recognize, including myself, and my own healing journey of how I understand my trauma."

Desjarlais also said the pontiff's recognition the residential system constituted genocide was particularly significant, and that he wants to see the **House of Commons** do the same.

MP, Senator to press each Chamber on motions dealing with residential schools

In June last year, **NDP MP Leah Gazan** (Winnipeg Centre, Man.) tabled a motion seeking the unanimous consent from **MPs** to urge the government to recognize the residential school system constituted a genocide. The motion did not pass in the **House of Commons**, but Gazan has said that, in light of the remarks by the Pope, she plans to introduce a similar motion this fall.

In November 2021, McCallum also presented a motion in the **Senate** calling for the Chamber to acknowledge that "that racism, in all its forms, was a cornerstone upon which the residential school system was created."

McCallum said she hopes the events of the Pope's visit may help push that motion further. "But if nothing happens with it, I

have put it on the floor," said McCallum, who has been reaching out to **Senators** asking them to speak on the issue when the Upper Chamber returns in the fall.

"And if people don't, then that's the legacy of **Senate**," she said. "We'll see what happens, but always I am hopeful that we will move forward, with or without the Pope."

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