

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

Tuesday, May 1, 2007

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

Business of Supply

Opposition Motion--Indian Residential Schools

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, we are here in this House today to discuss an important motion, a motion which impacts thousands of aboriginal Canadians across this country.

The motion asks for the House to apologize to the survivors of Indian residential schools for the trauma that they have suffered as a result of policies intended to assimilate first nations, Inuit and Métis children causing the loss of aboriginal culture, heritage and language while also leaving a very sad legacy of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. An apology is the right thing to do.

We must ask ourselves as parliamentarians, why are we here today discussing this motion brought forward by the Liberal Party? We are here in this House discussing this Liberal opposition day motion because the Conservative government has refused to apologize to the thousands of survivors who were affected from the trauma, suffering and embarrassment when they attended residential schools. These survivors deserve an apology.

It is unfortunate that since taking office the Conservative government has actually turned its back on aboriginal Canadians across this country. The Conservatives did it when they cancelled the Kelowna accord. They did it by refusing to apologize as a government to the survivors of those who attended residential schools.

We all know the facts. The residential schools were places of disease. They were places of hunger. They were places where there was overcrowding and there was despair. Many children died as a result of the suffering, the trauma and the embarrassment that they had endured.

It is unfortunate that the government has refused to step up to the plate. Since forming the government, the Conservatives have refused to show any leadership. They have refused to take action and actually do the right thing and apologize to the survivors.

During the Liberals' time in government a new era of cooperation began between the first nations and the government with the establishment of a new aboriginal affairs cabinet committee and a secretariat, as well as a Canada aboriginal peoples round table process. The process was actually based on overarching principles of partnership and of respect, of working in collaboration and in conjunction with each other to address some of the issues. All of those concepts seem very foreign to the Conservative government.

In May 2005 the previous Liberal government and the Assembly of First Nations, the AFN, took an important step in recognizing the need for reconciliation and healing. They signed an accord that outlined their joint commitment to compensate for abuses in the Indian residential schools.

We have seen the leadership that was provided by former prime minister Paul Martin. There was leadership provided by Phil Fontaine---

(1545)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer):

I remind the hon. member that the previous prime minister is still a member of this House and we cannot refer to him by his proper name.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, my apologies.

This cooperation between the former Liberal government and the AFN culminated in a formal agreement. It included a national apology. It included a compensation process for victims of sexual and physical abuse. It included a lump sum payment for former students. It included a truth and reconciliation commission with national and regional processes, as well as funding for an Aboriginal Healing Foundation. It was a step in the right direction to overcome this black mark in our history.

In November 2005, while continuing to build on the principles of partnership and respect, the former Liberal government successfully brought together Canada's first ministers and aboriginal leaders in Kelowna, British Columbia. They signed the Kelowna accord. This historic \$5 billion investment included money for education, included investments for housing and infrastructure, included investments for health care, included investments for economic opportunities for the aboriginal and first nations communities, and included investments for relationship building and accountability.

In addition to the Kelowna accord funding, a variety of funding mechanisms, initiatives and resources were provided to ensure that we would provide compensation for the direct benefit of former students and toward a fair and lasting resolution of the legacy of Indian residential schools. There were investments to ensure that aboriginal communities would benefit through such things as early learning and child care programs and housing on reserves. We ensured that we would build relationships to allow aboriginal and first nations children and young people the opportunity to go to school, to get post-secondary education. We ensured that the aboriginal communities would share in the gas tax revenues and that we would invest in aboriginal businesses and housing.

The initiatives were many, but unfortunately, one of the first acts of the Conservative government was to turn its back on aboriginal Canadians by ripping up the Kelowna accord. The Conservative government failed as a result to invest in health care, to invest in education, to invest in opportunities for aboriginal Canadians.

The after-effects of the suffering that has been endured by the survivors of Indian residential schoolchildren continues to plague aboriginal people in this country.

I was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and as such, I have seen and heard stories first-hand from some of the survivors. I have seen the impact on the survivors as a result of their being in the residential schools. Each and every one of them has been impacted. This painful legacy continues to affect over 80,000 survivors in this nation to this day.

For many of those who attended these schools, the scars from the emotional, physical and sexual abuse remain. They suffer from shame and embarrassment, and nightmares. We only need look at some of the challenges that plague the aboriginal communities across the country to realize that. There is widespread alcoholism, drug abuse, violence. There are high suicide rates in these communities. These are issues the survivors are still struggling with as a result of the impact of the trauma that they suffered in residential schools.

What is more, the policies of assimilation that were adopted by many of these schools have resulted in diminishing important cultural traditions that the aboriginal community had. It has diminished valuable aspects of the aboriginal culture, heritage and language. Rather than encouraging a sense of pride and confidence in their cultures and the traditions of their communities, their experiences at these schools have resulted in their being demoralized and ashamed of their culture and traditions.

A simple apology is not a lot to ask for, but for the survivors of the residential schools, it is an integral part of their healing process.

(1550)

After much stalling by the Conservative government, and after much persistence by some of the opposition parties, the Conservatives finally agreed to implement the \$2.2 billion residential school agreement that had been reached by the former Liberal government. The government still refuses to issue a national apology. The Minister of Indian Affairs claims that after the truth and reconciliation commission he may decide to issue an apology. That will be five years from now.

I would urge the government to do the right thing, to show some leadership and to take some action. I urge the government to stand in the House and support this important motion. I urge the government and the minister to do the right thing and apologize to all survivors of residential schools in this country.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I grew up in Winnipeg too and I have lived around aboriginal communities all my life. The motion calls on the House to apologize. I believe we have said that the House is certainly prepared to do that; certainly we are.

The Government of Canada has apologized. It apologized in 1998. Apparently that apology is not good enough for the member and I can understand that. It was an apology from the Liberal government at the time and I probably would not be satisfied with that either.

I would like to point out that it would appear that all of these troubles started on January 23, 2006, but they have been going on for quite a while. I think if people were to look at the record they would find there are probably more years of shame under a collection of Liberal governments than there ever have been under a Conservative government.

I would like to ask the hon. member, does she acknowledge the fact that the Government of Canada apologized in 1998? Does she understand that the House, and not the Government of Canada, is being asked to apologize? We are willing to go along with that. Does she acknowledge that there is enough shame to go around on all governments throughout the history of Canada on this whole file?

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, if we were to go down memory lane the hon. member would realize that in 1998 it was actually a statement of reconciliation. It was an initiative that was undertaken by a former Liberal government.

We must realize that the new Conservative government is now in power. It must do the right thing and honour an agreement that was made between the AFN and the previous Liberal government. It must do the right thing, honour that agreement in its entirety and issue an apology on behalf of the government.

If the minister were listening to the survivors of these schools and to aboriginal Canadians he would realize that all of them want him to keep his word. They want him to have the integrity to do the right thing and apologize on behalf of the government, which is the Conservatives.

If the Liberals were in government, they would be issuing an apology. The Liberals would honour their word.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP):

Mr. Speaker, my riding in northwestern British Columbia is about 35% first nations. Many, if not all, families in my region are touched by this issue. They are either descendants or people immediately affected by the travesty of residential schools.

One of the things that Canadians find most distasteful about politics is when serious and complex issues are brought in for partisan reasons and when attacks are made at a partisan level.

In the debate today, and I will cast aspersions in both directions on this, there is a temptation within the political sphere to continue to attack an opponent while using an issue which should never be used for such purposes.

The fact of the matter is in this country today first nations people are surviving the effects of residential schools under a burden which under no circumstances should we ever find tolerable.

We in this House need to seek substantive improvements in the quality of life for first nations people from coast to coast to coast, particularly those that were most affected by this tragedy in our collective national history, not any one party's, but our collective national history.

I would ask the member to speak for a moment on the need for that type of depth in the debate.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, I could not agree more with the hon. member. It is really important that all parliamentarians put aside our partisanship and do the right thing and issue an apology to the survivors who have suffered the physical abuse, the trauma and the embarrassment.

I can say that having been born and raised in Winnipeg and having attended school in an inner-city neighbourhood I have heard some of the stories first hand. Some of the parents of children with whom I went to school went to residential schools. Their stories are absolutely heartbreaking.

When we speak in the House today it is with that passion and that voice. Many of the members on this side and on all sides of the House have that same passion and commitment. That is why it is important that all of us work together to ensure that the government and the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development step up to the plate and do the right thing and issue an apology. It is a matter of integrity and ensuring that we close one of the darkest chapters in our country's history.