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Native Indians offer accounts of state abuse

By Lorraine Mallinder

An unusual crowd has gathered outside the Queen Elizabeth, one of Montreal's swankiest hotels. Afternoons usually see the city's well-heeled drop by for high tea, but today there's a ragtag gathering of native Indians puffing on cigarettes under the awnings.

They've come here for the biggest show in town, to testify at Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For three years now, the commission has been on a nationwide tour, trying to make amends for the country's disastrous attempt to assimilate its natives.

From the late 19th century right up to the nineties, native children were forced to attend church-run residential schools so they could learn how to think, speak and act like white people. Parents who resisted were threatened with prison.

Not for nothing is it called Canada's shameful secret. Abandoned to their fate, many suffered sexual, physical and mental abuse. Tuberculosis claimed many lives. There are heart-wrenching tales of children dying of exposure as they tried to run away.

The hotel's conference room is packed to the rafters as Romeo Saganash talks about his ten years at a school in the Quebec town of La Tuque. The federal MP is a native success story, who comes across as a confident, self-assured type.

But, he breaks down as he remembers his little brother Johnny, who was sent to a different school at the age of six. A year later, the boy died. The family was never told what had happened. There was no death certificate.

Forty years later, his mother found the place where her little boy was buried. "And, you know, I've often seen my mother cry," says Saganash. "But I've never seen my mother cry like that. Never.

"I look normal, but I could never be normal," he says. "And none of these kids who were sent to these schools could claim to be normal today. It's impossible."

There's not a dry eye in the house. Boxes of tissues are being handed out. Specially trained counsellors step in to offer comfort to the distressed. It's mass therapy in the full glare of the public eye.

Some of the most powerful stories are told in private. One lost-looking woman joins a healing circle behind closed doors. For years, she's been having nightmares. "I didn't plan on speaking," she says. "I came in the hopes of finding pictures. To see if there was some truth to what I experience nightly."

At the age of five, she was taken away from her parents. The government agent promised she would be joining her sisters at her new school. The car journey seemed interminable. "I puked all the way," she says. Once she got there, she discovered her sisters weren't there after all. She was on her own.

Her raw account of the sexual abuse she went on to suffer makes for difficult viewing. She begins to cry, filling the room with her pain. A counsellor places a comforting hand on her shoulder, making her flinch. "Don't touch me," she says.

Outside, there's light relief – stalls selling feathered jewellery, dream catchers, fringed leather jackets and other native crafts. An Inuit room features a tent decorated with fur rugs. And, Indian healers perform cleansing rituals with smoking sage branches.

At the far end: the corner of shame. How else to describe the remorseful clerics at stands strewn with photo albums compiled for the occasion? Countless young faces look out from black and white photos, unaware of the years of trauma that lie ahead.

At another desk, government officials hand out application forms for compensation. People who were abused at residential schools are eligible for a \$100,000 payment. With nearly 40,000 claimants, it's expected the total tab could top \$4bn.

Will it work?

The Canadian government is clearly keen to sort out this dreadful mess once and for all. But, irrespective of much money is thrown at the problem, reconciliation will not happen without truth. And, the government has so far been extremely uncooperative on that front.

Millions of documents essential to the commission's investigation have yet to be released. Despite a court order to turn over its archives three months ago, the government has not yet budged. Time is running out if the commission's final report, due next year, is to contain the whole truth.

Katherine Sorbey isn't buying the government's attempts at reconciliation. The indomitable M'ikmaq elder from Nova Scotia takes to the stage in her straw hat, red tracksuit top and dangly silver earrings and gives it all she's worth.

She's done all her crying, she says. And now, she's "pissed off" that, having offered money to victims, the government is now "giving itself a pat on the back". There's a feeling of release in the room as the crowd starts clapping.

"We have to speak out. We can no longer have our hats in our hands, bowed down. This hat is going to stay here and I'm not going to take it off," she roars.

The crowd goes wild. At last, it feels like the therapy is working.

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