

Motion on papal apology for residential schools fails to get unanimous consent

A motion calling on the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) to invite Pope Francis to apologize for Indian Residential failed to get unanimous consent April 18 in the House of Commons.

NDP MP Charlie Angus expressed disappointment that one backbench Conservative MP had blocked the motion from passing, but said the motion would come up for debate and a vote in the House in the coming weeks, noting they were looking at options on when it will happen.



NDP MP Charlie Angus

In a press conference earlier in the day, Angus had said there were two defendants in the systemic abuse at the schools, the Government of Canada and the churches. In passing the motion, it will be one defendant telling the other to do the right thing, he said.

Angus said any previous expressions of sorrow or regret by previous popes about the actions of some individuals have failed to acknowledge the “systemic nature” of the abuse at the schools. That’s why it is important for Pope Francis to make the apology, he said. “It’s the CCCB that’s the impediment here.”

Angus had gained support of the Liberals, the Bloc Quebecois and the Green Party Leader for unanimous consent, but the Conservative caucus had decided earlier in the day to allow a free vote on the motion.

“We pride ourselves in Canada on the separation of church and state, and we have a government that likes to impose values tests,” the Conservatives’ Indigenous Affairs critic Cathy McLeod told journalists, noting the Canada Summer Jobs attestation.

After Question Period, when Angus introduced the motion, one Tory MP said, “No.”

Garnett Genuis, the Conservative MP for Sherwood Park-Fort Saskatchewan, told journalists he refused to give consent because he thought Parliament should not be “dictating” to any religious entity on how to run its affairs or how to engage in reconciliation.

Stressing the principle of separation of church and state, Genuis said such a motion would be an unprecedented move on the part of Parliament in relation to a religion, he said.



Conservative MP Garnett Genuis

Genuis said the Catholic dioceses and religious orders that were involved in the schools had apologized and paid compensation for their role in running the schools. Whether the Pope should come and apologize, he said is a matter for the Catholic Church to decide.

Earlier in the day, the president and vice president of the CCCB held a news conference on Parliament Hill to attempt to “clear up misconceptions and inaccuracies” related to the motion.

Joining them from via telephone conferencing was Irving Papineau, a Mohawk from Akwesasne and vice-chair of the Canadian Catholic Aboriginal Council. Papineau said a papal apology is “not much talked about” in his community.

“What is needed is not more words, but local initiatives and programs,” he said, noting Indigenous communities are diverse and need “tailor made” instead of a one-size fits all solutions.

CCCB President Lionel Gendron of Saint-Jean-Longueuil told the news conference that it is not true Pope Francis has refused to apologize, only that he could not personally respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Call to Action No. 58 that makes specific criteria for an apology and includes a request the Pope do so on Canadian soil within a year.

Gendron and CCCB vice-president Richard Gagnon noted that Pope Benedict XVI had apologized in 2009 and his apology had been accepted by the then national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Phil Fontaine.

Fontaine, however, had told the CBC that the CCCB was taking his words out of context.

“I would never say anything to diminish what happened nine years ago, but I also call on the Catholic Church, and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, to honour its commitment to reconciliation and healing,” Fontaine said.



Former AFN Chief Phil Fontaine

When challenged by journalists about Fontaine’s comments, Bishop Gendron said, “This is what he said,” referring to his remarks after Pope Benedict XVI’s apology, but “ if he has changed his position since then” that is his choice.

The Pope is “open to coming to Canada and what the Pope says to Indigenous people is what he determines is best, pastorally speaking,” Archbishop Gagnon said, noting he could not “articulate what the Pope will say.”

The bishops said the Pope has been invited to Canada by the current and past

two CCCB presidents, and reiterated he may still come to Canada.

Angus responded to the bishops' news conference with one of his own that included the former TRC chairman Senator Murray Sinclair, and two residential school survivors.

"We are very disheartened to see the obfuscation of historical facts," Angus said.

"For the Canadian Catholic Bishops to say the Catholic Church as a whole was not involved with residential schools is irresponsible, historical revisionism."

Angus also spoke of the Church's hierarchical structure, with the Pope at the head. "The CCCB is the voice of the Catholic Church in Canada," he said.

"There has not been a single apology that has recognized the systemic nature of the crime," he said.

Sinclair pointed out 70 per cent of the schools were run by the Roman Catholic Church. "Now for the Church to hide behind the legal entities it created," he said. "It's a shame."

"We have no difficulty looking behind legal charades" to create entities to protect the Church's assets, Sinclair said.

He called the efforts to indoctrinate children by destroying their language and culture "cultural genocide."

NDP MP Romeo Saganash, a survivor of residential schools, said he was so disgusted by the bishops' remarks that he had to leave the room. "I don't think there's an intention to apologize to survivors," he said.

"We were taught the Pope was the highest authority," said Evelyn Korkmaz, a St. Anne's Residential School survivor. "We were taught our Indigenous ways were the work of the devil."

"What was done to us as children was a crime against humanity," she said. "I would accept an apology today, tomorrow or two years from now."

A spokesman from Infrastructure and Communities Minister Amarjeet Sohi's office said the Liberals have been working with Angus to improve the motion.

"The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action provide a roadmap for the journey of reconciliation and our government is committed to working with all partners to ensure all of the Calls to Action are implemented," said Brook Simpson, spokesperson for Sohi who represents the Edmonton-Mill Woods riding.

"Call to Action 58 calls on the Pope to issue an apology to residential school Survivors, their families, and communities. We continue to believe an apology

from the Pope, on behalf of the Catholic Church, is an important step in acknowledging the past and moving toward Reconciliation.”