

The Origins of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation

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Every September 30, people across Canada observe the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. The day honours the children who never returned home from residential schools, as well as Survivors, their families, and their communities. Understanding its origins means learning about a difficult part of Canada's history and the people who maintained that the truth needed to be heard.

For more than a century, the Canadian government and several churches operated residential schools for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children. Many children were taken far from their families and communities. They were often forbidden from speaking their languages or maintaining their cultural traditions. Many experienced neglect and abuse, and thousands died while attending the schools. The effects of this system continue to affect families and communities today.

Survivors spent many years fighting to have their experiences recognized. Their efforts helped lead to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. As part of that agreement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada began its work in 2008. The Commission travelled across the country, listening to Survivors and collecting their stories. By sharing the truth, Survivors helped Canadians gain a clearer understanding of what had happened and why reconciliation requires continuing action.

In 2015, the Commission released its final report and 94 Calls to Action. Call to Action 80 asked the federal government, working with Indigenous peoples, to establish a statutory holiday called a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. The purpose would be to honour Survivors, their families, and their communities and to maintain public remembrance of the history and legacy of residential schools.

September 30 was already important because of Orange Shirt Day. The movement grew from the story of Phyllis Webstad, a residential school Survivor from the Stswecem'c Xget'tem First Nation. In 1973, when Phyllis was six years old, she arrived at the residential school in Williams Lake, British Columbia, wearing a new orange shirt. The shirt was taken from her. Years later, sharing this experience helped inspire Orange Shirt Day and its message that Every Child Matters.

In 2021, Parliament passed legislation making September 30 the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a federal statutory holiday. The day is not simply about remembering the past. It is about listening, learning, and maintaining a commitment to reconciliation. Canadians can continue gaining knowledge by hearing Indigenous voices, learning local histories, and considering how truthful understanding can support respectful relationships now and in the future.