

Exoneration Speech by Prime Minister Trudeau in the House of Commons March 26, 2018

Today, we come together in the presence of the Tsilhqot'in Chiefs, to fully acknowledge the actions of past governments, committed against the Tsilhqot'in people, and to express the Government of Canada's profound regret for those actions.

We also come together out of recognition and respect for the Tsilhqot'in Nation – a vital partner in Canada's ongoing nation-to-nation efforts towards reconciliation.

Today, we honour and recognize six Tsilhqot'in chiefs.

Men who were treated and tried as criminals in an era where both the colonial government and the legal process did not respect the inherent rights of the Tsilhqot'in people, and the Tsilhqot'in Nation.

As the Government and the people of Canada continue to come to terms with our colonial past, it is essential that we recognize and support the implementation of the rights of the Tsilhqot'in – and all Indigenous Peoples – enshrined in our Constitution.

The recognition and implementation of Indigenous rights can wait no longer.

And neither should the Tsilhqot'in people

continue to wait for an apology that is long overdue.

Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Tsilhqot'in people cared for and protected their homelands.

In the spring of 1864, the Tsilhqot'in chiefs led a war party, in defence of those homelands.

The chiefs were attempting to repel a colonial road crew that wanted to build a road through Tsilhqot'in territory without any legal agreement with the Tsilhqot'in Nation.

The rights of the Tsilhqot'in people to the land, and their right to maintain and uphold their cultural and legal traditions, were not considered by the colonial government of the day.

As settlers came to the land in the rush for gold, no consideration was given to the needs of the Tsilhqot'in people who were there first. No agreement was made to access their land. No consent was sought.

At the same time, along with settlement came smallpox, which devastated Indigenous communities across the continent, including the Tsilhqot'in.

Some reliable historical accounts indicate that the Tsilhqot'in had been threatened with the spread of the disease by one of the road workers.

And so, faced with these threats, the Tsilhqot'in people took action to defend their territory.

After convening a council to declare war, they attacked the road crew near Bute Inlet and removed all settlers from their lands, before taking refuge in their territory beyond the reach of the colonial militia.

Not long after, one of the leaders of the colonial militia, Gold Commissioner William Cox, sent the Tsilhqot'in chiefs a sacred gift of tobacco and, with it, an invitation to discuss terms of peace.

Head War Chief Lhats'as'in and his men accepted this truce.

As a show of good will, they rode into the camp to negotiate peace.

Instead of being welcomed as leaders and respected warriors, they were arrested, imprisoned, convicted and killed.

On October 26, 1864, five Tsilhqot'in chiefs were hanged for murder: Head War Chief Lhats'as'in, Chief Biyil, Chief Tilaghd, Chief Taqed and Chief Chayses.

They are buried in Quesnel, BC.
Later, Chief Ahan was also hanged.
He is buried in New Westminster, BC.

Today our government acknowledges what the colonial government of the day was unwilling to accept: that these six chiefs were leaders and warriors of the Tsilhqot'in Nation, and that the Tsilhqot'in people they led maintained rights to land that had never been ceded.

Even though the colonial government did not recognize these rights, the chiefs acted in accordance with their own laws to defend their territory, their people, and their way of life.

They acted as leaders of a proud and independent nation facing a threat from another nation.

When they came to meet with colonial officials, they did so on a diplomatic mission, expecting to be treated with dignity and honour.

Their capture and arrest by the colonial government demonstrated a profound lack of respect for the Tsilhqot'in people, as did the refusal to recognize Tsilhqot'in as a nation.

Those are mistakes that our government is determined to set right.

We now understand that the treatment of the Tsilhqot'in chiefs represented a betrayal of trust – an injustice that has been carried by the Tsilhqot'in people for more than 150 years.

Even as they have continued to fight for – and achieve – recognition as the owners and caretakers of their land.

Mr. Speaker, today the Tsilhqot'in people – including the descendants of those six chiefs – continue to live on and care for Tsilhqot'in lands.

They have never stopped fighting to preserve their territory and their culture, right up to the historic Supreme Court of Canada decision of June 26, 2014, which recognized Aboriginal title for the Tsilhqot'in Nation.

The Tsilhqot'in people and their leaders continue to show the same commitment to their land and to their nation that their chiefs did in 1864, pursuing government-to-government discussions with the Government of British Columbia and the Government of Canada, with the goal of reconciliation and recognition as a self-determining First Nation.

In February 2016, the Tsilhqot'in Nation and British Columbia signed the Nenqay Deni Accord, a significant step towards this goal.

Less than a year later, in January 2017, we signed a Letter of Understanding between the Government of Canada and the Tsilhqot'in Nation, marking another step towards reconciliation and recognition of

our nation-to-nation relationship.

Mr. Speaker, we know that the exoneration and the apology we are making today on behalf of Canada cannot, by itself, repair the damage that has been done.

But it is my sincere hope that these words will allow for greater healing as Canada and the Tsilhqot'in Nation continue on the shared journey towards reconciliation.

At the same time, we would do well to acknowledge that for the Tsilhqot'in people, the events of 1864 and 1865 are not confined to history.

As a people, in particular the mothers that have passed this history down through generations, the Tsilhqot'in have carried those events with them for more than a century and a half.

The actions of the government of the day have had a deep and lasting impact on the relationship between the Tsilhqot'in Nation and Canada.

Think of all we might have gained, Mr. Speaker, if proper relations between our nations had been established and maintained.

Think of what it might have meant for the Tsilhqot'in people to have true self-determination over their own future. Think of the economic opportunities that could have been realized.

Think of what Canada could have gained had we been open, those many years ago, to learning about the rich culture and traditions of the Tsilhqot'in people, and finding for it a lasting place within the fabric of Canada.

For the loss of that time and opportunity, we are truly sorry. As much as it is within our power to do so, we must right the wrongs of the past.

And so, as an important symbol of our commitment to reconciliation, we confirm without reservation that Chief Lhats'as'in, Chief Biyil, Chief Tilaghd, Chief Taqed, Chief Chayses, and Chief Ahan are fully exonerated of any crime or wrongdoing.

In the words of Chief Lhats'as'in, they meant war, not murder.

We recognize that these six chiefs were leaders of a nation, that they acted in accordance with their laws and traditions, and that they are well-regarded as heroes by their people.

I very much look forward to visiting the Declared Aboriginal Title lands of the Tsilhqot'in Nation this summer, at the invitation of the Tsilhqot'in leadership, to deliver this statement of exoneration directly to the Tsilhqot'in people, who have fought so long and so hard to have the commitment and sacrifice of their War Chiefs recognized.

Acknowledging and apologizing for past mistakes is an important part of renewing the relationship between Canada and the Tsilhqot'in Nation, but more hard work lies ahead.

To continue to work together in positive ways that affirm the government's respect and recognition of the rights of the Tsilhqot'in people.

To build a partnership that will support the Tsilhqot'in people as they continue to preserve and strengthen their culture and traditions, and govern and care for their territory as a flourishing nation.

To embrace the Tsilhqot'in Nation and its rich contributions to the country that we all call home.

To live up to the spirit of cooperation between our peoples, which has always been the unique strength and promise of Canada from its earliest days.

As we honour the courage and sacrifice shown by the Tsilhqot'in chiefs 154 years ago, we fulfill that strength and that promise.

And we do it as we always should have: in partnership, with respect.

Together.

Thank you.