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Reconciliation must bring peace *and* justice: Chartrand

Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people must bring peace and justice, acknowledge a common understanding of history and include an apology, First Nations Canadian Professor Paul Chartrand told a conference in Canberra today.

A Métis professor of law who served on the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1991-1996), Professor Chartrand said the truth of history had to be agreed.

“Truth is like spring ice, it’s thin and fragile and flexible – not brittle and hard like winter ice. Anyone can have a piece of it but it can only be held up with many hands. If anyone grasps too tightly it shatters at your feet.”

While reconciliation is associated with bringing peace and social harmony, that is a dangerous association, Professor Chartrand said.

“Peace can be imposed by brutal, violent means. We must have peace with justice – always.”

Professor Chartrand said there needs to be a bridge of reconciliation built to repair the history of the Crown’s relations with Indigenous peoples.

“If you want to be a bridge you shouldn’t worry that you get walked on by both sides once in a while,” he said.

While he originally doubted the value of apology from unwilling politicians, he said he changed his mind after speaking with hundreds of Indigenous women in Canada.

“Indigenous women in Canada told me stories of how afraid they were of the police. There is a fear of agents of a State that has a monopoly on power.

“The State has a duty to protect all of its peoples, so it’s important for those that control the State to say ‘do not fear – no more – not under our watch – you are safe,” Professor Chartrand said.

Artists, poets and other creative people were best placed to influence the way people think about reconciliation and Indigenous peoples, he said.

Professor Chartrand

Media: The conference concludes today at the Manning Clark Centre, ANU. Full conference program available at:

www.aiatsis.gov.au/research_program/events2/aiatsis_conf2007

Chris Ryan: 0408 688 026 chris.ryan@aiatsis.gov.au