

## **FORMER PM RAISES AWARENESS OF ABORIGINAL CHALLENGES**

Vincent McDermott  
Fort McMurray Today

Canada is failing to educate its aboriginal youth, said former Prime Minister Paul Martin during a Wednesday visit to Fort McMurray, and Canadians need to start encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit and appreciation for education in one of the nation's poorest demographics.

"The question we have to ask is, why do we expect aboriginal Canada to understand us, but we make so little attempt to understand them?" asked Martin, who was speaking at Father Mercredi Community Catholic School to launch the Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneur Program. "As young aboriginal Canadians make their mark, we need to be more understanding."

After leaving politics in 2008, Martin has tried to tackle challenges in Canada's aboriginal community through the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative.

The business-focused program will teach Aboriginal students in Grades 11 and 12 how to launch a business. The program will be worth school credit and is modeled after the Ontario Senior Business Studies curriculum, as well as an entrepreneurship program that has been implemented in 12 different countries.

It will also encourage them to stay in school, striving for knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the modern economy, as well as secondary and post-secondary education.

"We lived in this land for thousands of years. We lived off the land very simply. This very country has people from all over the world and we are still here," said Chief Vern Janvier of the Chipewyan Prairie First Nation. "But we have to take part in the new world, in the new reality that is here – the development of our resources."

Before serving as prime minister between 2003 and 2006, Martin first became aware of problems in indigenous communities in his youth.

As a teenager, Martin travelled to Canada's far north and started working along the Mackenzie River. Many of the friends he made were Inuit, First Nations or Metis.

"I grew up in Windsor, Ont., in southwestern Ontario," he said. "And it's very easy to live your whole life in southwestern Ontario and never meet a Canadian of aboriginal descent, something that's surprising to those living in western Canada."

While he says they were just as hard working and intelligent as other Canadians, many aboriginals felt they were stuck between two cultures, experiencing a sense of hopelessness and uncertainty regarding their future.

"For them, school had come to an end and there was nothing that was going to come after that," he said. "They didn't know where they were going to go."

In the following years, some had found success and were living well. Others had succumbed to suicide or a life of poverty.

“That stuck me, all my life,” he said.

The experience prompted Martin to create the Kelowna Accord of 2005, a \$5 billion, five-year plan to improve the lives of First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. It was the first time that the Prime Minister, the Premiers, Territorial leaders and Aboriginal leaders met in one place to discuss challenges facing Canada’s indigenous peoples.

However, Martin’s minority government fell 72 hours later, sparking a federal election that earned Stephen Harper’s Conservative Party a victory.

“Unfortunately, the current government did not continue it,” he said.

Still, he hopes that his non-profit will succeed where the Kelowna Accord did not.

“In the long term, this kind of a venture, the partnerships between ourselves and the high school, the school board, the donors, that’s a very powerful partnership,” said Martin. “You want to duplicate that right across the country.”