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## Cree Nation Response to Indian Residential Schools

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The events in Kamloops, BC where the remains of 215 children were uncovered has left communities across the country in shock. Polls have even been conducted which show that 68% of Canadians had little knowledge of the terrible legacy of Indian Residential Schools.

The chasm between indigenous and non-indigenous solitudes could not be more stark than at this present time. The graves recently discovered, and those yet to be found, do not represent history for indigenous people, they represent the reality of today; the colonial policies that led to these mass graves are at the root of the current high incarceration rates, social challenges, poor education outcomes, and high suicide rates that our communities deal with today. We have called for support in healing. Canadians have called for reconciliation. Both will be very difficult to achieve as long as we live such different realities, as long as we do not acknowledge very difficult truths, and as long as fail to undertake the uncomfortable exercise of trying to learn, understand and, take responsibility.

We live in an era where we have incredible opportunities to access and share information and yet paradoxically, we have never been more isolated and disconnected from one another. "I didn't know" is no longer an acceptable response or excuse. We all must find the courage, not only to face horrific moments in our shared history, but to actively challenge formally accepted points of view. The lens through which history is viewed must be critiqued; it must be redefined from a perspective that will allow for Canadians to learn stark truths, understand our present situation, and take responsibility for authentic actions of reconciliation. The time for unquestioning valorization of a troubling past is over. All of our children deserve to learn truths upon which to build a viable future.

Education is a sacred obligation of all societies, and we must ensure that the curricula across the country properly arm all students with the knowledge and lessons from the past. Schools, professional orders, and even religious orders have an important role in correcting the current deficiencies in all forms of public education. For too long shame, guilt and fear have motivated the suppression or destruction of records and information related to Indian Residential Schools.

If we are to truly process, understand and move forward from this terrible chapter in our history, we require access to all records and documents that attest to the atrocities experienced in Indian Residential Schools. Documents must also be archived and access guaranteed for future generations.

Indigenous youth must be provided with opportunities to understand how the fall-out from residential school experiences has affected the present reality of their communities, their nations and their families. Often times these experiences are too difficult to share for those that lived them. It will be an incredibly challenging exercise to balance this public interest against the potential to cause further harm and pain to those that have already endured so much. Therefore, all work in public education such as curriculum development, teaching, mental health support, or program implementation, must be done from a trauma-informed approach. No Government or religious institution will be able to undertake this alone; collaboration at a level never before seen in this country between Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments will be required. For our school system, this means added and increased support for support curriculum development, mental health and wellbeing, culture and language maintenance.

Public education moves beyond what happens in schools and post-secondary institutions. There must be a place where the public can learn, build understanding and come to terms with our past; a centre of recognition and commemoration. We are not simply calling for a museum to display the horrors of Indian Residential Schools for the people of urban centres in Quebec. We need to create a safe and solemn place where a mother of today, through a photograph can look into the eyes of another mother from the past who has had to let go of her most precious and vulnerable treasure to a foreign and terrifying institution; where a father of today can experience, in the image of the slumped shoulders of a Cree man, the anguish of being forced to realize that there was little he could do to protect his child or his family during a time of extreme oppression; we need a place where the youth of today can come to understand the experience of young people, so much like themselves, but who were taken and placed in Residential Schools among strangers who denied them their language, their culture, their dignity, their right to love and family. It will be through personal realizations like this that the healing and strengthening bonds of empathy will be built between all peoples. Museums have the power to assert our common humanity even when actions of genocide or dehumanization have taken place.

We cannot afford to forget. We cannot afford to deny. The residential school project was an act of dehumanization perpetrated by governments and religious orders. The discoveries of the graves of children, our nations' dearest treasures, only reminds us that we were never human in their eyes, only inconveniences to the project of colonization. The way forward is through education in all sectors, across this country. Education can be healing, but only if we commit to authentic and meaningful action. The journey will be difficult and so I welcome any who rise to the challenge of contributing to a collective effort that will allow us all – whether Indigenous or not – to move into a future that strengthens and sustains us all.