



June 14th, 2021

Cree Nation Response to Indian Residential Schools

Speaking Notes

Grand Chief Dr. Abel Bosum

We are here today with very mixed emotions. We sit here with full hearts because it has been 14 months since we have been able to sit together with fellow leaders and yet all our hearts are heavy and ache because we are going to address something that represents those darkest times of our history. As a survivor of Indian Residential Schools, news of the 215 children from Kamloops immediately brought back memories of our friends and classmates that never made it home, or even those that did but only as a shell of their former selves. At our regular COVID-19 briefing last week, when the conversation naturally turned to the aftermath of Kamloops, participants shared names of friends, cousins and siblings who never came home. Those 215 children are not unknown, there are people who know their names, see their faces and to this day feel their absence.

There are very challenging days ahead as we unearth family and friends across the country, to bring home what we can of those we lost and help other communities find as much as they can of their loved ones. We will need to honour all of these brave students. Aside from being careful not to unnecessarily harm former students, we need to be especially careful of our youth and our elders.

For years, our Youth have suffered and lived the aftermath of Indian Residential Schools with very little information or explanations as to how and why. Even though it will be hard we have to be careful to ensure they feel included and that we share as much with them as we can. Normally, you want to protect youth from ugly and terrible things, but we should not underestimate their strength and resilience. The youth of today deserve as much as the youth of yesterday; answers, explanations and resources to build a better tomorrow free from the terrible shadows of the past.

I held a lot of anger for many years against my mother thinking she had failed me, year after year letting me be taken away and mistreated for 11 months of the year. It would be years later as a parent and a grandfather that I only began to understand the depth of the pain and suffering of



the whole community every time we were taken away. Moving forward, no one should be left behind in efforts to restore and protect.

In Canada, over the last 25 years, we have seen the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the MMIWG Inquiry, the Viens Commission, the Joyce Echaquan Public Inquiry, to now in 2021, the Kamloops discovery re-exposing the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the systemic racism that it represents: what has changed? Unfortunately, still to this day there are denials and avoidance to the fact that there was indeed an intent of genocide on Indigenous peoples across Canada with immense repercussions. We will all have a role in building a better, fairer society.

The joint announcements of Ministers Lafrenière, Miller and Bennett this Saturday, that the governments would be there when we needed them without fights over jurisdiction were encouraging but they will need to understand that at this time in history, we are nervous and have doubts about the sincerity of these commitments. Words will not be enough as the bodies of more children are unearthed.

The Cree leadership is committed to leading the efforts to investigate the Indian Residential Schools on our territory and we will need access to the information from the religious orders that managed them. This is not about them, and we will not accept failure to cooperate fully. We will also demand the cooperation of governments in making sure that the religious orders that they mandated to manage these terrible institutions do comply.

To both levels of government, we will also be calling on you to make changes and adaptations to your laws, regulations and administrations to help us lift ourselves, our families and communities out of the past and honour all that have endured all aspects of residential schools, which will allow us to protect and preserve our rich language and culture. We will be calling on you to provide and prioritize the resources needed to build our own capacity to heal the deep wounds. You will receive correspondence from the Cree leadership to begin the hard work that lays ahead for us all.

God bless the Cree Nation.



Chief Daisy House

Our community of Chisasibi has been hit particularly hard by the news from Kamloops of the 215 children, as a community with 2 former sites of Indian Residential Schools the news revived terrible memories, fears and traumas. The knowledge that the remains of children will be found on grounds in our community, children that were taken from distant homes, is almost too much to bear. The community has a solemn obligation to these children, their families and their people. Despite the already heavy burden on the people of my community we intend to take actions to secure the sites in a manner that is respectful of this solemn obligation.

We have an opportunity as a community with two former Indian Residential School Sites to show other communities, that we share their pain, we cherish their children, and we care for the spirit of their community. We will be reaching out to the families and communities of all students that passed through the doors of the Indian Residential Schools at Fort George and will we need the assistance of all government organizations and Churches that have any records to help ensure that we are as inclusive as possible. Moving forward will not only be the challenge of securing and documenting the past but will involve the difficult challenge of commemorating these sites in a way that does not cause further victimization or cause unnecessary pain but captures the love and compassion that we feel for all children who attended, the love and compassion that we feel for their families and communities.

There is something very important that I feel I must communicate to the rest of Quebec and Canada. Although there have been attempts to address the impacts of Indian Residential Schools in the past through individual compensation measures or formal apologies there is an important component which we have yet to address. Community.

We are a people who from birth and through ceremonies such as the walking out ceremony where a child's first steps are celebrated through recognition of the place this child takes in the fabric that binds our people, the land and wildlife together. This deep spiritual connection is nurtured and celebrated throughout our lifetime. Children and youth to this day make up the most significant segment of our communities. When you take one of our children, when you torture that child in an attempt to kill their spirit or when you take a child away forever, you do profound damage to the soul of our community. The damage goes far beyond the damage that is done to an individual Indian Residential School Student and it never goes away. What do I say to a grandmother who to this day gets upset when we disturb the footprints of a child because during the most painful time in her life, all she could do was preserve the footprints of her children as long as she could, because this was all she would have of them 11 months of every year?



Here in Chisasibi we have brave and courageous community members that have formed groups to console and assist the former students and community members that struggle with the terrible legacy of Indian Residential Schools. These groups are supported and guided by Elders' that hold and fulfill sacred roles in our communities. It is these groups that will lead the management of the former sites of Indian Residential Schools in our community. The potential to cause great harm by not respecting the role of these groups is very high. The administration and leadership of the Cree Nation of Chisasibi will be there to support them and we will ensure that fellow administrations such as the Cree Nation Government, the Cree School Board, Cree Board of Health and Social Services and Eenu Eeyou Police Force also fulfill this same obligation.

I would like to personally thank all people, officials and organizations that have offered support and assistance during these very trying times. For those of you that only now begin to realize the depths of the horrors that our communities have lived and ask what you can do: do not forget us, or our children. You honour us and them by never forgetting and showing understanding and patience whenever you interact with us. Your prayers and compassion are felt and appreciated.

God bless you all. Thank you.

Bertie Wapachee

The legacy of damage caused by Indian Residential Schools has left our families in pain and our communities in pain which need help far beyond the capacity of any one administration or organization. Since 1975 the promise of the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement through Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay was a health care service with the necessary adaptations reflective of the particular needs of our people and our communities. It is not lost on us that not every First Nation has a Treaty they can rely on to get the Federal and Provincial governments to the table to address health care needs and instead find themselves falling through the cracks of jurisdictional denial of both governments.

We must not take for granted that it is not only between levels of Government where we can find excuses as to why communities lack the resources they need to deal with the collective inter generation traumas associated with Indian Residential School. Health care, justice, public security and youth protection agencies will need to work together to address the repercussions of violence that comes from years of neglect of deep emotional wounds. My administration will be open when called upon to collaborate and I will not accept being told to stay in my lane should my organization feel the need to call on a partner agency for assistance.



It has taken many years to get where we are today and yet still, we have so far to go. We have a special specific program and staff to deal with the traumas of Indian Residential School but is not in every community and although they work tirelessly, they are too few. Unfortunately, substance abuse is unsurprisingly too common in our communities where we have not been proactive enough to develop and promote therapies and programs to help people manage their pains and traumas in healthier ways. Yet still to this day we do not have a treatment center on our territory, and we follow the dangerous practice of sending people away in the name of helping them. Our land is a healing land, it does not make sense that in 2021 we still do not have the land-based treatment facilities or programs needed to help our people manage old wounds.

October 7th, 2019 we signed a new Agreement to develop new resources, new programs with an emphasis on mental health. Today we have renewed promises of support from Federal and Provincial Governments for support in dealing with the aftermath of Indian Residential Schools. There is no reason why we cannot have a tomorrow with significant improvements, and I am expecting the Cree leadership of today to demand that we deliver and hold us accountable.

Although we will be forever appreciative of the specialists and professionals that come to our communities, we are not producing our own professionals at a pace to meet the growing needs in our communities. The long-term solution for our communities is the investment in infrastructure and training programs that will allow us to produce our own specialists that will meet the health care needs of our wounded communities and community members, in our homes, at our camps and most importantly in our language. I will be needing the help of not only my counterpart at the Ministry of Health but also the Cree School Board with the Ministry of Education to ensure that bureaucratic divisions and unapplicable accreditation standards are not barriers to restoring the wholeness of our communities which broke with the arrival of planes and buses that took our children away.

The coming weeks and months will unearth more bodies, more wounds and more pain it will take the strength and commitment of all of us to get through this.



Sarah Pashagumskum

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.