



Statement

June 21, 2020
For Immediate Release

Today, as we recognize National Indigenous Peoples Day, the very first thing we are called upon to do is to celebrate and honour the diverse original peoples of this land – the First Nations, Métis, Inuit and urban Indigenous peoples. We honour their incredible strength and wisdom. It is truly humbling to witness the depth of the knowledge and understanding of these lands that they possess, and the spirit and resilience that have continued to sustain them, undaunted and unabated, through the generations.

While we celebrate, I believe it is also vital to reflect on our own personal positions in relation to this special day and the journeys we need to take individually and collectively to decolonize. We need to consider the actions that we are called upon to take. This may be difficult, but it's crucial. Let me give you a personal example.

The other day, a dear friend of mine posted an old black-and-white photograph of cows and a few horses in a rolling field, with a huge gable roof barn in the background. It looked familiar – like so many other mid-20th century photos of farms across Canada. But the picturesque scene contained an ugly underbelly that, for uninvited white settlers on these lands, needs to be recognized and addressed, even if – perhaps especially if – to do so feels uncomfortable.

The photo captured the fields and barn at a residential school located about six or seven hours away from Victoria on current roads. My friend talked about his father's experience while being forced to attend this school. He spoke about how his father figured out how to get assigned to tend to the cows so that he could feed himself some milk when no one was looking, and how he was always so hungry and remained so for the rest of his life. A relative of his added that his father had also attended this school and that he, too, spoke of being hungry as a child, and throughout his life, always worried about whether there would be food. When doing forced labour in the kitchens, he would sometimes get some bread and squish it flat inside his shirt so no one would know that he had taken some food to eat.

When I reflect upon the significance of National Indigenous Peoples Day and Indigenous History Month, I realize that it is these kinds of stories to which we must pay attention. In my own journey towards becoming more culturally humble and agile, I know that it is important to be aware of and informed about the history of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, "Indian" hospitals, tuberculosis sanitoriums, the *Indian Act*, the reservation system, government policies and the many, many other acts of systemic racism. We must also seek a deeper understanding of what happened to children and youth and their families and, crucially, what *continues to happen* as a direct consequence. In my Office, we see the continuing patterns resulting from ongoing colonialism, and it has to change. That starts with listening, and stories are a bridge towards creating this understanding and empathy. For non-Indigenous peoples, we need to realize that we can never really know how the

children felt or feel, but we can work hard to imagine and be moved. We are called upon, first, to listen, intently and with good hearts. For Indigenous young people, it is important to know that their current situations, arising from this colonial background, are not their fault.

In the work we do at my Office, it is clear that culture is a protective factor for Indigenous children and youth. Knowing this, we are working to ensure that the children and youth we serve are connected to their families, communities and cultures as much as possible. We know we need to listen and stand back while Indigenous leaders and communities decide the best way forward for their own children and youth. We are called upon to support them and to use our platform to broadcast our support.

And let's be frank: we must acknowledge and take action against the pervasive systemic racism in our society. Indigenous peoples are not shocked by what we have seen in recent weeks in Canada and the U.S. It's been their lived reality for far too long. We need to champion and reinforce Indigenous peoples' demands for changes in policing to stop the historical and continuing legacy of needless traumatic deaths. We need to uncover and eradicate racist policies and practices in hospitals and health care, in child welfare, in justice and many other social institutions. We have to remember that colonization is not an historical artifact. It is an ongoing, lived reality for all of us, whether we realize it or not. The past continues to shape and affect the present and the brutality of racism continues. Last week, former elected chief of the Hupacasath First Nation, Judith Sayers, powerfully called upon Canadians to support Indigenous peoples and demand action from governments on policing. We are called upon to stand with her. We must speak – and speak loudly – at every opportunity to demand change and be changed.

During this time of COVID-19, celebrations look different, but there are many virtual opportunities to celebrate and honour Indigenous Peoples Day and Indigenous History Month. Let's include our children and youth in these celebrations. They are the anti-racist leaders of the future. Today is a day to honour them.

Beyond this day, we must stay connected and continue our decolonization journey. We are called upon to commit: to continue learning, to go deeper to understand history and its impacts in the present, to be humble and to get uncomfortable, to acknowledge our complicity and to make the changes that are needed. Children and youth are counting on us.

Happy National Indigenous Peoples Day.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Charlesworth
Representative for Children and Youth