

Monday, June 7, 2021

BC Métis Federation Members
Partner Communities
Partners

Remembering the Past: A BC Métis Federation Response (BCMF) to the Kamloops Indian Residential School Unmarked Grave Discovery

Dear friends,

I am writing on behalf of the BC Métis Federation board, staff, and members to our Métis statements in the events unfolding in Kamloops, BC. The purpose of this letter is to share our Métis perspective and offer our support to First Nations as we all grapple with the true history of this country. We have several members and families also profoundly impacted by the history of residential schools in Canada.

The confirmation of an undocumented burial site containing the bodies of 215 children at the Kamloops Indian Residential School on Tk'emlups te Secwepemc territory has deeply grieved BCMF leaders, staff and members. Although First Nations and Métis peoples in BC have long known about the horrors of Canada's genocide, it has been an emotionally challenging week for survivors within the BCMF community, their family members and support networks. All of them have been reminded of traumatic childhood experiences within Canada's Indian Residential and Day School system. We mourn alongside the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc, other First Nations, and mixed-ancestry communities whose children did not come home from the Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS). We pray that the repatriation of the remains of these innocent ones and the reawakening of their memory within our communities will be another step on the pathway to healing.

First Nations and Métis have a shared history of Indian Residential Schooling in BC and the accompanying repression of our collective self-determination as Indigenous communities. As early as 1873, Indian Commission J. D. Powell reported that "mission schools" across the province provided "the groundwork of a good education" for "Indians and half-breeds". After that, Canada's Indian departments recorded that up to half of the province's Indian Residential Schools were filled by "half-breeds". It is almost certain that mixed-ancestry children attended the KIRS over its period of operation by the Catholic Church's Oblates from 1890-1977. In 1892, J.W. McKay, Indian Agent for the Kamloops Okanagan Indian Agency, provided Federal official Arthur Vowell with "a list of half-breeds living as Indians on Indian reserves belonging to this agency." It appears that the Federal and Provincial government were intent on using Indian Act administrative mechanisms and residential schooling to segregate, assimilate and eradicate free and independent Métis communities throughout what is now known as British Columbia. The systemic attempts to erase the long history of self-determining Métis peoples across the province continued into the 20th century when national, provincial and municipal governments used settler society law and racialized policies to deny our very existence, ignore our rights, dispossess us from our land, limit our access to resources, restrict our mobility, and separate us from our indigenous kinship networks. This history of dispossession, repression and discrimination on a societal level is consistent

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with the personal stories told by our Métis elders who survived Canada's system of Indian Residential Schools in BC.

The BCMF, on behalf of its member communities, deserves to understand better the extent of violence directed toward vulnerable mixed-ancestry children and their families in this province. It may well be that the remains of some of the children resting in undocumented graves on the former grounds of the KIRS are a part of these mixed-ancestry communities in this province. We call on all levels of government to be accountable for the history that they created and open up access to records that can help all Indigenous peoples to repatriate their loved ones. The BCMF supports efforts, like that of the United Nations' human rights rapporteurs, to push for Canada and the Catholic and Protestant churches to conduct 'prompt and thorough investigations for the KIRS and all other Indigenous residential schools across the country. In addition, it would magnify our loss if *a priori* beliefs and static, restrictive views of our history and identity precluded or excluded us from finding our relatives. It is especially egregious that we are accused of creating "unsubstantiated history" by some leaders in our extended indigenous kinship networks. We ask that acrimonious identity politics, anti-Métis racism, divisive social media battles, and zero-sum contests for rights, status, power, land and resources not stand in the way of justice. The failure to respect our request to be involved in the possible repatriation of our relations should not be added to human rights infringements, ongoing government subjugation and dispossession, suppression of freedom to be Métis, usurping of customary law, and the diminishment of the well-being of Métis people and communities in BC.

To continue with this narrative of erasure and exclusion is to risk denying the very history of some of the children that have yet to find their way back home to both First Nations and Métis families in BC. It is a reality that Justice Sinclair acknowledged in December of 2015 with the release of the Final Report on Truth and Reconciliation: "Métis were left out of the settlement and are still waiting for justice and fair treatment." So far, the Truth and Reconciliation narrative has not effectively remembered the past in a way that facilitates a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Métis self-determination, nor has it created bridges of knowledge, wisdom, love or healing between all Indigenous communities that have been impacted by colonialism. In a broader sense, forums like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have made it more difficult for us to 'find our history' partly because of the lack of understanding of the complexity and fluidity of Métis peoples over time and across multiple geographies and kinship networks. Nevertheless, First Nations and Métis share in the sorrow of 215 undocumented deaths at the KIRS because we endured the same lived experience. As stated in the 1885 Annual Report for the Department of Indian Affairs: "there is no difference made in the treatment of the white, half-breed and Indian children. All share alike in the refectory, the classroom, the field or, household work and recreation, and all are amenable to the same discipline." In light of our common indigenous history and kinship, it would be a denial of justice to reinforce entrenched historical fallacies that deny the existence of independent mixed-ancestry communities in BC persist. Our mourning for indigenous lives lost and forgotten should not be increased by cultural myths that refuse the survival of Métis self-determining communities and ignore the strategies we utilized to avoid the systemic effort to eradicate our very existence.

We hope that mixed-ancestry indigenous communities in BC can participate in mutual accord with the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc and other First Nations impacted by this troubling 'discovery' to address the many complex issues that surface as a result of this finding of the remains of 215 children. This is

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reflected in Prime Minister Trudeau's 2015 statement: "No one pretends to have all the answers to problems facing Indigenous communities ... We're committed to working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders as we start to make things right for Indigenous peoples." In response to the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc's report of 215 undocumented burials, Prime Minister Trudeau observed that "to truly heal those wounds, we must first acknowledge the truth. Not only about residential schools, but about so many injustices both past and present that Indigenous peoples faced" and suggested that Indigenous communities must "decide for themselves how they want to proceed."

In our grief, the BCMF requests that Indigenous nations in BC -- First Nations and self-determining Métis communities -- come together to create the space and the framework for all of us to share mutually recognizable representations of our collective and individual experiences within Canada's Indian Residential Schools.

Respectfully



Keith Henry
President
BC Métis Federation

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