

Statement on Residential School Discoveries

Faculty and staff in the Department of Indigenous Studies acknowledge that no statement will ever feel truly adequate, as there really are no words. We offer our deepest condolences to the Indigenous families and community in Kamloops and Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc after the remains of two hundred fifteen children of various ages were found there in Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc territory, and to the families and community of the Cowessess First Nation after the discovery of 751 unmarked graves at the site of the former Marieval Residential School.

These discoveries, and the inevitability that there will be yet more at other sites across Canada, expose yet more of the horrors of Canada's Residential School system. This news should remind Canadians that this legacy of cultural genocide is not a legacy of the distant past, but a personal and devastating reality, not just to the families whose loved ones lie in the graves that have now been uncovered, but to Indigenous families across Canada and the United States. The residential school system was ongoing from the 1820's to as recently as 1996. This is a history that carries an inter-generational legacy of trauma, as Indigenous communities continue to be traumatized by settler-colonialism.

To honour the 215 children in Kamloops, the 751 at Cowessess, and the other not yet revealed burials, Canada needs to acknowledge these, and yet to be revealed losses, and begin to listen, and act accordingly. Indigenous communities have been telling us of these losses for years, yet Canada refused to listen. We also welcome the Alberta government's commitment to provide funding for Indigenous communities to search for similar undocumented burial sites at Residential School sites across the province. We caution that this commitment cannot stop at simple funding. The provincial government must commit also to the hard, and painful work of true reconciliation with the past and present reality of its relationship with Indigenous communities. The government can no longer whitewash the past or maintain a policy of 'least effort is enough effort' when it comes to Indigenous Peoples.

The nation, and provinces, need to push forward with stronger purpose in properly Indigenizing and decolonizing the education system across Canada. There needs to be more funding, an honest and truthful curriculum, more Indigenous educators, stronger support for Indigenous language revitalization, more rigorous structural support for reserve, and urban, Indigenous communities, and a commitment to the social, political, and cultural, truth of Indigenous sovereignty. We owe that, not just to the memories of these children, but to all Indigenous children who were driven through this system, and their descendants who still bear the scars of their experiences today. This is a particular responsibility for those of us involved in education in Canada today, including all of us who work in postsecondary education. We must remain committed to uncovering and telling the truth about the pasts, present, and futures – not just the trauma, but also pay tribute to the ingenuity, creativity, and brilliance, of Indigenous Peoples across Canada.

We again offer our condolences to Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, to Cowessess, and to the families of those communities yet to reclaim their stolen ancestors.

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