



Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs
EMPOWERING OUR NATIONS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 30, 2021

AMC Grand Chief Dumas' statement regarding inadequate Provincial Governmental response on the discovery of mass grave of 215 First Nation children

Treaty One Territory, Manitoba – The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) issues this statement regarding the lack of governmental response from the Province of Manitoba on the discovery of a mass grave of 215 children.

AMC Grand Chief Arlen Dumas stated, “215 children’s bodies were discovered at the former Kamloops residential school. Yet, it took more than two days, after an onslaught of social media blow back on the provincial government’s silence, for the Pallister government to send out a statement. The statement had four sentences. Yes, you did read that correctly. It took them more than 48 hours to write four forced sentences totalling only 103 words. The content was hollow and lacked emotion, but it only intensified the emotion I feel, and what I believe we as First Nations people feel across this province and across this country.

First Nations are reeling. Just when we thought the death of loved ones from wave after wave of this pandemic was hard enough to deal with, we then learn of this devastating news of these tiny souls that were never even given a chance. The Kamloops school never disclosed this information, and small children, as young as three years old were not properly buried. Families were left to grieve never knowing what happened and having to live with unanswered questions. What they learned this last week was that their children were placed in a mass grave and were then forgotten about by the school, its administrators and the federal government.

There can be no doubt. There will be no polishing of words. There will be no tip toeing around this. It was and still is genocide of First Nations people. There is nothing else to call it.

Yet when this country and province was faced with the devastating news of this discovery, the Pallister government fell silent. Just days ago, the Premier was on his soap box shouting at the White House and the Biden administration that they were not doing enough to assist with a vaccine strategy. A day before that he was attacking Manitobans for not doing enough in this pandemic by following his government’s public health orders. The Premier is not so silent when needing to place blame. He has plenty to say then.

Yet, now there is confirmed and irrefutable evidence of the atrocities faced by First Nations citizens in BC and he is nowhere to be found to offer sincere remorse, regret or condolences to the families impacted by such a horrific discovery. The need to heal is not just in BC. Every region in this country has Residential Schools and every First Nation person has relatives that died or survived these institutions and live with the memories that haunt them to this day. The intergenerational effects are still with us. What was announced by the leadership of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation opened up those memories that have sat there on our hearts for generations.



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Manitoba has a piece of legislation, *The Path to Reconciliation Act*, that is currently about to undergo an audit by the Office of the Auditor General. Part of reconciliation means the ongoing process of building relationships, affirming historical agreements and addressing healing. Did those four sentences released by the provincial government tell that story in a midst of First Nations and their citizens mourning the loss of these lives? No they did not.

The Premier should remember that there are fourteen federally recognized Residential Schools in Manitoba. But there are at least two dozen more in this province that Canada did not include in its Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The National Truth and Reconciliation Commission here in Manitoba have stated that there is a significant amount of work to do in this province to ensure that no child is forgotten.

The Premier had an opportunity to address this news with expediency. He could have reached out to my office and asked how he could help First Nations in Manitoba through this tragedy. We might not see eye to eye on the road to reconciliation but what we can agree on is that the path requires confronting our past, openly and honestly, and by acknowledging the atrocities that took place and how those inhumane actions impact our First Nations to this very day. You simply need to look at social media over this weekend to see how people are feeling.

What a disservice to First Nations in Manitoba and across Canada by remaining silent while our Nations mourned. What a disservice to all allied Manitobans who look to governments and officials to speak when tragedies such as this makes us feel off kilter. What a disservice to the youth in the province who should be taught the significance of what this news meant and shown leadership by speaking up when it counts. Sadly, what we all saw was this: a Premier in hiding, popularity numbers dwindling, not bothering to speak. How truly sad.

So, while I recognize that the flags were finally lowered to half-mast late Sunday afternoon without any announcement, I ask why it took this long to do so. Why did it take a social media push to shame the government into doing the right thing? This news verifies the fact that this was genocide. Young children and babies were murdered. There is no other way to spin that. These were children that were loved and are still loved and remembered. Families were ripped apart back then. The aftermath is the families still struggling to cope today. Those memories are hard to shake and those stories are being shared now. This was not something to sit silent on, and frankly, the Pallister government's silence is violence.

I recall the comfort and solace I felt, when everyone stood together during the painful time of the Humboldt Broncos tragedy. I was very sad when that news broke. I felt for those families. Our office acknowledged the loss of lives and offered our condolences. We watched and supported the fact that flags were lowered by so many governments, organizations and businesses; people paid tribute to those beautiful souls by creating supportive social media posts and placing hockey sticks on front porches. It was a very heartfelt national gesture. With that in mind, I can feel how heavy this week has been for First Nation people. I see First Nations and allies alike looking for solace to mend their broken hearts and for ways to speak up and make a change. I see a country that is grieving together. I'm sad to say that I didn't see our Premier or this Pallister government showing any sincere remorse. Again, silence is an act of violence.



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Tomorrow, no matter who you are and where you are from, please wear your Orange Shirt Day t-shirt or any orange shirt you can to pay honour and tribute to the 215 little ones lost not so long ago. Hold your children tight. Reach out to your family members in a COVID-19 safe way. Cherish your loved ones, so that we can begin to heal together. Speak up and teach your children about these events. Do not be silent. Our work does not end at remembering and discussing. We need to break the cycle of racism and ignorance when it comes to telling the dark story of how this country was built. We need to stop calling this 'history'; we need to stop telling our First Nations citizens 'to get over it, it was so long ago'. It is not ancient history because our First Nations citizens are still living the effects of these colonization efforts as First Nation citizens are still discriminated against, encounter racism and are still ignored. It is not ancient history when we are still uncovering graves."

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About the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs

The AMC was formed in 1988 by the Chiefs in Manitoba to advocate on issues that commonly affect First Nations in Manitoba. AMC is an authorized representative of 62 of the 63 First Nations in Manitoba with a total of more than 151,000 First Nation citizens in the province, accounting for approximately 12 percent of the provincial population. AMC represents a diversity of Anishinaabe (Ojibway), Nehetho / Inineew (Cree), Anishininew (Ojibwe-Cree), Denesuline (Dene) and Dakota Oyate (Dakota) people.