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Senator joins First Nations and Indigenous leadership response to “Freedom Convoy”

Treaty One Territory, Manitoba - The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC), the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) and the Assembly of First Nations Manitoba Region offer this statement with respect to the “Freedom Convoy” and protestors use of cultural appropriation.

Truck drivers from across Canada have gathered in Ottawa to protest the bilateral mandate introduced by both the Governments of Canada and the United States, which now requires all essential workers, including truck drivers who wish to cross the border in a commercial truck, to be vaccinated.

AMC Grand Chief Arlen Dumas said, “It is my understanding that a vast majority of these truck drivers have been vaccinated, and we appreciate their support in ensuring food security for First Nations in Manitoba and that freight and goods continue to move to ensure our economy and access to goods does not stop. Sadly, it is evident that this “Freedom Convoy” has now been hijacked by protestors that have no connection to the trucking industry. They are using this protest to bolster their anti-vaccine stance. Social media posts and media reports also have shown protestors using objects that appear to be traditional First Nation sacred cultural objects such as drums and a peace pipe, and some protestors singing and drumming. The AMC strongly opposes this type of cultural appropriation that inappropriately depicts the use of First Nation sacred objects. The AMC remains strongly supportive of First Nations’ ability to determine their own public health responses to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Here in Winnipeg today, trucks and protestors are blockading downtown streets. It was only a year ago that the provincial government tried passing Bill 57 that would have made it illegal for First Nations to block provincial highways and calls on Manitoba Premier Heather Stefanson to respond to these protestors in a manner that balances their individual right to protest with the ongoing need to make informed decisions based on science for the collective health of all people living in Manitoba.”

“This movement, sparked by messages of personal autonomy against the vaccine, is unearthing long-simmering tensions from various groups across the country – issues that are not related to COVID. Everyone has seen the Nazi flags, desecration and misuse of Indigenous ceremony, hate-filled activities towards the homeless and residents of Ottawa, but also hate-filled misinformation towards First Nations Peoples. How did an act professing personal autonomy of body allow itself to become usurped by messages and acts disrespecting First Nations and desecrating sites of war veterans? Moreover, how can people disrespect themselves to such a degree? As First Nations people from this land, we love our country and have brought forward our concerns through peaceful protests. Never have we asked for dismantling of the government but have continued to approach negotiations in a peaceful manner despite all the oppression placed in our way. In the face of this oppression, we will persist in raising our voices in a peaceful manner. This is our country. It is a beautiful country, and it is ours to protect,” stated Senator Mary Jane McCallum.

Assembly of First Nation Manitoba Regional Chief Cindy Woodhouse stated, “We are aware of the vulnerabilities of our First Nation citizens here in Manitoba and how the pandemic is hitting our Nations hard, and we are losing people every day. It is appalling that these protestors are using cultural appropriation to bring media attention to this protest. First

Nations in Manitoba have done everything to keep First Nation citizens safe through some of the toughest health and safety protocols and the implementation of a robust vaccine strategy.”

“There are many people living around the Manitoba legislative building and it’s important they have the ability to live in a safe environment. It is essential our leaders call out and condemn white supremacy. My thoughts are with the people in Ottawa and now Winnipeg. It is astounding to see the actions taking place when you compare it with the response we experience as First Nations people organizing a protest or blockade. It seems clear to many the policing response to First Nations citizens is often heavy handed,” stated Grand Chief Garrison Settee, Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak

Dr. Barry Lavallee, Chief Executive Officer, Keewatinohk Inniniw Minoyawin went on to add the following comments, “We believe in vaccines as one tool we have to help keep Indigenous people safe from COVID-19. We are deeply concerned to see the activities taking place across the country due to a minority of people who disagree with the use of vaccines and other efforts put in place to keep all Canadians safe from the deadly virus that continues to disproportionately impact Indigenous people and other people of colour. We stand with our Jewish cousins, Black people, other people of colour, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, as well as Two Spirit and LGBTQQIA+ people across the country. We stand with you, and we condemn all forms of racial violence. We condemn the state for supporting racial violence. The biggest enemy of public health measures is white privilege.”

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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 / Ininew (Cree), Anishinew (Ojibwe-Cree), Denesuline (Dene) and Dakota Oyate (Dakota) people.