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FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Backgrounder

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Systematic Abuse in Canada's Indian Residential School System

It has now been conclusively proven that Canada's Indian Residential School System had a long history of substandard care of children due to:

- Chronic government and church underfunding;
- Failure to exercise adequate oversight and control;
- Failure to ensure proper treatment of the children in care by staff.

Chronic Underfunding

- To stem the escalating costs of ever-expanding residential schools in the 1890s, the federal government introduced a per capita grant of \$72 in 1892. However, by 1904, residential schools incurred an escalating deficit of \$50,000 due to regional cost differences.
- By 1938, the per capita grant was \$180. In comparison, the Province of Manitoba provided grants of \$642 and \$550 per capita to the School for the Deaf and the School for Boys, respectively.

Inadequate Oversight & Control

- The system failed to keep pace with educational advances as the schools were often isolated and staff were generally under-qualified and poorly paid. A 1948 federal government survey found that over 40 per cent of the paid staff had no professional training and some had not even graduated from high school. Unqualified teachers were hired because no one else was willing to work in remote areas for pitifully low wages at cash-strapped schools.
- By 1945, there were over 9,100 Aboriginal children in Canadian residential schools.
- In 1957, the per capita grant system was eliminated and controlled cost funding was introduced. By 1962, 91 per cent of teachers employed were fully qualified and by 1959, the number of children in grades 9 to 13 had increased from none in 1945 to 2,144.

Improper Treatment of Children

- The systemic underfunding and neglect resulted in overcrowding, poor sanitation and a lack of medical care resulting in high rates of tuberculosis. Children were often desperately hungry, inadequately clothed and living in dilapidated conditions.
- Government and church correspondence and reports reveal that "savagery" persisted in spite of their efforts to "civilize" the children.

- It has been documented that Canada and the churches actively worked to cover up the abuses—often moving pedophiles from school to school.
- As early as the 1960s and, in some cases, as far back as the 1930s, there were stories of profound physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse at residential schools. For many, survivors the effects of these experiences have never been effectively dealt with.
- The psychological and emotional abuses included public beatings, vilification of Aboriginal cultures, constant racism, public strip and genital searches, withholding presents and letters from family, locking children in closets and cages, starvation as punishment, forced labour in unsafe work situations, segregation of sexes, separation of brothers and sisters, and proscription of native languages and spirituality. In some cases, students who were caught speaking their language were punished by having their tongues pierced with a needle.
- Estimates suggest that as many as 50 per cent (documented by Duncan Campbell Scott in 1932) of the students died due to illness, beatings, attempts to escape, or suicide while in the schools.
- In 1988, the first public allegations of sexual abuse arose from eight survivors from St. George's Residential School in Lytton, BC, and another six from St. Joseph's Residential School in Williams Lake. Later, 30 survivors from the Alberni Indian Residential School come forward to publicly disclose their experiences.

The End of Residential Schools

- In 1948, a Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons recommended that residential schools be abolished. Beginning in 1951, some children began to attend secular day schools if they were accessible. However, many students from smaller communities and remote areas remained in residential schools. Despite the committee's recommendations, schools remained open for an additional 35 years.
- In 1969, the partnership between government and churches ended as the government assumed direct control of the 52 remaining schools, with a total enrollment of 7,704 students. By then, 60 per cent of Aboriginal children were enrolled in provincially run schools.
- Over the ensuing 14 years, the residential school system was gradually wound down, until the last institution closed its doors in 1983.

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The First Nations Leadership Council is comprised of the political executives of the B.C. Assembly of First Nations, First Nations Summit, and the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs.

The Council works together to politically represent the interests of First Nations in British Columbia and develop strategies and actions to bring about significant and substantive changes to government policy that will benefit all First Nations in British Columbia.

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