

Leaders reflect on first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation

By Nate Smelle

"When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that the Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men." ? Canada's first Conservative Prime Minister, and architect of the residential school system, Sir John A. MacDonald.

Between 1831 and 1998, there were 140 federally run residential schools operating across Canada. During this time more than 150,000 First Nations, Metis and Inuit children were stolen from their families and forced into Canada's residential school system.

For thousands of these children, the day they were shipped off to one of these institutions was the last time they would see their loved ones. Designed and operated with the intent to "kill the Indian in the child," Canada's residential schools left behind a legacy of pain and inter-generational trauma.

On May 27, many Canadians experienced a rude awakening to the inhumanities endured by residential school students, when the bodies of 215 Indigenous children were found buried on the grounds of the former residential school in Kamloops, B.C. Since this discovery, an estimated 1,300 to 1,800 more Indigenous children's bodies have been located hidden in the soil outside seven other former residential schools.

From 2008 to 2015 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission conducted its investigation, while providing those directly or indirectly affected by the legacy of the residential school system with an opportunity to share their stories and experiences. As a result of this process, the commission produced a report, identifying 94 Calls to Action.

The federal government announced on June 3 that it would be honouring the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action #80, by working in collaboration with Indigenous peoples to establish Sept. 30 as a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. As stated in Call to Action #80, this new statutory holiday is to be dedicated in honour of residential school Survivors, their families, and communities, to "ensure that public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process."

In a special message to Canadians on Sept. 30, Governor General Mary May Simon shared her thoughts on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation; and, what it means to her as the first Indigenous person to serve in the role.

Reflecting on the significance of the first National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, Simon said she thought back to how her childhood shaped her; and, "How so many in our community, and thousands more Indigenous children across Canada, were ripped away from their homes, separated from their families and sent to residential schools, where they were not allowed to speak their languages or honour their cultures, and were punished if they did."

As the child of a white father and an Inuk mother, Simon said she was not allowed to attend the residential school, so she stayed behind and was home-schooled.

When visiting the families of her friends who had been taken away, she recalls feeling as if she was "a stand-in, a well-loved substitute, for mothers and fathers who desperately missed their children."

"We all felt it," declared Simon.

“The sorrow of missing a part of our community. Since the launch of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the publication of Calls to Action” and more recently, with the discoveries of unmarked graves of residential school children “Canada’s real history has been laid bare.”

Acknowledging the inter-generational trauma created by Canada’s residential school system, Simon explained how the legacy of colonization has had devastating repercussions for Indigenous peoples, including the loss of language, culture and heritage. She also pointed out how the pain manufactured in these inherently racist institutions has been felt from generation to generation, and continues to this day.

“These are uncomfortable truths, and often hard to accept. But the truth also unites us as a nation, brings us together to dispel anger and despair, and embrace justice, harmony and trust instead,” stated Simon.

“Reconciliation is a way of life, continuous, with no end date. It is learning from our lived experiences and understanding one another. It is creating the necessary space for us to heal. It is planting seeds of hope and respect so that our garden blooms for our children. As we strive to acknowledge the horrors of the past, the suffering inflicted on Indigenous peoples, let us all stand side-by-side with grace and humility, and work together to build a better future for all.”

Recently re-elected Algonquin Negotiations Representative for the Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin First Nation Stephen Hunter said he started the day on Sept. 30 thinking about all the amazing community members he has been lucky enough to visit and spend time with over the past few months.

“Today I choose hope, today I choose love, today I wish for all people to feel connected, to embrace responsibility, to care for the person next to them,” said Hunter.

“Today I see Kijicho Manito members singing and drumming for all to hear. I see a warrior giving Algonquin teachings to his colleagues on base. I see Elders sharing with children in the park downtown. It is these things in unison with the governments willingness to act upon the 94 calls to action that will support the healing needed within our communities. Information, communication and education are key.”

Algonquin Elder Dora Yateman spent the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation attending virtual gatherings. Describing these sessions as “very emotional and very moving,” she pointed out how, “There was a significant amount of sharing this past week, with residential school survivors stories, that moved many to tears. There were many ceremonies for healing, and many discussions on taking action (or an action) under the 94 listed for Truth and Reconciliation to move forward... I was very honoured to have been a part and to give my support and to show my heritage and to be very proud of our Algonquin Communities for participating in this very important day.”

While acknowledging the severe impact of residential schools is a vital step in the process of reconciliation, chair of the Indigenous Trustees’ Council of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association, Elaine Johnston said it is also important to draw attention to the broader history and experiences of Indigenous people in this land called Canada over the past 500+ years, since European settlement and colonization began. She said Indigenous people want this day to more than just “wearing orange shirts.”

“This day must be about more than taking a day off or even wearing an orange shirt to school or the workplace,” said Johnston.

“There must be a focus on making concrete changes in our education system, and communities. And that is why we have written a letter to Premier Ford and ministers Lecce and Rickford, asking them to support the need for a Temporary Letter of Approval for Elders in Residence and Indigenous Language-proficient speakers to teach Indigenous Languages in classrooms across Ontario.”

In this letter, Johnston said they have also requested that the Ford government make a firm commitment to include Indigenous education leaders in correcting the history books, and all curriculum, to allow for true engagement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, from Kindergarten to Grade 12. She said the revitalization of Indigenous languages is essential for

maintaining Indigenous cultures, traditional knowledge, and history. Remarking on Minister Lecce's announcement on Sept. 30 that the province was making it mandatory for Indigenous learning to be embedded throughout Ontario's curriculum, Johnston said she considers it to be "a step forward toward greater reconciliation in Ontario."

"What we will need to see in the co-development of the curriculum is true collaboration with Indigenous leaders, at every stage of the process, to ensure our cultures and perspectives are properly reflected," explained Johnston. "The changes that we have proposed would be a demonstration that Canadians, as a society, understand the importance of maintaining Indigenous languages and culture for generations to come. There is much work to be done, but I'm hopeful the progress we've seen this week will become a catalyst towards an ongoing conversation that leads to real action in the years ahead."

Hastings County Warden Rick Phillips shared his thoughts on Canada's first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation as well.

Speaking to his fellow Hastings County council members at their meeting on Sept. 30, Phillips suggested that everyone take some time to reflect on what the holiday represents for the country and to all Canadians; and, "look for ways to move forward together as we acknowledge our painful past." Moving forward, he said every county council and committee meeting will now begin with the reading of a Land Acknowledgment that recognizes the traditional First Nations, Métis and Inuit territories of land in Canada. Phillips said council believes this to be "a necessary step toward honouring the original occupants of these lands."

The Land Acknowledgment that will be read prior to each county meeting states:

"We are meeting today on the traditional territory of many nations including the Huron-Wendat, Anishnaabe, and the Haudenosaunee peoples. Hastings County Council acknowledges our shared obligation to respect, honour and sustain these lands and the natural resources contained within. We honour their cultures and celebrate their commitment to this land. We would also like to acknowledge the Mohawk and Algonquin nations whose traditional and unceded territory we are gathered upon today. Hastings County is situated on treaty land that is steeped in rich Indigenous history and home to many First Nations, Métis and Inuit people."

In an effort to help former residential school students heal from the violence and trauma they experienced at the hands of the Canadian government and the Catholic Church, mental health supports have been made available for Survivors and their families. Former residential school students and individuals in need of support are encouraged to call: 1-866-925-4419 for emotional crisis referral services and information on other health supports from the Government of Canada.

Indigenous peoples across Canada can also contact The Hope for Wellness Help Line 24 hours a day, seven days a week for counselling and crisis intervention toll-free Help Line at 1-855-242-3310; or connect to the online chat.