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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order, acknowledging first of all that in Ottawa we meet on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the motion adopted on June 1, 2021, and following the discovery of the remains of 215 indigenous children buried on the former site of the Kamloops residential school, the committee holds its meeting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action 72 to 76.

To ensure an orderly meeting once again, participants, ensure that you have selected the language of your choice on the interpretation globe at the bottom centre of your screen. If you do switch in speaking, there is no need to make a further technical adjustment.

When speaking, ensure your video is turned on. Please speak slowly and clearly. When not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

With us this first hour are the following departmental officials. From the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, we have Daniel Quan-Watson, deputy minister; Martin Reiher, assistant deputy minister; and Kristi Carin, director general. From the Department of Indigenous Services, we have Valerie Gideon, associate deputy minister.

Thank you all for taking the time. We will begin with opening statements followed by our usual rounds of questioning.

Who would like to begin with our official group?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson (Deputy Minister, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): I will, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Please, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: *Kwe kwe, ullukkut, tansi*, hello, good morning.

[English]

Mr. Chair, I'd like to acknowledge that I am speaking to you today from Treaty 6 territory in Edmonton, the traditional territory for many indigenous peoples, in particular the Cree, Saulteaux, Niitsitapi, Blackfoot, Métis and Nakota Sioux.

I'm supported by my senior officials from the department, as well as by my colleague, associate deputy minister of Indigenous Services Canada, Valerie Gideon. We will be available to answer questions on many mental health and other health supports.

[Translation]

I would like to begin by paying tribute to survivors of residential schools, their families and their communities, and by acknowledging the ongoing impact of intergenerational trauma.

Today, our hearts are with the Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc people, survivors, families and indigenous communities across Turtle Island as they grieve the loss of these innocent children.

Tragically, the gravesite in Kamloops isn't an isolated case. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission documented more than 4,100 deaths of residential school students across the country. There are other known cases of unmarked graves across the country, and many more—thousands, even—will be located. This is the grim reality of residential schools.

As we reflect on this loss, we must acknowledge that this isn't a purely historical event. There are parents who are still living and who lost children, maybe even amongst those found in Kamloops.

[English]

There are surviving brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews and other family members who will be wondering if their loved ones are among those who have been located. We are resolved to follow the wishes of communities and offer support, as needed, to those affected, and to memorialize those innocent souls.

The recent events in Kamloops remind us about the importance of acknowledging the legacy of residential schools and their tragic impact on first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. It is difficult to imagine the pain suffered by so many indigenous children and their families and communities. It is said that one of the children found at the Kamloops residential school may have been as young as three years old—a life that was stolen and likely buried without a proper ceremony. It's disturbing, and it should never have happened, but it did.

Many students who went to residential school never returned. They were lost to their families. They died at rates far higher than those experienced by the general school-aged population. Their parents were often not informed of their sickness and death. They were buried, away from their families, in long-neglected graves.

Although it is painful, we need to continue to search for answers. Canadians have a responsibility to know the history and legacy of residential schools, and to honour residential school survivors, their families and communities.

Archaeological and historical research was conducted about potential gravesites and cemeteries at former residential school sites across Canada in advance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. All available federal-related records were turned over to the TRC. The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation now houses the reports on the deaths of students. As technology evolves, it is likely that other burial sites will be uncovered.

[Translation]

Identifying burial locations of children who died while attending residential schools is fundamental to providing closure for families. Significant progress is being made with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action. Approximately 80% of the calls to action under the sole or shared responsibility of the federal government are completed or well under way.

We know that we can do better. Indeed, we must. Collectively, we must chart a new path toward a Canada that honours, respects and is fully inclusive for first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Renewed relationships are fundamental to the growth and prosperity of our country.

Meegwetch, qujannamiik, merci, thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thanks so much.

Are we going to hear further? Can we move to our questioning now? That's great.

Just before we start, I'd like to point out to our guests that the picture behind me is of a sculpture located in the Battlefield Park national historic site in Stoney Creek, called *The Eagles Among Us*. It's the work of first nations artist, David General, and is dedicated to healing and reconciliation.

On Monday, a vigil was held at that site for the 215 children, with pairs of shoes filling the sculpture base in memory of the lost children.

Throughout the current pandemic, we were saddened by the reality of people, especially the elderly, passing away with no loved ones near to comfort them. Imagine the fate of these children, in a strange place, being overcome by illness, dependent on strangers to ease their suffering, if indeed any were there, tears in their eyes, all alone, feeling unloved as the darkness of death overcame them.

We are here today, in part, to tell their spirits that they are loved. They are watching us, and we can't let them down.

With that, I am going to welcome Cathy McLeod, who has done so much great work here, back to our committee as the first questioner in the round of questioning.

Cathy.

• (1110)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to start with the words of Kúkpi7 Casimir, Chief Casimir, and what she said to the Prime Minister of Canada and all federal parties:

We acknowledge your gestures, but as a community who is burdened with the legacy of a federally mandated Indian residential school, Canada must face ownership and accountability to Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, as well as all communities and families.

I am going to go back. In 2015 this government committed to all 94 calls to action. It put dollars aside in 2019, of which very limited amounts have been spent, and both the government and the AFN report cards indicate limited to moderate progress on this particular issue.

I'm going to ask some very specific questions for the community I represent, and I have to hold them up. The leadership and the strength that they have shown have been incredible and we just appreciate so much, again, the leadership that has been shown.

On the calls to action, I'm going to start with number 73, and I am going to ask specifically what has happened in the community. I'll shorten it to TTS, as they often do. What have you done in terms of call to action 73? It reads as follows:

We call upon the federal government to work with churches, Aboriginal communities, and former residential school students to establish and maintain an online registry of residential school cemeteries, including, where possible, plot maps showing the location of deceased residential school children.

Again, specific to the community that I represent, where this horrific discovery of 215 children was made, what have you done on call to action 73 with them?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Mr. Chair, thank you for your ongoing work on this, which is particularly close to the community you represent.

On call to action 73, we have taken a number of steps. We have made some investments. Obviously, it's a national approach, dealing with all of the 131 sites that we know of, and certainly the 55 across the country where there are known burial sites, but it will be available specifically for Kamloops.

I'll have my colleague, Martin Reiher, speak to the specific investments that we have made in the online registry, which is—

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I'm talking about for Kamloops, specifically. Have you done anything in terms of their plots?

I know that Chief Casimir indicated that she hadn't seen any support come through on any of these calls to action. Maybe there is some national work going on, but after six years you would think the biggest residential school in the country would have had some direct conversations and direct engagement and some direct work. It's been six years, so, again, specific to this community, have dollars flowed? Have conversations been had? Have meetings been had?

Have you listened to their direction? I understand that it was a provincial grant that got them to where they were, so they had to struggle to get a provincial grant. It wasn't federal dollars.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'm pleased to be able to report that it was in fact a federal grant. It came from Canadian Heritage. It was part of the celebration and commemoration fund. It was approximately \$40,000. The grant is available online. You can find the details of it there. It was in fact the federal government, and it's the result of a direct engagement between a federal department and the band on that very specific site. It was, in fact, federal monies.

That program was established as part of the overall response of the government to the TRC recommendations, and it was done specifically to ensure that this particular site in Kamloops, at that school, was found. The work that has been done was in fact the result of those conversations with the federal department and based on federal investments.

• (1115)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I know my time is going to run out too quickly, but perhaps we could have a summary to this committee in terms of calls to action 73 to 76, on what direct engagement, what direct dollars have flowed.

As we are speaking, my next question is actually from Chief Casimir. She's asked if you commit and promise to respect the policies, laws and protocols of this community as you move forward—unreservedly.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I can say that unreservedly.

In fact, the consultation about how the money should be spent got exactly that reaction across the country, from every single indigenous group we had. We were frequently told that it was the Crown's fault that those children were there, and that we needed to respect, now, the fact that it was the indigenous community's role to decide what to do with what was found.

So yes, unreservedly, I can commit to what you have suggested.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Mr. Chair, do I still have a little time?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: In summary, do you also commit, specifically to TTS, to send to this committee everything that has been done in terms of calls to action 73 through to 76?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Yes. We will provide a full report of what we have done in relation to this particular first nation, as well as any other information that might be wanted by the committee.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I will be pleased to let them know, because those are some of the things they are concerned about. From their perspective, they have not felt that there has been much movement on 73 to 76.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Cathy.

Adam van Koeverden, you have six minutes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much to the officials who have joined us here today to share their insight and perspectives with us. It's so important that Canadians know and hear from you as we are navigating this together.

All Canadians from coast to coast to coast are shaken, upset and distraught by this discovery of the remains of 215 children, and the loss to the families who have these memories. It's reverberating, certainly in British Columbia and Kamloops, but across the country as well, and it's absolutely heartbreaking.

Yesterday we heard that \$27 million was made available, which was first allocated in 2019, to support this ongoing work from call to action 74. As my colleague mentioned, it calls on the federal government to work with churches and indigenous community leaders to inform families of children, and to respond to families with appropriate commemoration ceremonies. This is heartbreaking work. This is tragic work.

I'm also glad to hear that there was some federal funding utilized in this discovery. Thank you for highlighting that.

My question is for whoever would like to take it.

Can you explain to the committee why the funding for this very important initiative was delayed, and do you believe that \$27 million will be enough to support hurting communities across the country in continuing this important work?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'd be happy to take that, Mr. Chair.

In budget 2019, as was noted, this money was made available. One thing that was very important and we knew at the time was that something as sensitive as this issue should not be something that the federal government simply decides in its own office spaces as to exactly what to do.

There will be many different approaches that indigenous communities want in order to deal with this. It's important to remember that, while the Kamloops school is situated in Kamloops, those children were taken, sometimes, from hundreds of kilometres away. One thing that many indigenous communities have reminded us of again and again is that they will not disturb other communities' ancestors' remains without engaging properly with them.

How to deal with these issues is very sensitive. We know that some communities have told us already that they intend simply to memorialize the location and not do further work. There will be other instances where people want to do deep forensic work, or at least work that resembles forensic work, for different reasons. We knew it was our job to listen to what they had to say. We knew it was our job not to repeat the mistakes that had been made in the past, which, in fact, led to many of these situations in which government simply made its own decisions about what it thought was best. Therefore, we conducted a consultation process.

As you can imagine, many of the people we most needed to speak to were those with living memory of the schools. Many of those are elders. Many of those consultations do not work well in the format we're using today. There were delays as a result of COVID-19, because many of the people you talk to don't have either the technical ability or, frankly, the Internet access to do this type of work. However, we conducted that consultation, and we came up with the approach that was announced yesterday.

The core of that is very much along the lines of what your colleague just asked about in the final question, which is whether we will respect the wishes of indigenous groups, what they want to do and want not to do. We got a universal message that it's what they were asking us, and we will do that.

• (1120)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Mr. Quan-Watson.

My second question builds on that. There have been calls across the country to investigate and search the grounds of every former residential school, and for the forensic work to begin immediately, but there have also been very important calls from indigenous communities that all of this work needs to be community led. It needs to be community informed. Those decisions need to be guided by the communities, the families in question and the people it will impact emotionally, physically and personally in such profound ways.

Would anybody like to comment on the importance of this work continuing to be community led?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'll just speak quickly to it.

Again, there are many living relatives of some of the people who died at these schools—brothers and sisters, nieces, nephews and, in some instances, parents. The idea that the Crown would go in against their wishes to begin work is, I think, something that we would reject outright, but, where they want that work done, we would definitely support that. It was, again, at the core of the consultations we heard, and perhaps my colleague Mr. Reiher could speak quickly to the key messages he heard when he was managing those consultations.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Reiher.

Mr. Martin Reiher (Assistant Deputy Minister, Resolution and Partnerships, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Deputy.

Indeed, we heard that this work is extremely complex and very difficult to do. Building relationships based on respect, trust and developing partnerships with communities will be paramount. Resi-

dential schools had students from multiple communities, as the deputy mentioned, so it will be important to be inclusive of all impacted communities. It's important to ensure that the processes for memorialization and commemoration are community led, culturally appropriate, based on ceremony, respectful of protocols and focused on helping families acknowledge their loved ones.

We also heard that this initiative will put those impacted by the legacies of Indian residential schools at risk of re-traumatizing, and it's important to include true, mindful practices. We heard very well that CIRNAC must respect and follow the information of government protocols that communities have in place, as well as the family wishes, to ensure that we have the appropriate balance between family healing, privacy and the desire to let Canadians know about this tragic situation.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Madam Bérubé.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I represent the constituency of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, in which Cree and Anishnabe people live. We're all saddened by this terrible discovery last weekend. My thoughts are with the families and communities who are deeply affected by this tragedy. Today, we simply want to understand what happened. *Meegwetich.*

In the 2019 budget, the government announced an investment of \$33.8 million over three years to implement calls to action 72 to 76 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

However, it seems that, in reality, most of the money announced hasn't been spent. I'm just trying to understand why. Is the process stalled at the Treasury Board of Canada, or have other projects not been developed?

• (1125)

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Thank you for the question.

I wouldn't say that the money was blocked. It's just that there was no question of spending the money without knowing what the communities involved wanted done.

The communities told us that the government was making unilateral decisions during the residential school era and that this was the source of the issue. While the discussions concerned the children who died, there was no question of going back to that era of unilateral decision-making by the federal government.

We conducted consultations to find out how the communities wanted to proceed. We listened to them. The response announced yesterday is based on what we heard.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: The Toronto Star also reported that the research that led to the appalling discovery in Kamloops was funded by provincial, not federal, dollars. Why is this the case?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I can confirm that the funding came from the federal government, specifically the Department of Canadian Heritage. The details of the grant are online. I believe that the amount was approximately \$40,000 from a program set up in part to respond to the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Last December, I received the response to one of my written questions regarding the implementation of calls to action 81 and 82. The government responded that only 0.5 full-time equivalent employees were responsible for the implementation of call to action 82. As you may recall, this call to action consists of the construction of a national monument in Ottawa to honour the victims of residential schools.

Don't you think that this isn't enough to implement the call to action?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'll ask my colleague, Ms. Carin, to explain exactly where things stand with regard to call to action 81.

[English]

Ms. Kristi Carin (Director General, Reconciliation Secretariat Branch, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): Unfortunately I don't have that information in front of me, but we can commit to providing a written response to the committee.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: I have with me the government's response to my question. I'll read an excerpt: "Designation of a site will be undertaken once subsidies are provided to build this monument. As it is likely that a national monument would be constructed on federal lands in the capital, no purchase of land is envisioned at this time."

Am I to understand that the government hasn't planned any subsidies for the construction of the monument to honour the victims of residential schools?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: We'll give you a written response with more details. However, I can tell you that the federal government owns a great deal of land in the national capital region. It isn't always necessary to buy land. Often the land costs much more than the monument itself. I don't foresee the funding issue getting in the way of what we need to do at all.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Given everything happening right now and the 2019 and current budgets, how do you plan to help the communities affected at this time?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: The minister announced yesterday that \$27 million was available. She also committed to providing more resources if necessary.

Clearly, communities across the country will want to take a variety of approaches. Some will want to take extremely comprehensive steps. In other cases, there will likely be a great deal of discus-

sion within the communities. The necessary investments may ultimately be more modest, even though the outcome is as important as any other project that communities might undertake in different parts of the country.

• (1130)

[English]

The Chair: We'll leave it at that and move on now to Ms. Blaney for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to everyone for being here to testify.

I want to start off by saying that I think it's important for all of us to recognize that what we're seeing across Canada in indigenous communities is not a call for remembrance or commemoration. It's a call to acknowledge genocide, and to acknowledge that there are crime scenes across our Canada, that there are graves of indigenous children across our country. I want to acknowledge that as I start my questioning.

My first question is, how many nations is the department currently working with to identify possible burial sites?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: If I could just pick up quickly on the first point you made, some of the most heart-wrenching conversations I've had in the last week have been with indigenous people who are frustrated with the reaction of Canadians, from the perspective, they said, that six years ago this issue was laid bare in black and white for every Canadian to read. Why is it a surprise now? I would just pick up on the comment you made there.

We are working with every community that wishes to engage on this issue. We have made communications to every single community in the country. It's on our website. We'll be sending out an email blast to everybody. We are prepared to work with anyone on this front. It is their choice. These are very difficult conversations, as you can imagine, and many communities have in their priorities things that are not related to these issues at this moment in time. We will respect the time frames in which they want to raise them and whether or not they want to raise them, but we are open to working with everyone. Again, there are a number of communities where we're having specific conversations, but we're open to working with absolutely everyone.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Justice Sinclair has told the world that when he started this process, when he was part of that commission, they didn't expect the number of stories they received from survivors who were talking about children killed, children who died and children who never returned. They weren't sure what happened to them, indicating very clearly that there was something serious happening here that we should have been looking into and, of course, that wasn't studied the way it should have been.

I'm just wondering if you could tell us how many requests the department has received, how many have been dismissed and how many have been followed up with, and if the stories of survivors are enough for an investigation.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'll ask my colleague Martin Reiher to speak to some of the specifics and the requests we have had.

I'm not aware that we have denied any requests from different groups that might have come forward to us. Obviously, we were waiting for the money. We expect many requests to come in now that it's out there. The groups we work with have known that this money was coming. They were waiting for the details of it. It's now out there.

You're quite right, obviously, that these stories have been told many times. I think one of the reasons people have stopped talking about them is that, throughout history, parents have gone and asked school administrators, and parents have gone and talked to police forces. People asked all sorts of government agents what had happened to their children, and they were ignored time and time again. In some instances, they were lied to. In some instances, documents were withheld that should have been given to them. People got to the point where they didn't talk about it publicly and, as you point out, it came out in significant volume during the hearings process.

Perhaps my colleague Mr. Reiher could speak to the engagements we have had where people have sought resources to this point.

Mr. Martin Reiher: Indeed we have not denied any request for funding. We are actually keeping track of the requests we have received in the last few days in particular, and we will follow up with the first nations, in addition, of course, to making the information available to present requests in the future.

The second part of the question was with respect to what survivors had to say and whether that is sufficient to launch the work. Obviously the information that survivors recall and have shared is critical as a starting point for that type of work. Additional work will be required—historical research and archeological research, obviously, in order to locate potential burial grounds.

• (1135)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I just have a quick few seconds left.

Are there support systems that are going to be available for communities, should a cite be identified? We need to see trauma-informed care given onsite for elders, knowledge keepers, community members, survivors and their families. I'm just wondering if those resources are also part of this package.

The Chair: Answer briefly, please.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'll turn to my colleague, Valerie Gideon.

Ms. Valerie Gideon (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): I can speak to that.

In budget 2021, we were able to obtain renewal of the Indian residential schools resolution health support program, to continue to extend those mental health and cultural supports to communities

across the country until 2024. There are additional mental health resources also that were included, so the total is close to \$600 million over three years. That's in addition to the other base programming that we have in the department, such as non-insured health benefits.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Members of the committee, the departmental staff, of course, is available. If we're not able to complete all of our inquiries, we can certainly ask for written submissions back.

In view of the impending hour ahead of us, which features the commissioners from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I'm going to ask that we take one more question from each of our parties on the committee. That will allow us to have just a few minutes prior to noon to make sure that our next set of witnesses is connected and ready to go, because we also have a hard stop at one o'clock, which we won't be able to extend.

Unless someone wishes to challenge that, I will now go to Mr. Schmale.

Jamie, go ahead please.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair, and good afternoon, witnesses.

Out of the calls to action in the TRC report, how many have been completed so far?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: We estimate that approximately 80% of those for which the federal government is solely or in partnership responsible have been either completed or substantially completed. An example of substantially complete or at least well under way—I think that's the terminology used—would be C-15, where the consultations have been done; it has been presented to Parliament, and it's being considered. Of course, we can't say it's completed until the final step is there, but that would be something we would consider to be well under way.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay. How many are fully completed?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'll ask my colleague, Madam Carin, to speak to the specifics there.

Ms. Kristi Carin: Thank you.

I can say that of the 76 calls to action that are under federal or shared responsibility, 16 have been completed.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

Has recommendation 2 been completed? It has to do with child welfare.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Perhaps I could turn to my colleague, Madam Gideon.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: I would say that with the introduction of federal legislation specific to the exercise of jurisdiction from first nations, Inuit and Métis, we are currently at the stage of implementation of the legislation, in co-development with indigenous partners.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you.

In regard to calls to action 6 to 12, which have to do with education, is the government using any data to demonstrate the progress towards closing the funding gap for the educational needs of indigenous children on reserves, and if yes, is there a way to access or see that data?

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We can certainly provide the committee with the significant increases in education funding based on the new national education formula for K to 12 that was developed with first nations. We can certainly demonstrate that to you over the last three or four or five years, depending on the committee's request.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Perfect.

Would a member of the public be able to easily access this?

● (1140)

Ms. Valerie Gideon: We produce our annual report at the departmental level. Our departmental results reports offer some of that financial information. In our response, we can also point you to where there are public sources of that information. We don't provide publicly every community's specific breakdown of education funding, for example.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: In regard to calls to action 72 to 76 specifically, I know you—or the department—touched on it a bit, but I wasn't clear on it. What is the process for communities to access funds to conduct searches?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'll let my colleague, Monsieur Reiher, speak to the specifics there.

Mr. Martin Reiher: Thank you.

An email address was made public yesterday for where requests can be sent. We will engage with the requesters to discuss with them what they want to accomplish, to develop a plan and to determine the funding that will be provided.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Prior to this, what was the process? Was it as easy as that?

Mr. Martin Reiher: This department did not have resources available explicitly for that type of work, where we put in place this program. As was indicated, we wanted to first deal with call to action 72 and engage on how best to address calls to action 74 to 76, which we have done. Now we are implementing it.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I will just add briefly that we are pleased that it looks like about 4,100 of the estimated 6,000 students who died or disappeared now have a place in the records that are being kept by the National Council for Reconciliation.

We think that is an important step forward. There's clearly more work to be done. Former senator Sinclair, who has been mentioned, has obviously spoken of the records that still need to go there. We support very much that work being done. That's an important part of this piece as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Powlowski, please go ahead.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thanks.

I listened to a statement by former senator Sinclair about the Kamloops discovery. One of the things he stated was that when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was having its hearings, I guess at the end it requested more money to look specifically into deaths in residential schools. That was denied.

This was a number of years ago, but can you say why that was denied? Would the government and the ministry reconsider this, should the indigenous community want to do it at this point?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: I'm not able to speak to the details of why the decision might have been made at that point in time. I know that, obviously, the request was made and the decision was made not to provide the funds.

This issue is certainly one we are committed to addressing and resolving. There is a significant amount of resources that are available to deal with it. The minister has committed that she's prepared to seek more resources if they are required. We would certainly entertain any request in this area seriously.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Deputy Minister, you've already kind of touched upon this. Former senator Sinclair has also talked about lists. I've heard from other sources as well that quite a few people seem to believe the church kept very good records, and that there are lists out there as to the names of people who died.

Does the government have such a list? What, if anything, has the government done to try to get hold of such lists?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: The federal government has turned over all the documents it has and made them available. Those are part of the records that are currently being held.

Other parties have lists that haven't been shared. Obviously, those would be in their possession, not our possession. If they had been in our possession, we would have turned them over. We are certainly—along with the former commissioner and the report of the commission—strongly encouraging the call to make sure that information is shared.

Perhaps Monsieur Reiher can speak a bit about the communications we've had on that front. There was obviously a take-note debate the other evening that addressed some aspects of related issues here. These are some conversations we've been having with a number of players over the years to strongly encourage them to do as the federal government has done, which is to turn over the records.

● (1145)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Mr. Reiher, you might want to respond, but maybe in responding you can also answer this: Does the government have any legal power to require the other parties, such as the churches, to hand over any lists they have?

Mr. Martin Reiher: As part of the implementation of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, we established an all-party table involving the churches, and we have continued discussion with churches in the development of the response to calls to action 74 to 76. As part of these discussions, they have all indicated around the table that they are prepared to collaborate and share information in their archives.

We will continue to facilitate the sharing of this information in the context of specific projects, and I anticipate that there will be great collaboration.

In terms of a legal capacity to impose sharing, we do not have that authority.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I realize that many of these children died many years ago. Has there really been nothing in all those years in terms of attempts to investigate this before? I think we're obviously at chapter 22 of a long story.

Really, did no previous governments, no indigenous services, ever make an attempt to get to the bottom of finding out names and notifying families?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: There have over time been a number of efforts made, though not as co-ordinated and not on a national scale like this. For example, there have been known situations in Regina where there was a "discovery", and I think that's a loaded word in this context, because there are many indigenous communities that say, "We told you all along that people were there."

It is of note that when the Kamloops band went and looked, they looked in only one place; they didn't have to look all over. They knew exactly where to go; they went to that one spot.

There have been many instances where remains have been found—55 sites out of 131 so far—but it has not been done on as organized a basis as this. Even at Kamloops, there was work done in the 1990s originally, or least most recently prior to the events of this past week and this past year.

Yes, work has been done.

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt. We'll move quickly along to Madam Bérubé, for two and a half minutes.

Please go ahead.

[Translation]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yesterday, during question period, the Prime Minister said as follows: "In 2019, we invested \$33.8 million in this work..." This was for calls to action 72 to 76.

When we look at the 2020-21 main estimates and the 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B), all we see is an expenditure of \$3.2 million in the supplementary estimates.

Do you agree that a budget and a budget implementation act aren't the same thing? How do you explain that?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Thank you for the question.

Again, the key was to ensure that the money would be invested as intended by the communities. We went to the communities as

part of a national consultation. We had some very difficult conversations. Of course, we talked about children, deaths, things that are completely unknown, so many events that cause a great deal of sadness and trauma. The purpose of this consultation was to ensure that the announcement in due course would respect the wishes and desires of the communities. As I said, it was very important to talk to the elders, the people who have lived with memories of residential schools their entire lives. That's why it took so long.

The COVID-19 pandemic was also a factor that slowed down the process, despite the availability of technology and high-speed Internet. Without the pandemic, the process would have been faster.

• (1150)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Yesterday, the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations made the following statement, which was reported in an article in *Le Devoir*. Let me quote it for you: "Since we made our commitment, it was a matter of having to explain to the Treasury Board exactly how the money would be distributed. That approval has come and we are now able to urgently distribute it."

Am I to understand that the \$33.8 million basically hasn't been spent? Did the department knock on the Treasury Board's door and get told no? Can you explain that to me, please?

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: Yes—

[English]

The Chair: Answer very quickly, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: It was more because we knocked on the door of the communities to find out what we needed to ask the Treasury Board. The board responded almost immediately once the request was made.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have Ms. Blaney to finish.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I'm just going to start off by saying that I am having slightly confusing feelings about hearing again and again that it should always be nation-led. I 100% agree with that, but we're asking communities that are dealing with huge grief, that are already dealing with the realities in their communities.... They are largely underfunded to do the services that they need, to just provide basic things for their communities, and now we're asking them to guide us on how to deal with the genocide perpetrated against them by Canada and the churches.

Yes, I think it's important, but I just.... I don't have an answer for that, but I want to put my discomfort on the record that communities that are dealing with all the things they're dealing with are now being told on top of that, "We're going to send you an e-mail, and you let us know what you want to do." It's pretty hard when you're grieving the fact.... I mean, this has triggered people who are survivors, people who are the children and grandchildren of survivors, and I think part of the reason it's triggered them is because they've heard these stories, generation after generation, of the survivors saying, "We saw. We saw these things happen, but when we told, nobody cared."

This is genocide. Canada has to own this and stop asking indigenous communities to carry the bag. This is Canada's genocide against them. I just want to put that on the record. I'm just so frustrated right now.

If I could just hear from you on two questions.... What's the timeline between a nation or community coming forward and people arriving on the site to do the investigation? What is the capacity within indigenous communities, and how is it being built up so that they can do these inspections themselves without having a third party come in to do them?

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I must ask you to answer as quickly as you can.

Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson: In terms of the time it'll take, that will depend on what the communities ask for, because it could be a broad range of things. We'll be there to support them immediately. There are help supports that have been made available already to deal with some of the immediate issues, and we will get the funding out as quickly as possible to support the things they ask for.

The Chair: I'm going to, sadly, because of the reasons explained, have to suspend the meeting in just a moment.

I want to thank our departmental staff for their attendance today. Certainly, I'm sure you'll be able to fill in any blanks that were left due to the lack of time that we have. Thank you once again.

This meeting is temporarily suspended.

• (1150)

(Pause)

• (1200)

The Chair: Welcome back. I acknowledge again that in Ottawa, we meet on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on June 1, 2021, and following the discovery of the remains of 215 indigenous children buried on the site of the former Kamloops residential school, the committee is holding this meeting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action 72 to 76.

Participants, choose your language using the globe at the bottom centre of the screen—either English or French. Once you've chosen that, when you change the language you're speaking to French or English, you won't have to make any further adjustments. Also, make sure your video is turned on, and mute your microphone when you are not speaking.

We are waiting for the former chair, the Honourable Murray Sinclair, but with us now are the former commissioners of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Wilton Littlechild and Marie Wilson, along with Stephanie Scott, executive director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

Dr. Littlechild, please go ahead. Thank you for joining us today.

• (1205)

Dr. Wilton Littlechild (Former Commissioner, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Cree as follows:*]

Nitotêmtik, nikan ninanaskomaw Kisê-Manitow âsamina pêyawkwâw ê-iyinamâkoyâhk. Ka-pîkoskakh wiyasiwêwin maki oh-pinayahkik awâsisak.

[*Cree text translated as follows:*]

My relatives, first of all I want to thank the Creator. Once again, he provides for us by breaking the law to lift up the children.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Sorry, but I don't hear the interpretation.

[*English*]

The Chair: I believe Mr. Littlechild is speaking in his language.

Mr. Littlechild, please go ahead.

Dr. Wilton Littlechild: I was acknowledging and thanking you for this great, although very sad, moment for you to call a special session where we can recognize and uplift the spirit of the child's life, which in our culture is very important.

[*Witness spoke in Cree as follows:*]

Mahikan Pimohtêw nisihkason. Maskwacîs ohci.

[*Cree text translated as follows:*]

My name is Walking Wolf. I am from Hobbema.

[*English*]

My name is Walking Wolf, from the Maskwacis Cree territory, and I want to thank you again, first of all, for calling this special session.

I want to draw us right back to the first report that the commission made. We concluded very early, from the stories we were hearing, that this was a direct assault. The indigenous residential school policy or the Indian residential school policy was an assault on our languages, on our families, on our communities and, very importantly, on our spirituality. I want to talk about that in terms of the impact of this finding on families and communities from the perspective of not only our traditional laws, our customary laws, but also our sacred laws, especially in terms of our practice when we lose someone in our community.

I want to begin with a story about my own grandfather, Mahihgan Pimoteyw, whose name I bear now. In a epidemic, when he was a chief, he had to bury 33 members of the Ermineskin Cree Nation in one day. That obligation was passed down to my mother, and then now to me, to help our community at times of grief and mourning like we have today.

Also, I wanted to remind us that in our history we saw many gravesites, during our journey as a commission, that were outside the graveyard, because the person may have been a young person from the school who had committed suicide, and they were not allowed to be buried within the graveyard. I want to point that out also, because when I was in residential school—three of them for over 14 years—when I was 10 and 12 I lost both of my grandparents, who actually were the ones who raised me, but I was not allowed to go to their funeral. I didn't have a chance to say farewell to my grandmother or my grandfather. Now I do, through this opportunity.

The other thing I want to point out is as a commission we always had an empty seat beside us, and I have an empty seat beside me now. We would call in the child's spirit to come and join us at the hearing, to guide us, to pray with us and just to be with us to support us. Then, after the hearing, we will send the spirit free again, back to the place of forever happiness, as our old people often call it.

I want to also reflect on our own repatriation here of 17 bodies from a residential school. All that was marked on the coffin was “nine-year-old girl” or “12-year-old boy”. There was one particular one that had “6-year-old boy”, and I chose to carry that coffin to the graveyard after our ceremonies, because that's how old I was when I was taken to residential school.

• (1210)

We had a traditional ceremony. By that I mean we had a wake. We sang our 16 travelling songs. We had our pipe ceremony. We had our elders speak to us during the wake, and also we had our last giveaway feast. These are traditional ceremonies that are not only ceremonies but a part of our laws. We need to do this as indigenous people when we lose someone from our community. The hardest one is always when you lose a child. We were able to do that. After that, we had a memorial for four years after the burial, on the day of the burial.

I wanted to mention that this was lost to these families of 215 children and more. In my own community, there were the 17 I mentioned. Also, there were four little skeletons that were found in the old school when it was being taken down, so it hits home for me, because our school at one time was also the largest in Canada, with over 500 students from all different parts of the province.

I want to thank the leaders here in my community—the elders who had a memorial service. We've been having prayer ceremonies every day since we heard this news, because one of the Mayan prophecies is that spirituality has to come back to leadership. I mention that one of the four prophecies they made recently.

I want to thank Deputy Minister Quan-Watson, because I know the previous witness, and he follows this with respect, the teaching, in his work.

In conclusion, I want to remind us of the sacred teachings, and in this case the one I want to reflect on is one about respect. I heard it earlier in the session that this must be community led. Yesterday I was engaged with the United Nations conference on the coming decade for indigenous languages. As you know, that was one of the ones that was assaulted as well.

In saying that, the suggestion was made that this not be indigenous led but indigenous driven, because the difference between the two words is that if it's indigenous driven, then you have a hand in it and can shape the outcomes that you desire in a good way. We need to respect that teaching, as well.

[Witness spoke in Cree as follows:]

So, áhkamêyimok.

[Cree text translated as follows:]

So, persevere.

[English]

Continue the good work you are doing, and as I did in our community, I ask for everyone who is listening to pause for a moment and say a prayer for these children who now have a bright path going back to the sacred place of the ancestors.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. That's all I wanted to present at this point.

• (1215)

The Chair: Before I go to Senator Sinclair, can we do a brief pause for the thoughts that you just expressed? Committee.

[A moment of silence observed]

The Chair: Are we okay, technically, with Mr. Sinclair?

Hon. Murray Sinclair (Former Chair, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, As an Individual): Good morning, everybody. Can you hear me all right?

The Chair: Thank you.

Would you like to go ahead with your testimony, sir? Please go ahead.

Hon. Murray Sinclair: All right.

I apologize for connecting late. The technology and connection information I was given was not as full as it could have been, and therefore I spent the last 25 minutes with your tech people, trying to get into this forum with you. I also apologize to my colleagues Commissioner Littlechild and Commissioner Wilson for missing anything they may have already said. It would have been good for us to have heard each other speak.

When I was invited to participate in this event, I debated with myself for a while, the better part of a day and a half or so, as to whether or not I wanted to participate in this, mainly because I hate the possibility that something as significant as this, as personal as this and as triggering as this is could become a political football or could become an issue that gets embraced in the political action that's going on in Ottawa. I was pleased to see and hear that the Prime Minister and the leader of the official opposition have joined together to indicate that they will develop a plan about how to move forward on this. I also want to commend each one of them for having reached out to me to indicate that they wish to talk about what that could entail. I've advised my colleagues of that.

The fact that it also gets played out so publicly in the media is both a good thing and a bad thing. I've spoken about this before. It's good for Canada to understand that we still have to come to terms with a lot of what occurred during the residential school era and that there are still a lot of uncovered truths out there that we need to look at. This is one of them that we identified in the course of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At the same time, I recognize that this has been a huge trigger to the survivors.

I shut my phone off to all media requests—with the exception of one or two, mainly because the number of media requests was significant—and allowed the survivors to reach out to me. I have to say that I have spoken with probably about 200 survivors who have contacted me over the course of the last few days to express their reaction, their grief, their feelings of anger, their feelings of frustration, but also their huge emotion and their sense of the depth of what they're looking at for themselves and trying to come to terms with. The fact that there are very few and, in most places now, no healing resource programs available to them is a huge chapter that unfortunately has ended with the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the commitment by the Government of Canada to provide healing centres and programs for survivors. It's one that I spoke about in the public statement I issued this week.

I think we really need to take that to heart. I compared it to how different it was for Canada when it provided some gathering services and resources for veterans of the Second World War when they returned. We ensured that they had places where they could gather and talk with each other, because nothing heals survivors more than other survivors.

They're now in great pain as a result of this story, and they will be in even more pain, because as we go forward, I'm sure we're going to discover additional places where bodies are buried and unmarked gravesites are found. More information is going to come to light. I will begin with those thoughts.

• (1220)

One of the questions that people in private conversations keep asking me is, what has the government been doing about this to this point in time? I point to the calls to action that we issued—calls to action 71 through to 75, I think—in which we identified this as a major issue that needed to be done.

The volume we issued as part of the TRC's final report, volume 4, identified the work that we were able to do in the course of the TRC. Even with the limited amount of research that we did, we were able to safely say that we believe that there are several un-

known burial sites that can be discovered and located with the use of proper geological researchers and experts. Scott Hamilton, who did that work for us, has indicated on the maps and the database he was able to develop where he thinks those sites currently are.

Nothing has been done by the government to follow that up, and we think that that's a sad commentary upon the commitment the government has—or the lack of commitment the government has—to try to close the story on what happened at residential schools, because despite the fact that it may not be important to some Canadians and maybe to government officials, it's of huge importance to residential school survivors and to the families of those who did not come back.

When we were doing the work of the TRC and listening to testimony, we heard from many survivors who told us some horrendous stories about deaths at the schools. We heard stories from survivors who talked about what they believed to be acts of murder and what they believed to be acts of negligence. We were not able to test that in terms of looking behind the evidence and searching out further information. We simply allowed the survivors to tell their stories, because we knew that the depth of feeling they had about that and what they were telling us was a huge burden that they needed to have lifted—and be allowed to have lifted from them—so we wanted them to have that opportunity.

In addition to that, we know that there is additional information out there in the records that have been lost to the process, because much of our information about what records might exist shows that school records were destroyed. Some were lost to floods or fires, but many were destroyed that would tell us that information.

We do know that the Bryce report disclosed, of course, that the death rates in schools in Saskatchewan were somewhere between 25% in some schools, in one school, and 49% in another school. That tells you that if this was the death rate in that era for those schools, and if anything even approaching that 25% continued to be the death rate in residential schools for any period of time, then that was a huge problem. The Government of Canada would not accept his report. It would not allow him to continue further studies and in fact turfed him from the public service as a result of his information and the fact that he insisted on continuing to talk about it.

There was a lot done to cover this up, and that's an aspect of this story that really needs to be investigated. The fact that there are still church records that have not been revealed—that have not been made available to the national centre or to us at the TRC—related to this is also a sad commentary on the lack of commitment by the Catholic church to allow us to investigate this further. We need to have that question looked at as well.

• (1225)

I understand that in British Columbia.... I got a call early this morning, in fact, saying that the RCMP have now declared that a major investigation is going to occur into the bodies that have been located in Kamloops, and they are now beginning to question those who have made this story available. Unfortunately, in the typical, heavy-handed and ham-handed police way, they are simply intimidating people, rather than helping them. We need to have a discussion with the police about how they're handling it, because they should not be pursuing those who are revealing the information. They should, in fact, be looking at and looking for those records. They should be looking at what we know as opposed to trying to pursue witnesses.

The young lady who did the research on the ground-penetrating radar, for example, is quite scared of the approach that the RCMP have taken with her, and I don't blame her. My advice to her—and others—has been to make sure she has legal counsel available to her so that she is not mistreated going forward.

We have a huge task still remaining ahead of us, and we identified that as a remaining task in work with the TRC. In order for us to deal with this properly, we need to ensure that there is an independent study done into that question of those burial sites, where they are and what the numbers are going to tell us. That investigation should not be conducted under the auspices of the federal government but should be overseen by a parliamentary committee that will ensure that it is done in a proper way, as opposed to having anyone within the justice department or the department of indigenous affairs controlling that process.

I would encourage you to think about that as we go forward, because I think there are still many questions that remain to be answered. I think it's not only survivors of the schools who need to know this. The survivors of those who worked in the schools also need to know what happened, because this is hurting them as well. Several of them have reached out to me about how much anguish they are feeling over knowing that their grandfather, grandmother, father or mother worked in the school and they didn't know, or never talked about it if they did know anything. They want to know what they can do to help them as well.

I'm sure you will have a lot of questions for us, so I'll leave it at that. I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Ms. Wilson, could you go ahead, please, with your testimony?

Dr. Marie Wilson (Former Commissioner, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Chair.

Good morning, everyone. I want to acknowledge the committee and, if I may say, Chair Bratina, I also honour your expressions of remorse and what you shared with us about your wife in a very personal conversation. I think that speaks to our shared humanity as we come round this issue.

I want to acknowledge Deputy Minister Quan-Watson as well for [Technical difficulty—Editor] coming to you from Treaty 8 territory

[Technical difficulty—Editor] peoples of the Dene Nation. I know Daniel lived here, but he also worked with us and paid attention to us throughout the work of our commission.

I also want to acknowledge my fellow commissioners. Good morning to you both. It's good to see you both. Thank you very much, Chief Littlechild, for your very personal sharings as well.

I acknowledge our NCTR relatives. I refer to them in that way because, in speaking of them, the existence of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation was something that our commission gave birth to. It was part of our mandate with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and they carry on the very important and reverent work of safekeeping all that we learned and all that was given to us by way of teachings and material effects during the commission's work.

I also want to acknowledge any survivors or intergenerational survivors who may be in the room, on this committee or joining us in other ways and whose voices and, I have to say, relentless advocacy and efforts have brought us to this time and place.

Finally, and most particularly, I want to acknowledge and honour all those across the country who are grieving and who are, at the same time, feeling expressions of feeling validated for all that they have told us and all that is beginning to be heard.

I was thinking, if only I could say happy anniversary, but we're not here to celebrate. Rather, we're here to hold up to the light those things that, in fact, we have known about for years but have until now denied, ignored, or given insufficient attention, resources, or the urgency needed for action to follow.

What was happening six years ago today—six years ago, exactly, yesterday? In fact, thousands of residential school survivors and others from throughout the land were gathered in Ottawa to witness, receive and celebrate the conclusions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. We three commissioners stood together to release the summary report of our findings, a full volume of survivors' voices—some of whom talked precisely about this issue—10 founding principles of reconciliation and 94 calls to action. We have today referenced only the calls to action numbering in the 70s, which are particularly about this, but there are others calls to action that are interrelated, such as number 82, which calls for a national monument, in part to have a commemorative place for the unknown child—those who we haven't yet found and may never find.

My part in those final speeches that day was, in fact, about the missing children. We talked about it a lot at that time, and that was six years ago.

A few months later, we released our multi-volume, full report, and our chair, Mr. Sinclair, has just referred you to volume 4, an entire volume devoted to missing children and unmarked burials.

Commissioner Littlechild has talked to you about the chairs we had in place, the empty chairs, usually two of them, one for all the little boys and one for all the little girls, so they would be ever present in front of mind in our thinking and in our work.

The conclusions in our reports did not come from thin air. They came from historic documents, from new research that was commissioned by us and from 7,000 recorded voices of former residential school student survivors, each one of them an expert on their own lived experiences, what happened to them, what happened to friends and family members, what they witnessed and those they never saw again.

Well, that was six years ago. What was happening nine years ago? In public hearings open to all who cared to pay attention, because all of our activities were public and most of them web-streamed, survivor women in Chisasibi, northern Quebec, entrusted me with this baby rattle, the *shiishiikun*. They conveyed a particular responsibility to me as the woman commissioner, sometimes referred to as the mother commissioner, to do all that we could to find and free the spirits of the missing children.

• (1235)

What was happening 11 years ago? At one of our very earliest TRC events, in Winnipeg, we sat in a circle, which included the then Conservative Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and a former chief, who implored us to find their missing relative, one who had never returned home from residential school.

What was happening 13 years ago? Leaders from each and every one of your political parties stood in the House of Commons to offer official apologies for your parties' and for respective governments' roles in imposing and perpetuating the residential school system. Very importantly, each one promised to work together to make things right in the spirit of reconciliation.

We are called together again today in what you have deemed an emergency session. I've been pondering this question: When does the known, when does the atrocious become an emergency? I'm very, very grateful for this expression of urgency but I am dismayed that it's being framed using the poor language that we have to work with, that it's being called "discovery of human remains". This is not a discovery, which is why I have reminded you of this history. It is the validation of all that we have previously and repeatedly been told and have been saying. These are not statistics. We know the number, but these are not statistics. By the way, these are also not all of the children we know to have died at school. We already knew of 52 in our existing records. These are not statistics; these are little children, some of them possibly now forever unknown but all of them loved and none of them ever forgotten.

What can Canada do?

I've tried to wrap my head around what we might offer back as you go forward with your deliberations. Commissioner Sinclair touched on it already, and I think it's extremely important. First is a continued and sustained non-partisan response and prioritization of resources needed to do this work and all that is being addressed under that broad banner of reconciliation. We have repeatedly said that reconciliation is a non-partisan issue.

Next is accountability, so that we hold ourselves as a country to the international standards and expectations that we would in fact, and we have in the past, advocated for with respect to other countries, including in terms of the consideration of crime and crimes against humanity.

I would ask for honest language and that we not make ourselves comfortable with phrases such as "a sad chapter in our history". Is it that or is it a human rights atrocity? Is it a social policy mistake or, in this story, was it a breeding ground for crime and abuse? With my appreciation for your committee, your focus and your commitment, for which I'm very grateful, I want you to push for this to be seen more and more as not just an issue for indigenous and northern affairs. It is an issue of human rights and of justice that is of critical importance to all Canadians and to our very principles of democracy.

It is for all of government, and I would say all of governments, as we say repeatedly in our calls to action, and the federal government with its particular ability and influence and powers to convene across all governments. Call to action number 75 in particular is very specific about that. Many of these residential schools and the burial sites are no longer on church-owned properties or even public properties. Many of them are now in private hands, and there's going to be a need for collaboration among private landowners, municipalities, indigenous leaders, provincial governments and territorial ones as well.

Then I would ask for transparency and comprehensive reporting, and, of course, that flows most easily when you have a comprehensive strategy that has been communicated and that we all know about. That way, we can know what progress is being made without having to depend on the government purporting to have done things without anyone else being well aware of them.

• (1240)

I am aware, in fact, of the initiatives that are under way within the indigenous affairs department on this file. Has it advanced enough? Has it advanced fast enough? Are people aware of its existence?

I think these are things we need to communicate thoroughly, frequently and in a comprehensive way, so we understand how these efforts tie in with the other efforts that are all intertwined in our calls to action. I really encourage you and all others not to limit yourselves to the calls to action that number in the 70s.

Act on the obvious. As an example, take number 82, which is outside that bundle in the 70s. It calls for a national monument to honour all students who went to residential schools, knowing that it also is intended to serve as the tomb of the unknown child, if you will, and accepting, as we must, that not all the children we will find will ever be identified. Will we ever know exactly where they came from and who they belonged to?

I would like to end by saying that I would like us to embrace—without making crass comparisons—the valuable lessons of COVID, where we have shown and proven to ourselves that we know how to give urgent response. We know how to do whatever it takes, whatever it costs, when it has to do with the right thing, when it has to do with us taking care of each other, and when it has to do with making sure we are living up to the standards we say we believe in as a country.

I want to end, if I may, where I began, by honouring all the generations of little ones who were taken from their homes and displaced from everything and everyone they knew, and by acknowledging the little children lying in Kamloops. This past week they have risen up and they have begun to be heard across the country. They have brought Canada to the forefront of international attention. It's our responsibility collectively, I think, to continue to listen to them and to make every effort to find the others throughout the land who are still missing.

I look forward to your questions and conversation. Thank you very much.

Marsi cho.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Indeed, we would have felt such shame as this committee if we had not reached out to acknowledge the situation and then determine how we will proceed. Thank you so much for the comments you've made so far.

We've also changed the typical format of the meeting, which is six-minute statements and then rounds of questions, because we didn't want to interfere with the thoughts that you were having that you wished to share with us. Sometimes there's no time limit that you can put on that.

We have one more testimony coming from the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. We have Stephanie Scott and Cynthia Wesley-Esquiaux. Who would like to speak?

Ms. Stephanie Scott (Executive Director, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation): I'll start. I just want to begin by acknowledging that I'm joining this meeting from the original lands of the Anishinabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples, in the homeland of the Métis.

On behalf of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, I want to say thank you, *meegwetch*, to the commissioners, whom I was able to walk beside for many years during the commission. I want to thank the honourable chair and the members of the committee for initiating this timely and absolutely necessary study.

My heart goes out to the families of the children who perished at the Kamloops residential school, and all the children who did not return home. This is a time of mourning. It is also an opportunity to

finally do the work to locate the children who were taken away, never to return home.

It's our sincere hope that what the Tk'emlúps te Sekwépemc have accomplished in locating 215 children will be a moment where all Canadians embrace the truth and act with genuine commitment towards reconciliation. We hope that out of this tragedy, we will see a concerted national action to locate and honour all first nations, Métis and Inuit children who perished as a result of the residential school system. This is something that is urgently needed and long overdue.

As the former manager of statement gathering during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I heard survivors talk about witnessing the murder and death of children when they were at residential schools. Many parents were never notified of their child's passing, nor told where their children were. We continue to hear these accounts at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. The fourth volume of the TRC's final report described cemeteries as being abandoned and unprotected.

The NCTR is the child of the TRC, and we continue to work closely with survivors to ensure our work is guided by their vision and reflects their truth. Five of the 94 calls to action call on governments and Canadian institutions to collaborate with and support our ongoing work.

Call to action 72 specifically calls on the federal government to allocate sufficient resources to the NCTR to allow us to maintain the national residential school student death register. Between the work of the TRC and the NCTR, we have confirmed 4,117 deaths of children in the residential schools. Due to gaps in the records, we have not been able to identify the names of some of these children.

The number of children believed to have gone missing is much higher. Record-keeping for these schools was nowhere near today's standards, nor were the records consistent. Review of the records already in the NCTR's collection is still ongoing, and we will find more children.

A significant key in piecing together the evidence remains with survivors and their families. Even today, survivors continue to come forward with accounts of deaths that they witnessed. Many are in unmarked graves. There are also accounts of bodies that were buried within walls, bodies buried in the hills or by riversides, and bodies that were never found after children died trying to escape from these schools. These sites are in fact crime scenes, and the discovery at Kamloops has triggered a new urgency for survivors and their families to share their truths while they still can.

We do not know what communities will decide concerning repatriating children to their homes. This must be the choice of families and communities. I do, however, want to underscore to the committee the urgency of documenting what survivors witnessed or what families have shared about missing loved ones. We are racing against time. We often hear from survivors that they have fewer tomorrows than they have yesterdays.

We know the Kamloops residential school is one school in over 140 across this country. We are only at the beginning of recognizing the extent of the horrific loss of precious lives. The work ahead is extensive.

I feel it is also important for the committee to recognize that, at this point, there is no ongoing federal commitment to maintain the NCTR's core funding, which is necessary for this vital work to continue.

Since we opened in 2015, we have developed a national student memorial register, created internships with other institutions to expand digital archives, and created greater accessibility of the truths within the records we hold. We also developed a commemoration and healing fund with the guidance of residential school survivors. In developing this fund, survivors prioritized accessibility, because communities deserve to pursue healing and remembrance in ways they feel are appropriate for themselves, without red tape and cumbersome bureaucratic barriers.

I will now ask Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, the chair of the NCTR's governing circle, to talk about what needs to be done going forward.

Meegwetch.

• (1245)

Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux (Chair, Governing Circle, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation): Thank you, Stephanie.

Thank you to the commissioners, as well, for the work you've done in the past and the truth that you brought to light.

I'd like to thank the standing committee, as well, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I'd like to say good afternoon. I am a proud member and resident of the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation in Lake Simcoe.

Together with the Chippewas of Beausoleil and Rama, and the Mississaugas of Alderville, Curve Lake, Hiawatha and Scugog Island, we are all signatories to several treaties signed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries that covered lands in different parts of

southern and central Ontario. I'd like to acknowledge that I'm speaking to you from the original lands of the Chippewa today.

First, I also want you to know that both my parents attended residential school and spent 20 years there between them, my father going at the very young age of four, actually being raised there and also suffering the consequences of that through the rest of his life.

I think there are two things that need to be done.

The first is to finally uncover the truth—and I mean truth with a capital T, because we've had a lot of truth-telling, but we have not had the final truth—to finally and completely identify all the children who never returned home. Paramount to this step is having all parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement release all the relevant records needed to document this truth.

The second is upholding indigenous protocols around mourning and ensuring that indigenous communities determine what ceremonies and commemorations are necessary and appropriate to honour the children who died and those who never returned home.

For years, the Canadian government denied indigenous peoples the freedom to practise our sacred ceremonies and cultural practices. The residential school system had a role—if not the largest role—in reinforcing this. Survivors have shared that residential schools had a detrimental impact on their ability to grieve.

It is therefore necessary that communities be supported to bring in knowledge-keepers and undertake the ceremonies that were so long denied to the missing children, their families and their communities. There is an ongoing restoration process that must be supported for our next generations.

I want to underline the TRC's call to action 76, which says that indigenous peoples must be able to lead in the development of strategies for documenting, maintaining, commemorating and protecting residential school cemeteries.

In the view of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation—and the survivors we depend on to guide us—hiding, damaging, interfering with or destroying the graves of residential school children must be recognized as a crime and prosecuted as such.

In addition, national standards must be put in place concerning the use of investigative technologies, such as ground-scanning radar, to ensure that the privacy of affected families is respected and that any evidence of crimes is not compromised.

Finally, all measures to investigate and protect burial sites must be consistent with the rights of indigenous people in domestic and international law, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Yesterday, the federal Minister for Crown-Indigenous Relations announced that previously allocated funding for the investigation of gravesites would finally be made available to first nations, Inuit and Métis Nation governments and communities. In making the announcement, the minister told reporters that indigenous peoples weren't ready for the money to be released before this.

This is quite simply untrue. The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, survivors and our partners have been working within frameworks of collaboration, respect for diverse indigenous protocols and adherence to the guidance of survivors and knowledge-keepers for many years—as you heard former commissioner Wilson say.

The federal government has been told time and time again that the need for action is urgent. The national centre and indigenous communities have been desperate to begin meaningful action in locating gravesites, but have been severely underfunded. We've made progress on this journey towards truth, reconciliation and healing, but more truth—a deeper truth—remains.

The Kamloops school brings into focus just how much more work we have to do as a country. This is going to require genuine, sustained action by the Government of Canada to meet the obligations required to right this horrific wrong. Survivors have consistently said that before we can meaningfully talk about reconciliation, we must have truth and we must have healing.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation was cut short in its work, and its support would be very appropriate right now. Until we have identified all the children who never came home from residential schools, we will not know the whole truth. Until those children are finally returned to their families and communities, the healing journey will remain incomplete.

This is a collective task before us. We must do this in a good way without any further delay.

Meegwetch for your time and attention.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, witnesses, for your testimony.

We're actually right at the time at which we must end the meeting, and there are many specific technical reasons for why we have to end the meeting.

However, I'm going to ask each member, Mrs. McLeod, Mr. Battiste, Madam Bérubé and Rachel Blaney, to take one minute of brief reflection on what we've heard from witnesses today.

Cathy McLeod, please go ahead.

Once again, we don't have time for an interchange, but I want you to express any feelings you have as a result of what we've heard today.

• (1255)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: First of all, to the commissioners, it's hard to believe I was with you at the ceremony six years ago, when the report was released.

There has been some progress, but as you reflected, insufficient attention, resources, and urgency. I represent the area of Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, and I know that it was known. You brought an awareness, and this has rocked the country, certainly for people who weren't as aware as they needed to be or should have been.

I wish I had time. I would love to explore more of the issues around the records and whether there is anything we can do to compel action. I would be very interested in the comments from the Honourable Murray Sinclair about the investigation, and I wonder if it's too premature that the work needs to be done by communities for a parliamentary kind of investigation.

Unfortunately, we don't have the time. I just want to acknowledge the incredible burden you carry from hearing the very difficult testimony, which I'm sure still lives with you to this day.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Jaime Battiste.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): [*Member spoke in Mi'kmaq as follows:*]

Welalieg otji logoeoagen telatoog ag logeoagen tan gisatoog.

[*Mi'kmaq text translated as follows:*]

Thank you for the work you are doing and the work you have done.

[*English*]

I just wanted to thank you in my language.

This has been a difficult week for most of us, but for you this was your reality for years, listening to this and hearing this.

This emergency meeting was to help us reflect and understand based on your knowledge. We felt it was important to hear from you, as you live this every day.

There are so many questions as Canadians are going through the grief, the shock, the denial and the pain. Indigenous people are going through the same and are triggered, asking why: Why was our language, why was our culture, and why were our lives so insignificant? Why were we such a threat that this is what we went through?

I think your reflections have really helped us, and your words and recommendations continue to guide our work. We're going to be working hard in this committee to make sure the recommendations are implemented in full.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Ms. Bérubé, you have the floor.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Mr. Chair, I must first apologize to Mr. Littlechild. I have a great deal of respect and empathy for him and his testimony. I didn't mean to interrupt him earlier. I just wanted to understand his comments, with all due respect, because they were very important. I realize that I didn't handle this well and I apologize again.

I would also like to tell the witnesses that we're all saddened by the terrible news of this discovery. There may be more to come. I'm the Bloc Québécois critic for indigenous affairs and the member of Parliament for Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, in Quebec, where several indigenous communities are located. Small shoes were placed everywhere in memory of these children who didn't deserve what they experienced. What happened at that time remains incomprehensible.

Your testimonies are so important and touching. *Meegwetch*. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Rachel Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I just want to thank everyone here so much for their testimony.

As the granddaughter of a survivor, and as the spouse of a survivor, my heart is with everyone across this country that had this experience, because I know how hard it is.

I guess what I would say is that I wish all Canadians could see the gaze of my husband when he looks at his children right now.

I want to acknowledge Chief Robert Joseph, who told us that even when we are angry we must carry these beautiful, precious souls in our hands and in our hearts, and remember that as we go through this process, we must send them to the better place so that they can be okay now.

I just want to thank you for giving all Canadians a pathway to doing this, because until all Canadians carry this the way indigenous people have carried this since the very start, they will not fully heal.

Thank you for your work. I appreciate it so much.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you. Once again, to conclude, Wilton Littlechild mentioned the spirits that are among us, and behind me is a picture of *The Eagles Among Us* by David General, here in Hamilton.

I mentioned early on that through the current pandemic we were saddened by the reality of people, especially the elderly, passing away with no loved ones near to comfort them. Imagine the fate of these children, in a strange place, being overcome by illnesses, dependent on strangers to ease their suffering—if indeed any were there—tears in their eyes, all alone, feeling unloved as the darkness of death overcame them.

We are here today to tell their spirits that they are loved, and we will not disrespect the memory of those children who were lost.

Thank you, everyone. I'd like to take a motion to adjourn.

Mr. Powlowski, Ms. Blaney, all in favour?

This meeting is adjourned.

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