June 21, 2017 |

Statements

National Aboriginal Day Statement by President Irene Lanzinger

June 21 marks the 21st celebration of Canada's National Aboriginal Day. It's a day that acknowledges and celebrates the diversity of indigenous peoples and the rich heritage of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. In a practical way, this acknowledgement begins with recognizing the traditional indigenous territory where all Canadians live, work and play.

This territorial acknowledgement is beginning to happen at schools, union halls and government events across the country, and is a meaningful step toward reconciliation. The indigenous people of Canada are an integral part of everything we have come to enjoy with respect to freedom and economic prosperity in this country, and we must be ever mindful of this.

This year also marks 150 years since Canada was formed as a country. This is a time to reflect on the history and experiences of the indigenous people of our country, and to reflect on what the lives of indigenous people looked like on these lands before contact.

The federal government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has gained publicity since it released its report and 94 calls to action in 2016. But there remains much work to do to bring awareness and education to the general public of the injustices committed against indigenous communities after the creation of Canada. It is also important to recognize that not all indigenous people will celebrate or acknowledge July 1 Canada Day.

Media coverage has put the spotlight on the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. British Columbia has the highest numbers of murdered and missing in Canada. While acknowledging the high numbers of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, it is imperative to consider the families and children left behind.

Yes, our duty as a society is to ensure that we fix what is wrong with our system that allows indigenous women to be stolen from us at such alarming rates. But we must do so by supporting the families and loved ones of the missing and murdered. We must unite to promote truth and justice in this area, so families have a voice in providing statements and information to contribute in a meaningful way to the national inquiry, and to make sure those family members are supported through the process.

The Federation will continue to support the work of the Coalition on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and encourage union members and their families to post information on the inquiry in communities across the province to include as many families as possible in this process.

Media both provincially and nationally have been highlighting issues like child poverty, the lack of clean drinking water, environmental protection, and the general state of critical infrastructure on reserves, including homes and schools. Ongoing focus is needed on these important issues, as well as the issues of cultural appropriation of indigenous culture, unemployment and the need for youth supports and programs. It is crucial that we respect the rights of indigenous communities as we would any other community in Canada, including their right to raise their children. The importance of this is underlined as we realize indigenous youth are the fastest growing population segment in Canada – a group that has alarmingly high suicide rates.

The Yukon has made National Aboriginal Day an official statutory holiday, and it is time we do the same here in British Columbia and throughout the country, so that people can come together to understand our history and celebrate our future. Let’s start by learning more about the issues affecting indigenous peoples and show up to celebrate, support and acknowledge their rightful place in this country’s history and current landscape.