

July 21, 2020

New Brunswick Monthly Meeting
The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
c/o 22 Hollybrook St.
Fredericton, NB
E3A 4N7

Dear Premier Higgs,

We are writing to you from a heritage of concern for fair dealing with the Indigenous Peoples of North America. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) has carried this concern ever since Quaker settlers first landed on this continent.

Quakers both individually and collectively have been allies of the First Nation Peoples in New Brunswick and across Canada as Indigenous communities have worked to maintain their cultural traditions and strengthen their communities. We are heartened to see the thoughtful and sensitive way they have created and presented their invitation to your government to participate in an Inquiry on racism.

We see an unprecedented opportunity for New Brunswick and your government to take a leadership position in establishing a new relationship with the First Nations of the Province.

The Chiefs of the Wolastoqey First Nations have presented an invitation to the Government of New Brunswick to join them in creating a new era of consultation and action that addresses the long-standing wrongs of systemic racism in our province. We see an unprecedented opportunity for New Brunswick and your government to take a leadership position in establishing a new relationship.

This is a unique moment in the history of New Brunswick. The invitation that has been extended comes from the strength and knowledge of First Nation leadership. It should be met with the strength and knowledge of the leadership of the current New Brunswick Government.

As Premier, it rests primarily with you to set the tone and provide the response that meets the First Nations' invitation at the level it is being offered. We urge you to consider the opportunity that has unexpectedly come your way to do something for the province no previous Premier has done.

Although it may not have been on your agenda when you became Premier, circumstances of social change have now swept across the United States, Canada, and much of the world that are putting the moral leadership of governments to the test.

Systemic racism is now being widely recognized as a corrosive force that damages the cultural, legal, social, and economic life of the societies in which it operates. Awakening to this reality has

propelled people of all ethnic backgrounds—and especially the young—into a renewed movement for social justice, equal rights, and an end to institutional and governmental racism.

We recognize that forms of racism are deeply rooted in the attitudes and behaviour of some people in New Brunswick and change at that level often comes slowly. But the encouraging aspect of the new awareness is that government has the power to change policies and enact new policies that eliminate racism from the administration of government operations.

The Wolastoqey Chiefs are asking for an Inquiry into systemic racism and how to eliminate it. You have countered by saying it would be better to convene a Task Force that can quickly identify areas for action and make recommendations for addressing them.

We ask, why not do both? A quick acting Task Force would be a good step. An Inquiry could go deeper and broader into the extent of racism's damaging effects and the scope of the corrective action needed.

We appreciate that you are not keen on advancing purely symbolic action on racism but instead want to see concrete action on specific aspects of the problem. However, we urge you to consider that the symbolism of high-profile leadership from the top level of government often has a real effect on the values, attitudes, and behaviour of citizens throughout society.

Accepting the Wolastoqey First Nation's offer to help organize, convene, and conduct an Inquiry into systemic racism would have a positive, symbolic effect on both the Indigenous people and the general population of the province. Although the act is partly symbolic, the positive effect on thinking and attitudes is real. The Inquiry would, of course, lead to additional action on racism at broader and deeper levels.

We hope you will consider anew the enormous value for New Brunswick of your leadership along with First Nations leadership in setting up and conducting an Inquiry on systemic racism. It could be a model for Canada and the beginning of a new era for New Brunswick.

Sincerely,

Vincent Zelazny, Clerk
New Brunswick Monthly Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)