

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

June 4, 2021

Honourable John Horgan
Premier of British Columbia
Via email only: premier@gov.bc.ca

RE: Private Archives hosted by British Columbia

Dear Premier Horgan,

In 2011, the Province of British Columbia entered into an agreement with the Sisters of St. Ann to hold their archives in the British Columbia Provincial Archives. These materials are not held in any other collection in Canada, including the Library and Archives of Canada. The agreement entered into between the Sisters of St. Ann and the British Columbia Government has never been shared with First Nations affected, and it is not public.

We request that you release this agreement to First Nations immediately. The act of concluding such an agreement has been seen as an effort to conceal or limit our access to the entire residential school history in British Columbia. In effect, British Columbia agreed to host in the publicly owned physical space of the Provincial Archives, these complete records and facilitate the internal archival work of the religious congregation, while ensuring records would remain a “private” archive.

As you know, the Catholic missionary activities in British Columbia, such as with Oblate orders and St. Ann’s, placed a targeted focus on the health and education of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia. While some of these activities were authorized under federal law, such as the Indian Advancement Act, 1884 (later becoming the Indian Act), British Columbia also enthusiastically supported the efforts, making special arrangements for this work to advance.

Canada established denominational schools for the education of Indians and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (“OMI”) were one of the main congregations operating the schools throughout the Province. Religious missions were given our lands, resources, and access and control over our children. The complete impact of these colonial actions must involve a commitment to hear and record the full truth of how this impacted Indigenous peoples.

In 1920, when the *Indian Act* was amended making mandatory attendance at residential school for all Indigenous children in British Columbia between the ages of 7-17, the education mission of the OMI was expanded in British Columbia. As you may have learned last week with the unmarked burial site, very young children are believed to be buried at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. We do know that children younger than 7 attended the Kamloops school, and the limited records we have accessed through Federal Government “returns” indicate some were in fact as young as 3 years old. Furthermore, after 1933, principals of the schools, including Kamloops Indian Residential School, had complete legal guardianship of the children and made all decisions on their behalf leaving parents and families powerless.



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The Sisters of St. Ann were among those participating in the residential school mission and undertook extensive health and education missions in British Columbia. The archives of the order, and the records of the work they have undertaken, is one of several important sources of information that must be freely shared with First Nations throughout British Columbia. Restrictions on access to these archives is a serious concern to First Nations, and is not consistent with the Government's commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, (Articles 11 & 12, among other humanitarian and international human rights law requirements).

The 2011 British Columbia-St. Ann agreement imposed restrictions on access to the records held at the British Columbia Archives, including

- No public access to the records and the archive remains "private" but in the public space of the Provincial Archives, behind a locked door.
- The Sisters of St. Ann archivist, or other designated individual, would review the records and address any "inaccuracies" in the records
- In exchange for holding the archives in the physical space of the archives, the Sisters of St. Ann presumably would at some point in the future permit the public archivists some access to the records.
- We believe public access is not contemplated until after 2027, or later.

With the discovery of the unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School, and your acknowledgement that you will take all steps necessary to support First Nations in ensuring the truth about residential schools guides our work going forward, we urge you to immediately rescind this agreement and stand up to ensure we have full access to the complete private archive.

It is important that you inquire into how this private archive came to be held in a provincial office under these arrangements. What motivated the Government of British Columbia to put in place this arrangement in 2011? It is highly problematic and not proper. What other special "arrangements" has British Columbia or officials made similar to this one with churches or governments regarding records? We request you to commission an independent audit of the matter of records relating to First Nations peoples leading to a public report regarding British Columbia's conduct and handling of records relevant to the Indian residential school period, with recommendations to bring this into alignment with best practices and human rights.

While Canada has made special agreements on records, it is shocking to learn that the Government of British Columbia has also done so.

We request you address this immediately and take concrete steps to respond to our concerns. The options are clear to us, either this private archive is made fully and completely accessible to First Nations impacted, or it is removed from the public facility. We cannot wait years for access while British Columbia hosts and supports the denial of full access by our Nations seeking to advance the truth of residential schools in British Columbia.

Sincerely,

FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

On behalf of the FIRST NATIONS SUMMIT



Cheryl Casimer

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Lydia Hwitsum

On behalf of the UNION OF BC INDIAN CHIEFS



Grand Chief Stewart Phillip



Chief Don Tom



Kukpi7 Judy Wilson

On behalf of the BC ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS:



Regional Chief Terry Teegee

CC: Kukpi7 Rosanne Casimir, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc
First Nations in BC
Prime Minister Justin Trudeau
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