



Wolastoqey chiefs decline to participate in Higgs government's commission on systemic racism

The following statement was issued today by the six chiefs of the Wolastoqey Nation in New Brunswick:

November 24, 2021 – (WOLASTOQEY TERRITORY) - For the last 17 months, we have been clear that an Indigenous-led independent inquiry is needed to review systemic racism against Indigenous people in New Brunswick. We stand firm in this position.

We were recently approached by the government-appointed commission on systemic racism.

In a letter sent today to the Commissioner, we have declined to participate in the Higgs government's ill-equipped and ineffective alternative to an inquiry into systemic racism against Indigenous people in New Brunswick.

Participating would make us complicit in this government's efforts to sweep this complex, essential issue under the rug. It would not bring our people closer to justice.

Make no mistake: this commission is not a replacement for the inquiry we asked for. This government has misrepresented and misconstrued our words about previous meetings to fit their own narrative. We can't trust that our participation in this commission won't be exploited in the same way.

While we support action against systemic racism for other racialized groups, our issues are unique and complex.

The Higgs-mandated general review of systemic racism against all racialized people in New Brunswick pre-determines that the needs and experiences of all minority communities are the same. This is an example of systemic racism.

As Wolastoqey Chiefs, we have long warned that racism is deeply embedded in government departments like education, health, social development and justice. Yet this commission has no power to compel evidence or testimony from anyone, much less police and government

sources. How can we be assured those institutions - where we know systemic racism is most pervasive - will participate transparently?

Our persistent demands for an Indigenous-led inquiry have been ongoing for the better part of the last two years. Despite massive public outcry in support of our position and the resulting tension this has caused, the government's commission was struck with zero Indigenous representation.

Regardless of qualifications, the commission lacks the critical lived experience required to address matters that directly affect Indigenous communities.

Dr. Manju Varma, the Commissioner, was given a year, two staff members and \$500,000 to study racism against all racialized minorities in New Brunswick. Dr. Varma and her team are being set up to fail from the outset by a disingenuous, disrespectful provincial government and we have no faith that the government will take the commission's findings seriously.

We continue to call for an Indigenous-led inquiry into systemic racism in New Brunswick.

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