

Chair,

For over 50 years, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) has advocated as the national voice of off-reserve status and non-status Indians, Métis and Southern Labrador Inuit – Indigenous peoples across Canada who are often the most disenfranchised and marginalized populations. In 1971, CAP arose as a representative of the “forgotten peoples” in response to the structural and systemic exclusion of Indigenous peoples in federal government policy. We know too well the struggle for recognition that many Indigenous peoples face every day in Canada.

Throughout its history, CAP has been committed to addressing inequities and exclusion under the Indian Act and other colonial processes that have led to the marginalization of our people. This marginalization has resulted in terrible consequences with too many off-reserve and non-status Indigenous peoples suffering chronic and mental health issues, living below the poverty line, food insecure, in unsafe housing and experiencing homelessness to name just a few.

Today I would like to speak to you on education and in particular post-secondary education and the experience of our community here in Canada. There are currently no post-secondary federal programs that address the unique needs of off-reserve Status and Non-Status Indians, southern Inuit or Métis students across Canada. This lack of support means that the Government of Canada has so far not met its legal and ethical responsibility to our peoples under the Supreme Court of Canada, Daniels decision.

Canada has yet to implement policies and programs designed to administer post-secondary education funding, resources, or supports for constituents of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples as is their duty. Current federal programs offered to Indigenous students are based on the government’s distinctions-based approach, which most often means that only members of the governments chosen Indigenous peoples are able to access them. This distinctions-based approach has thus far excluded CAP students and youth who consequently do not qualify for or are unable to access any of the federal PSE support programs that are necessary for them to advance their education and futures.

This lack of respect for our people causes impossible barriers for our children and has caused a growing and concerning education gap between Indigenous children and their non-Indigenous counterparts and between our children and their better resourced Indigenous brothers and sisters.

Too often, education programs and resources discriminate on indigenous identity and do not respect the wide and diverse cultures that exist between our groups in Canada. Even with instruments like UNDRIP that declare universal rights to education, our people do not get to enjoy these rights, and the education gap between indigenous peoples remain critical and grow wider everyday.

Even more alarming for our children is the lack of inclusion found in the school system. Lack of resources has meant little to no training for school officials or policy development that respects the identity of our children. They are being erased from the history books and their voice unheard in the present day system. When our children are only introduced to the identity of other Indigenous groups they lose their own identity, their connection with their own culture and, suffer a crisis of identity leads to a loss of their sense of self and their place in the world.

Despite our efforts, and requests to Canada to remedy this problem, no solution is on the horizon and our children will continue to be discriminated against. We as United Nations across Turtle Island need to ensure our children and young people get the education that is owed to them. We should not be directed by the politics of greed that leaves so many to suffer.

****Statement made by National Chief Elmer St. Pierre of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada****