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Teachers speak out against 'whitewashing history'

By: Melissa Martin

Posted: 7:14 PM CDT Saturday, Jul. 17, 2021



A person wearing an orange shirt honouring residential school survivors bows their head as they listen to a speaker at the ProtectEdMB rally at the Manitoba legislature, Saturday morning. (Daniel Crump / Winnipeg Free Press)

When Chantal Shivanna Ramraj heard the comments that sparked more than a week of outcry across Manitoba, first from premier Brian Pallister and then from incoming Indigenous relations minister Alan Lagimodiere, the first reaction the teacher felt was disgust, and also frustration, but not shock.

"The way that both Brian Pallister and Alan Lagimodiere said these awful comments was so casual," Ramraj said. "They didn't expect the response that they got, which shows us that they're used to saying these things, and not having any response."

Lagimodiere issued a lengthy apology late Friday afternoon, for saying that the architects of residential schools "thought they were doing the right thing." Pallister has refused to apologize for his July 7 comments in which he condemned vandalism against two legislature statues by praising colonial history.



Protestors occupy the steps on the Manitoba legislature. (Daniel Crump / Winnipeg Free Press)

"Educators need to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples," Ramraj said. "The (Truth and Reconciliation Commission), most of its recommendations have to do with education. We as educators have the responsibility to not allow historical revisionism."

On Saturday morning, that brought Ramraj and around 100 other concerned educators, students, Indigenous advocates and supporters to the steps of the legislature, in a rally jointly against those comments and against Bill 64, the Pallister government's sweeping proposed education reforms.

Clad either in orange, the colour of solidarity with residential school survivors, or red, the colour chosen for the opposition campaign to Bill 64, the crowd gathered just steps

away from the now-empty plinth where the statue of Queen Victoria stood until activists pulled it down on July 1.

They listened intently to speeches from Indigenous elders, youth and other teachers. They chanted to "slam the door on 64" and held signs calling for Lagimodiere's resignation, grading Pallister's grasp of history (they gave it an "F") and declaring that residential schools were abuse, not education.



Elder Alma Kakikepinace speaks at the rally. (Daniel Crump / Winnipeg Free Press)

"I can't believe that I need to teach the government that genocide is wrong and it always was," one sign read.

Speaking to the crowd, Michael Kirkness, a Winnipeg teacher and member of Fox Lake Cree Nation, called for better support for Indigenous students, as well as commitment from government leaders to confront the trauma of past and present colonial policies, from residential schools to the child welfare system.

"We as educators need to stand up and make it known that we refuse to allow this revisionist narrative that the motives of residential schools were made with good intentions," Kirkness said.

"We will not stand for whitewashing history. And we are here to fight for what is right."



A protestor puts up a sign at the rally. The rally is part of an ongoing movement to oppose Bill 64, under the banner #ProtectEdMB. (Daniel Crump / Winnipeg Free Press)

The rally came as part of an ongoing movement to oppose Bill 64, under the banner #ProtectEdMB. Organizers had actually been meeting to discuss a book earlier this week, just as Lagimodiere's statements began to make headlines, Kirkness said. That inspired them to pull together the rally.

"We figured that we needed to do something," Kirkness said. "We needed to make our voices known that this attempt at trying to erase history and rewrite it to make it look and sound nice is not acceptable."

"This is an educational issue, but it's also more broadly a societal issue," he continued. "It is vitally important that we refuse to allow these powers that be to create a version of history that suits their needs. We need to stand up to that, and we need to fight for our education in a broader context."

After the rally, some attendees took time to quietly walk past the sea of orange flags planted in front of where the statue of Queen Victoria sat, a memorial to the thousands of Indigenous children who died in residential schools.

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