

To: Chair Wagner and Board of Directors

From: Joan Sorley

Date: April 16, 2018

Subject: The Chilcotin War and the Hanging of the Chiefs

As the Director charged with First Nations Relations portfolio, I have taken it upon myself to do a bit of research on the subject of the Chilcotin War of 1864. It is now accepted by senior levels of government, and by all parties in the House of Commons, that the hanging of the Chiefs as criminals was wrong, and a shameful chapter in our history. However, recent comments about “more than one story” have made me realize that not all of our Board members fully understand the history leading up to this motion.

The story of the Chilcotin War of 1864 has been passed down through each generation of Tsilhqot'in people ever since, and the Tsilhqot'in National Government has been steadfast in its position that there would be no reconciliation until BC and Canada recognize that the six Chiefs were not criminals. BC apologized in 1999 and 2014, and Canada fully exonerated the Chiefs in a moving ceremony in the House last month.

The story passed down through generations of Tsilhqot'in people is one of settlers pushing a road through their territory without their permission, using their people as labourers and refusing to pay them or share food with them, of raping Tsilhqot'in women, and of threatening them with smallpox-infested blankets. These actions prompted the Chiefs into declaring war on the settlers, and in an early morning raid, killing some of the invaders as they were sleeping. They then retreated. Later, in response to what they thought was an invitation to negotiate peace, they were ambushed, shackled and subsequently hung as criminals. Chief Klatsassin's last words were, “We meant war, not murder.”

The so-called “other” story, as told by Mel Rathenburg, a descendant of one of those settlers who was killed while tracking down the Chiefs, is one of an unprovoked murdering rampage by a bunch of criminals who were subsequently tracked down and brought to justice. The facts of both stories are the same, although Mr. Rathenburg denies that there was any biological warfare, only random threats from unscrupulous individuals, refers to “unsubstantiated rumours of prostitution”, and he cites a refusal to provide Chief Klatsassin with food and ammunition as a provoking factor. Mr. Rathenburg acknowledges that great wrongs were done by the settlers, but he calls the exoneration “rewriting history”, and thinks that reconciliation goes both ways.

Smallpox had just decimated the Tsilhqot'in population, and there is documented evidence that some of that spread was deliberate on the part of the Europeans. Smallpox killed 80% of the indigenous population in Western North America in 1862. Tsilhqot'in communities would have still been trying to recover from that in 1864, so such a threat would not have been taken lightly. The First Nations way of waging war was different from that of the invading settler populations, but it doesn't mean that it wasn't war, or that our forebears were not invading.

Since the hanging of the Chiefs, the Tsilhqot'in people have never stopped trying to regain their rights as our governments stripped them away, with the Indian Act, the creation of reserves, the residential schools, the 60s scoop, and the systemic racism embedded in our society.

I ask that, as a Board, we take the first step in reconciliation with the Tsilhqot'in people, in unanimously supporting our Provincial and Federal governments in their acts of apology and exoneration of the Tsilhqot'in Chiefs. Further, that we write a letter to the Tsilhqot'in National Government to that effect.

Respectfully submitted,

Joan Sorley

Director, Area F