



# MOTION REGARDING THE ADOPTION OF AN OPEN LETTER IN SUPPORT OF THE NATIONAL DAY FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION / LETTRE OUVERTE POUR LA JOURNÉE NATIONALE DE LA VÉRITÉ ET DE LA RÉCONCILIATION 2022-09-15

Submitted for: 2022-09-15

**Submitted to:** SSMU Legislative Council      **Document no.:** LEG-PUB-MOT-2022-09-15-006

**Moved by:** Val Masny  
*Vice-President (External Affairs)*      **Current Status:**  FOR APPROVAL  
 APPROVED  
 POSTPONED  
 COMMITTED  
 NOT APPROVED

**Seconded by:** Emily Thom  
*Law Representative*

## Issue

The Students' Society of McGill University ("the SSMU") commits to standing in solidarity and supporting Indigenous communities and Indigenous students on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on Friday, September 30, 2022. Also known as Orange Shirt Day, the national federal holiday is an Indigenous-led commemorative day to recognize the devastating legacy of Canada's residential school system.

## Background and Rationale

Whereas, McGill University is situated on the unceded traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka;

Whereas, McGill University has historically failed to recognize and address its role in colonialism and the ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples;

Whereas, SSMU has a duty, per its Constitution, to provide services to strengthen the educational, cultural, environmental, political, and social conditions of its Members;



Whereas, SSMU has a duty to recognize historic and ongoing systems of oppression and marginalization and do its best to combat them as per its Equity Policy;

Whereas, SSMU must support initiatives which foster equitable social change and anti-oppressive initiatives in order to build sustainable relationships with Indigenous Students, Faculty and Staff;

The open letter, by students of the Indigenous Law Association, calls upon SSMU and McGill University to stand in solidarity of the demands in this Open Letter and in support of the National Day For Truth And Reconciliation, including by:

1. Canceling all evaluations on September 30, 2022
2. Intensifying efforts towards decolonization
3. Intensifying efforts towards the University's "Indigenization"
4. Implementing Calls to Action 28, 62, 63, 64, 65 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada ("TRC")

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### Alignment with Mission

The motion substantively aligns with the mission of SSMU's Constitution, Indigenous Solidarity Policy, and Equity Policy.

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### Consultations Completed

Consultations were held with the SSMU's External Affairs Office, its Political Campaigns Coordinator, SSMU's Governance Manager, SSMU's VP Internal, the McGill's Law Student Association, and the McGill's Indigenous Law Association.

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### Risk Factors and Resource Implications

Adopting this motion signals the SSMU's commitment to amplifying Indigenous voices and demonstrating solidarity with Indigenous people and Indigenous students.

Should this motion fail, the SSMU would fail to showcase allyship to the Indigenous students that wrote this letter in the context of Truth and Reconciliation Day.

The Open Letter calls for evaluations to be canceled on September 30, 2022, potentially causing disruptions to course evaluation calendars and methods.



Resource wise, the content of the motion requires both SSMU and McGill University to allocate time, effort, and money to further reconciliation efforts and implement the TRC's Calls to Action.

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### Sustainability Considerations

The motion promotes social sustainability by reinforcing SSMU's mission and values to create a more positive environment that supports the well-being of Indigenous students and Indigenous communities.

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### Impact Decision and Next Steps

of As the resolution outlines below, next steps are to be taken by the Internal Affairs Office, the SSMU communications team, the External Affairs Office, and Legislative Council Councilors.

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### Resolution for Approval

Whereas, the Indigenous Law Association at McGill (Association de Droit Autochtone à McGill) has prepared an Open Letter concerning the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation;

Be it resolved that, the Legislative Council endorses the Open Letter in Appendix A;

Be it further resolved that, the Student Society of McGill University becomes a signatory of the Open Letter;

Be it further resolved that, the SSMU (through the Internal Affairs Office) make every effort possible to increase the visibility of the Open Letter including by, but not limited to, sharing it on its listserv and social media platforms;

Be it further resolved that, the SSMU (through the External Affairs Office) mobilize the student body around this Open Letter's calls to action and provide requested mobilization material to Indigenous groups on campus;

Be it further resolved that, the SSMU encourage its members to participate in the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on September 30, 2022, notably by attending Indigenous led events on campus and within the broader Tiohti:áke community;

Be it further resolved that, the Legislative Council Councilors share this Open Letter with their respective student associations and their members;



Be it further resolved that, Legislative Council Councilors encourage their faculty association to adopt a similar resolution;

Be it further resolved that, the Open Letter endorsed herein be presented at the SSMU Fall 2022 General Assembly;

Be it lastly resolved that, the Legislative Council recommend to the Board of Directors the ratification of this resolution.

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<b>Results of the Vote</b>	In favour	(UNANIMOUS)
	Opposed	()
	Abstain	()

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APPROVED



## Appendix A : OPEN LETTER FROM MCGILL UNIVERSITY'S INDIGENOUS LAW ASSOCIATION/ASSOCIATION DU DROIT AUTOCHTONE IN SUPPORT OF THE NATIONAL DAY FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION



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### **OPEN LETTER FROM MCGILL UNIVERSITY'S INDIGENOUS LAW ASSOCIATION/ASSOCIATION DU DROIT AUTOCHTONE IN SUPPORT OF THE NATIONAL DAY FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION**

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The Indigenous Law Association/Association de Droit Autochtone (ILADA), the McGill Law Students Association (LSA) and the Students Society of McGill University (SSMU) add their voices to the solidarity movement in support of Indigenous peoples on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

McGill University is an institution where ideas that move us forward as a society emerge, and we strongly believe the duty to actively confront Canada's colonial reality and work towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is incumbent upon all members of the University, namely students, professors, staff and, most importantly, the administration. While we applaud the efforts that McGill has taken to advance the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, we believe that the steps taken towards Indigenizing the University and decolonizing its spaces and



structures have been insufficient to bring about real cultural change and awareness on campus and in society at large.

We therefore call upon McGill's administration to take the following actions:

1. **On September 30th, cancel all evaluations** while encouraging students, professors and staff to wear orange shirts for National Truth and Reconciliation day;
2. **Intensify efforts toward full decolonization** of the University by, for example, creating more safe spaces for Indigenous students, professors and staff in all faculties, by including more Indigenous peoples in University and Faculty administration and by reviewing McGill's branding and promotional materials in light of the fact that it was constructed on traditional Kanienkehà:ka lands and that James McGill owned Indigenous Slaves;
3. **Intensify efforts toward the "Indigenization" of the University** by, for example, increasing the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in course curricula and by recruiting more members from Indigenous communities among students, faculty and staff to reflect the great diversity of Indigenous peoples in Quebec and Canada;
4. Work more diligently towards the **full implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 28th, 62nd, 63rd, 64th, and 65th Calls to action.**

The following paragraphs provide an overview of Canada's colonial reality, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report and the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. This overview is intended to underscore the importance of September 30th as a day of remembrance, reflection, and action, and to emphasize the necessity for the university to implement the calls to action in this letter.

### **Canada's Colonial Reality**

The Canadian Government has a long history of violence in its treatment of Indigenous children. Between the late 1800s and 1996, the Canadian Government and religious organizations operated the residential school system. As a result of that system, it is estimated that around 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were separated from their family, their home, their culture, and their traditional land to be sent to Residential Schools. These "schools" were part of Canada's assimilation policy, which was part of a cultural genocide aimed to eliminate Indigenous Peoples and their cultures. Many children suffered horrific psychological, physical, sexual, cultural, and spiritual abuse within the walls of these institutions. The schools were routinely overcrowded,



underfunded and disease-ridden, and many children, weakened by malnutrition, did not survive. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report identifies 3,201 reported deaths, the fact that the mortality rates at some residential schools reached 30 to 60% as well as the thousands of unmarked children's graves found across Turtle Island since the summer of 2021 show that this number is far from accurate.

In addition to Residential Schools, the Canadian Government and religious organizations also managed Indian Day Schools, which were another part of their assimilation plan to decimate Indigenous cultures across Turtle Island. Little research has been done regarding Indian Day Schools, and this needs to change. As Kenneth Deer, a Kanienkehà:ha elder, has said, "The damage from Day Schools was just as severe as Residential Schools. The only difference between the Day Schools and Residential Schools is that you went home at night."

Even when some Residential and Day Schools began to close, Indigenous children were still removed from their families and robbed of their culture during what is commonly known as the Sixties Scoop, which refers to the mass removal by child services of around 20,000 Indigenous children from their families to a non-Indigenous family without the permission of their parents nor their Nations. Many of these children were never told of their Indigenous roots and lost their families, identity, and language, and suffered psychological trauma as a result. Although some governments have given public apologies, the 2016 decision of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal stating that First Nations Children were being discriminated against within the child welfare system shows that the systemic inequities facing Indigenous children are far from being resolved.

The intergenerational impacts of these colonial policies still resonate within Indigenous communities in which many survivors and children of survivors live. The historical trauma caused by the violence inflicted to the children still affects survivors, their descendants and Indigenous communities more broadly.

### **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report as a Reminder**

Without a doubt, Canadian government treatment of Indigenous children is one of the darkest disgraces in Canadian history. The ongoing discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous children near residential schools had the effect of a national moral shock, and remind us that this reality still haunts us today. This news should not have been a surprise to Canadians and should not have been so easily forgotten only months later.

In 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was established by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement for the purpose of shedding light on the history and lasting impacts of the Canadian Indian residential school system on Indigenous students and their families. The Commission's priority was to demonstrate the impacts of the Residential Schools to the Canadians who have been kept in the dark from these flagrant human rights abuses. After thousands of emotional interviews conducted across the country, a multi-volume final report was published seven years later with the final conclusion that the



residential school system amounted to cultural genocide. The 273 pages-long fourth volume, entitled “Missing Children and Unmarked Burials Project”, aimed to record and analyze the deaths at the schools and the presence and condition of student cemeteries within the regulatory context in which the schools were intended to operate.

The project’s research led to horrifying conclusions such as: the deaths of 3,200 Indigenous children at the Residential Schools; the higher death rate of Indigenous children in Residential Schools than school-aged children in the general population; the inadequate set of standards, regulations and funding to guarantee the health and safety of residential school students; and the fact that the cemeteries were abandoned, disused and vulnerable to accidental disturbance.

The concept of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is meaningless if we continue to be willfully ignorant. We must confront this reality head on and educate those around us about its impact today.

### **Coming Together on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation**

In 2021 the Canadian government passed legislation declaring September 30<sup>th</sup> a federal statutory holiday known as the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. It serves as an opportunity to reflect on the legacy of Canada’s colonial past and present, with an emphasis on the impacts of residential school systems on Indigenous peoples. Taking part of this day contributes to Canada’s commitment to reconciliation and accountability for its violent history and ongoing colonial legacies.

On September 30, 2022, we call upon all students, professors, and staff of the McGill community to wear an orange shirt and to walk with us to honour the memories of the victims and survivors of Residential Schools.