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SCO RESPONSE TO PROVINCIAL BUDGET 2021

Pallister's continued path to tax cuts and austerity is hurting First Nations – Grand Chief Daniels

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ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is panning much of the provincial government's latest budget, released this week, which does not prioritize First Nations people or longstanding systemic issues.

"This process was flawed from the start," stated SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "When finance minister Scott Fielding rose to deliver his government's budget, he stated the finished document was the result of stakeholder engagement. First Nations are more than stakeholders, we are rights holders and Treaty partners, and SCO was not a part of that so-called outreach."

Budget 2021 does not address systemic issues that First Nation students face every day, including child poverty and a graduation rate that is just over 50 per cent. Last month, the province proposed legislation to dramatically change the education system, removing elected school trustees and replacing them with appointed and advisory bodies. However, the proposed changes and subsequent budget announcements do not address education gaps or respond to longstanding requests for First Nations language immersion programs, at a time when First Nation children comprise an increasing number of the children in Manitoba.

The budget announcement to cut the education property tax by 25 per cent this fiscal year will benefit upper income property owners, and result in \$248 million in lost revenue. At the same time, cuts were announced for foster care and child protection, with the budget dropping below \$500 million for the first time in four years. The province claims that efficiencies are the reason for the decreasing budget, but for too long, children in care, 90% of whom are Indigenous, have received inadequate support and investments from the province.

"I'm completely astounded that the provincial government is making cuts to children in care at this time," stated Deborah Smith, Chair of the Chiefs' Standing Committee on Child Welfare and Chief of Brokenhead Ojibway Nation. "They already illegally claw back the Children's Special Allowance payments, money that comes from the federal government meant for children in care, in order to balance the budget. Now they are further undermining these children's wellbeing and future opportunities by cutting the budget to its lowest in years."

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The province did commit nearly \$1.2 billion for COVID-19 response, which includes funds for personal protective equipment (PPE), vaccine deployment, educational supports, and contingency funds for future use. This is a welcome announcement that SCO hopes will come in time for a predicted third wave.

“It’s no secret, the pandemic continues to take a disproportionate toll both physically and mentally on our people,” said Grand Chief Daniels. “We need to see a commitment from this government to partner with SCO and take bold steps to transform the health care system and begin to close the major health gaps that exist for Anishinaabe and Dakota Peoples.”

The provincial government announced a \$62 million investment to help people re-enter the workforce after large job losses due to the pandemic as well as \$25 million for youth job programs. SCO supports these investments but cautioned that First Nation workers and youth need to be prioritized throughout the programming. Manitoba will only grow its economy by investing in its youngest, growing demographic - First Nations youth.

News of \$22 million in additional funding for the Rent Assist program, which helps low-income renters is welcome. However, the paltry \$2.56 million announced to support unsheltered Manitobans doesn’t come close to addressing the lack of affordable housing and the complex issues that lead to homelessness.

SCO is concerned by the budget line committing \$101 million for the Lake Manitoba and Lake St. Martin flood prevention project, as there has not been proper consultation with the First Nations most impacted by the project.

“While we can appreciate the province’s commitment of \$101 million to First Nation economic participation, we would like further details on what this would entail,” added Lake Manitoba First Nation Chief and Chair of the Interlake Reserve Tribal Council (IRTC), Cornell McLean. “We are optimistic that the provincial government will sit down with the IRTC and our member communities to share what they are proposing as we remain united on this project.”

First Nations continue to face negative consequences as a result of environmental degradation of our sacred waters and our territories. The province has committed only the most minimal investment to deal with the existential threat of climate change, announcing just \$1.2 million for a Climate and Green Plan Implementation Office, along with \$1 million for Conservation and Climate Fund projects.

Budget 2021 announced an investment of less than a million dollars to increase supports for family violence prevention initiatives and for families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, ensuring they remain a low priority. Meanwhile, SCO continues to wait for a plan to address

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the Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, noting it is almost two years since the release of the National Inquiry's final report.

"I call on the premier to prioritize First Nations and to abide by the Path to Reconciliation Act," concluded Grand Chief Daniels. "Together, let's create a more equitable Manitoba where First Nations and Settler Manitobans can flourish."

The Southern Chiefs' Organization represents 34 First Nations and more than 80,000 citizens in what is now called southern Manitoba. SCO is an independent political organization that protects, preserves, promotes, and enhances First Nations peoples' inherent rights, languages, customs, and traditions through the application and implementation of the spirit and intent of the Treaty-making process.

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