

# Fighting Denialism and Standing Up for the Truth About Residential Schooling

by Kimberly Murray

*Residential school denialism is on the rise. Niigaan Sinclair and Sean Carleton, University of Manitoba professors and CHRR Research Affiliates, are working on a new book collection that will help people learn how to identify and confront residential school denialism to help put truth before reconciliation. The following is an abridged version of a chapter, based on a conversation with lawyer and professor Kimberly Murray, that will appear in the new volume.*

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**SEAN CARLETON:** As we prepare for the upcoming Orange Shirt Day and National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, I'm wondering if you can reflect on the past year, as a lot has happened. Under your leadership, the Office of the Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites associated with Indian Residential Schools released its [Final Report](#) in October 2024. Many residential school teams, such as [Williams Lake](#) and [Penelakut](#), have made interim announcements confirming additional deaths. The Fort Resolution team announced they've [exhumed](#) burials of five children as part of their ongoing work. But government support for teams has also dried up. As an expert and someone who's been doing this work for a long time, where do you think we're at with the important work of truth and reconciliation on the eve of Orange Shirt Day and the first anniversary of the OSI report?

**KIMBERLY:** It's very troubling to me that communities are left hanging and wondering whether they're going to continue to receive funding from the federal government to do the investigations that are, and have been happening, across the country. Some are far along in their investigations, and others are at the early stages. So, to be cut off at whatever stage they're at is a big problem. I did have some hope when the election was happening because in the platform of the Liberal government, they said that they would continue to support the investigations for missing children and unmarked burials. But, as of today, we do not know what that's going to look like for the next fiscal year. As I said in my final report, I feel that Canada has legal, ethical, and moral obligations to continue supporting communities as they search for the missing and disappeared children. Until we get that commitment, I think that Canada, as a government, is just causing more trauma to Survivors and communities and that is certainly not good for reconciliation.

Regarding the second part of the question around where we are with truth and reconciliation, I find it very difficult to understand where we are as a country — federally, provincially, and institutionally — with the implementation of the [Calls to Action](#). I blame that on the fact that Canada never implemented the National Council for Reconciliation Call to Action. It's now implementing it. But here

we are, 10, almost 11, years later, and we still don't have the entity created; only the inaugural board has been selected. We're waiting for the entity to be created so that they can be the oversight to the 94 – or the other 93 – Calls to Action. I feel that if that was the first Call to Action that was implemented about 10 years ago, we would have a better understanding of the implementation of the Calls to Action. From what we can see, when we look at the Indigenous Watchdog or CBC, we're very slow at implementation. But I don't want to take away from the progress that has been made – I think that there's been implementation on the ground at local levels that isn't being captured by some of these oversight watchdog agencies or organizations. So, I'm looking forward to this new National Council for Reconciliation and seeing what they're going to be able to accomplish through gathering information on all the Calls, issuing reports, and calling on Canada and the provinces to respond to them and issue their own reports. It's unfortunate that it's taken this long for that Call to Action to be implemented, but it is something that I think could be positive for moving forward towards reconciliation.

**SEAN:** When reflecting on a decade since the Calls to Action, it's quite easy to look at many of the measuring sticks – like the Beyond 94 website, which we use often with students – and see 13 or 14, depending on how you count, Calls to Action completed in 10 years, and it doesn't look very good. Especially since many of the Calls that have been completed are more on the symbolic or performative level. That's not to say that those aren't important; they were put in the Calls to Action for a reason. But there hasn't been much progress on the big, chunky Calls. At the same time, Murray Sinclair used to say that the damage was done over generations, and so the solution will take generations too. There has been a lot of awareness created. I remember a time when most people I'd talk to had no knowledge of residential schools at all. Now, I think there is a lot of awareness and knowledge, but we're lacking on the action piece. We've done a lot of truth-telling, but there is still a lot of healing, justice, and reconciliation left to do.

It's interesting that you bring up the election – that might be a good way to transition to denialism. In one of the last budgets that Prime Minister Trudeau tabled, there was funding specifically allocated to challenging residential school denialism. Now, like any budget, it was a promise down the road when his political future was not a guarantee. But it was put into the budget and identified as an issue that was harming the progress of truth and reconciliation. When Mark Carney took over as Prime Minister, he was being questioned on the campaign trail about whether he was going to continue to make progress on these issues. He didn't sit down with APTN, and he was dodging the issue for quite a while. But eventually, he did say that he and the Liberal party were going to continue to make progress on truth and reconciliation. Now we're a few months out of the election, and those promises are being questioned. Will his government actually take action on truth and reconciliation; what about the commitment to challenge residential school denialism like the previous government. Will that continue? That hesitation, in this moment, is important because it allows denialism to filter into the cracks.

So, one of the issues that was included in the OSI report is a whole chapter outlining the hurt and harm of residential school denialism. It is, at least to my knowledge, the most comprehensive outlining of residential school denialism to date. So, thank you for doing that and including it. It's also

something that the media paid a lot of attention to, both in the lead up to the release of the report and afterwards — particularly the calls to criminalize or establish legislative tools to recognize and address denialism as a form of hate speech. From your perspective, why is denialism so harmful? Why do you think people, specifically non-Indigenous people, should be taking responsibility to challenge denialism?

**KIMBERLY:** We first raised the issue of denialism in our Interim Report. In that Interim Report, I didn't have recommendations; it was a key finding based on what I heard. So, we had a little section on denialism and identified that it was something I kept hearing in communities — about how upsetting it was to them. As you said, I was actually quite surprised by the attention that the media gave to that one and only issue following our Interim Report. I released the Interim Report in Cowessess and Minister Lametti received it— he didn't come to the community, he zoomed in. He gave his speaking notes after I released the report. The only question that came from the media was about denialism, which was really shocking to me. That seemed to snowball. Every time I did an interview, it was about denialism and amending the Criminal Code. I tried so many times to get reporters to look at the other important issues identified in the Interim and Final Report. I did meet with the Attorney General and the Minister of Crown Indigenous Relations after I released my Final Report and before my mandate ended. It was a very interesting meeting to me because I questioned them about whether they would amend the Criminal Code and their response was about whether I could get the NDP on board with their Online Harms Act, which we also write about in the same chapter. They seemed to indicate that that's where they thought the solution was — that they could respond to denialism through that piece of legislation and that we didn't need to amend the Criminal Code and potentially infringe on people's Freedom of Expression. I reminded them that we already have a similar provision in the Criminal Code against Holocaust deniers. So, I found that interesting.

Time and time again in communities, Survivors were so emotional talking about the fact that people don't believe them. It hasn't just started now in relation to the unmarked burials. It was an ongoing issue during the Truth and Reconciliation process around whether abuses happened, whether people were sexually assaulted in the institutions, whether they were apprehended and taken to the institutions, or whether their parents put them there — you know how the denialists work. It was so upsetting to Survivors because of the way the settlement agreement was created through the IAP process. The IAP Process is a closed-door process — no one gets to read the decisions, and there is no testimony that's public. The TRC process was there, and people shared their experiences. But a number of Survivors just didn't feel that they were acknowledged or that their harms were acknowledged in the way that they need them to be acknowledged. So, to have these “high profile,” if you will, Canadians denying and putting out misinformation and disinformation is really harmful to individuals. It's trying to silence Survivors, call them liars and cheaters, and claim that they're stealing money and are only trying to get people to burn down churches. It just goes from one ridiculous statement to another. It's re-traumatizing Survivors and making them afraid to come forward and speak the truth. Our Gatherings had to be so guarded about who was allowed to attend. When I did my closing, we had to ban someone from coming in because they were harassing all the youth on my Youth Council. They had also harassed a number of Survivors and Elders. It just wasn't a safe environment for people to come together to share their experiences. I think we heard a lot from

Kúkpi7 Rosanne Casimir and how she was targeted after Tk'emlúps made their announcement. So many communities are now saying they don't want to speak to the media, release information, or do interviews because it'll get twisted and turned, and then the bots and the people that are sending emails to everyone will come.

When I was doing my Final Report and that chapter, we got such hurtful, angry, and hateful emails from all kinds of people. One person in particular, if it was even a real person — I'm starting to think it was a bot. I, early on, decided to keep those emails, write about them, and put examples of them in the Final Report so that people could see how hateful and hurtful it is. We decided we were going to use the emails to make our argument that amendments must be made to the Criminal Code, and that we need to do more than what we're doing. That is why we made sure to include that in the report up to the end of our writing period. We noticed that every time there was a National Gathering, or a community made an announcement about their investigation, there was an increase of the emails coming to our info line, directly to me, or on my social media. Since I'm not in that job anymore, I actually just block everybody. I didn't block them when I was Special Interlocutor because I thought it was better for them to direct their hate at me than to Survivors and communities. But now, I just block them. I don't want to read or hear them anymore, so that's what I do.

**SEAN:** One thing that I've been thinking about in terms of denialism is that part of the goal of it as a movement — and it is really being controlled by a handful of people that have influence, particularly on the far-right, over organs of communication from the most outlandish Rebel News stuff to the National Post — is to influence what people think of as legitimate discourse.

It's not up for debate, though. You can believe that gravity doesn't exist, but it does. You can think that the earth is flat, but it's round. You can think that residential schools were well-intentioned, but they weren't. We now know this to be true. So, this is actually the most insidious part of denialism, aside from the obvious intimidation and harassment. It's trying to create a backlash. Denialists know that they're on the losing end. They feel the change and that awareness that I talked about at the beginning. They know it. That's why they're trying to throw out every anchor possible — they want to slow the momentum and progress on truth and reconciliation and keep the power and privilege that the colonial status quo allows them.

It's a lot of work for everybody involved, to challenge this misinformation. But I think the helpful part of including the chapter on denialism in your Report is that it clearly lays out what the issue is, why it's so harmful, and how a variety of different people experience it — from Survivors, to yourself, and anyone else doing this work.

It also activates non-Indigenous people, in particular, to take on challenging this as part of their commitment to truth and reconciliation. I often teach non-Indigenous students in my classes who say they are "on board" but still don't know what they can do. They have read the Calls to Action, and it says how the government will do this and that. Of course, they understand that they have a role to play in choosing governments. But, as we talked about, you can choose someone who says they're going to commit to truth and reconciliation work, and they still might not do it. But the thing about

challenging denialism, as you have laid out, is that it's sort of an unofficial Call to Action. If you want all of these other things, one of the basic things that you need to do is fight for the truth. When people are trying to distort, downplay, or minimize, you have a responsibility to challenge that in your interpersonal life — in your hockey change room, in your church community, in your general community, or at your kid's school. For example, if parents aren't wanting to send their kids in orange shirts. All sorts of wacky stuff. But there is a positive element to the denialism — it is giving non-Indigenous people an opportunity to use their knowledge and awareness on a day-to-day basis.

So, we're at this really interesting crossroads 10 years after the TRC. That is why we appreciate the work that you do and for making yourself available to chat about it. One thing that I've tried to do in this work is to be optimistic. It's really easy to be pessimistic. I think part of denialism's intimidation is trying to make Survivors and experts, and Canadians generally, dispirited and discouraged. Now that it has been 10 years since the TRC's report has been released, and given the rise in denialism and backlash that we've been talking about, we wonder what gives you hope for the future? What inspires you to keep doing the work that you do to put truth before reconciliation and challenge denialism? Which unfortunately is not ending. What gives you hope?

**KIMBERLY:** Before I speak to hope, I just want to go back to what you were saying about a Call to Action to Canadians to speak out against denialism. It was really important to us in that chapter that it wasn't just a chapter on denialism. When we were working through what it should be, we thought it was important to include education, commemoration, and memorialization as a way to counter denialism. One of the things that has been problematic is that those Calls to Action around memorialization and commemoration haven't happened, right? That has helped increase the rise of denialism. Where are all our monuments that were supposed to be erected?

When I get asked that question, what gives you hope, I always respond as Murray did — young people give me hope. Where I live in Toronto, I walk my dog every day past the elementary school that has orange ribbons on the fence. I think, yeah, that could be performative or seen as symbolic. But they're being taught something about why those orange ribbons are on the fence — and that's JK to Grade 6. That's very young for kids to be learning about Indian Residential Schools and that kids died in and disappeared from those institutions. So, when we reflect on the 10 years, I can see it. Now I'm working at a university, and I can see that people now were those kids that were learning about the TRC's Calls to Action in high school. Even before the Calls to Action came out, Murray Sinclair, Marie Wilson, and Wilton Littlechild met with the Ministers of Education from coast to coast to coast and challenged them to implement mandatory curriculum around Indian Residential Schools and the history of Indigenous people. We saw some good progress before the end of the TRC. But with everything, there is 2 steps forward and 1 step back. Changing government and changing curriculum — we saw that happen in Ontario when Ford got elected. So, I think we are way further ahead today on young people's understanding of the history of Canada, colonialism, genocide, and crimes against humanity. We just have to keep our foot on the gas pedal and not let the deniers get in our way.

Also, what keeps me going are those stories of resistance that Indigenous people, Survivors, and communities have and continue to have. One of the Survivors at our Gathering called it defiance —



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defiance of those kids to fight those institutions and fight against what was happening to them. I feel we don't do enough to enhance and show those stories. They're buried in the history chapters of the TRC. I would love for papers to write about the defiance that happened, and how the community, leadership, and parents fought for us to be where we are now, for Indigenous people to be here today, and that the church and state failed in their attempts to exterminate Indigenous people and culture. So, I get to hear about that defiance and resistance all the time and I see it every day. That gives me hope that people are doing everything they can to make their ancestors proud and that will continue. I don't think any denialists are going to stop that.

I do think the thing that's troubling about denialists and people accepting what the denialists say — and we wrote about this in the report — is that it's an easy way out for Canadians because they don't have to do anything. We need to ensure people aren't those bystanders to reconciliation. That's why I get so angry when Canada and the churches don't speak up. They have the evidence. They have everything to counter what the denialists are saying, and they just remain silent. They leave it for people like you, me, Survivors, and communities to have to fight. I think that if the state and the churches would speak up, that could help us a lot moving forward.

**SEAN:** I'm really inspired by your work and commitment to Survivors. I'm honoured to continue to fight denialism and stand up for the truth about residential schooling alongside you and everyone else doing this hard but important work.



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