

A royal tour confronts Canada's legacy of discrimination against Indigenous people.



Prince Charles meeting with the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, RoseAnne Archibald, in Ottawa on Wednesday.

20 may 2022

DETTAH, Northwest Territories — Royal visits are usually marked by pomp, carefully scripted ceremonies and lavish evening affairs. And there has certainly been some of that during a three-day visit to Canada by Prince Charles and his wife, Camilla, including a glittery reception in Ottawa at the official residence of Queen Elizabeth's representative in Canada.

But on Thursday, the last day of the royal tour, the tenor was far more subdued tone as Charles and Camilla visited the Northwest Territories.

The couple headed to a far northern Indigenous community, the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, where the history with the British monarchy has been painful.

There's a century-old treaty that the community says the Crown has infringed upon. And there's the grim legacy of Canada's now defunct compulsory residential school system for Indigenous Children, for which the Dene hold the Crown partly responsible.

The royal couple arrived in Yellowknife, the provincial capital, on Thursday at about 3:30 p.m. Eastern, before traveling to the Dene First Nation community. There, they

stepped out onto gravel and headed a meeting with Indigenous leaders, where difficult questions were likely.

Prince Charles joined two Indigenous chiefs at a large round table where they exchanged some small talk, including about previous visits by the royal family to the Northwest Territories, before reporters were escorted out of the meeting.

Charles's itinerary for his Canadian tour, including the visit to Yellowknives, was set by the government in Ottawa, underlining the extent to which the country's history of discrimination against Indigenous people has become a major political issue.

In April, Pope Francis issued the first ever direct papal apology to Indigenous people for the Roman Catholic Church's role in the residential schools. He plans to visit Canada in July to offer the same apology face-to-face.

On Monday, Charles and Camilla attended a reconciliation event in the Province of Newfoundland, where they met with Mary Simon, the first Indigenous person to serve as governor general of Canada, the queen's official representative in Canada.

In the historic city of St. John's, Newfoundland, Charles said, "I know that our visit here this week comes at an important moment, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across Canada committing to reflect honestly and openly on the past and to forge a new relationship for the future."

Edward Sangris, 68, is one of the Dene chiefs who met Charles and Camilla on Thursday. He was among the thousands of children sent off to the residential schools. His was a Catholic-run institution in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, until his father defied authorities and kept him home.

He declined in an interview to discuss his experiences there, but said that the schools — which have become a national scandal and which a government commission found to be a form of "cultural genocide" — will likely be a topic of conversation.

"This is one way of reconciliation," Chief Sangris said. "Even though they're not directly responsible for the harm and the pain that was caused, they're indirectly responsible for the actions of the Canadian government."

Given that Charles is not yet king, Chief Sangris said ahead of their meeting that he did not anticipate an apology from Charles on behalf of the royal family.

Charles and Camilla's visit to Dettah was scheduled to last one hour. The couple's agenda included for meetings in the territorial capital of Yellowknife with members of a special military reserve unit in remote northern communities, and visit the fast melting remains of an ice road for a discussion about climate change.

Chief Sangris said that he recognized the responsibility and role of the government of Canada in Indigenous affairs, but that he believed the monarchy's symbolic role in making treaties also made it responsible for subsequent violations.

In addition to grievances over Indigenous schools, the Dene believe that the compensation they receive for allowing mining projects on their traditional lands is less than it should be under the treaty with the Crown.

Ahead of the royal meeting, Chief Sangris said it was unlikely to resolve that dispute or to address other critical Dene issues, including a severe housing shortage. Chief Sangris's father met with Charles in 1970, when Charles and his mother, Queen Elizabeth, visited Yellowknives. Chief Sangris met them then, too, and said that many issues raised at the time remain unresolved.

Of Thursday's visit, Chief Sangris said, "I don't know what it's going to achieve for us."

Broadly speaking, this is a time of tension over the role of the monarchy in Britain's former overseas dominions. Separate tours of the Caribbean this year by Prince Edward, Charles's brother, and Prince William, the future king's son, were the target of protests against the monarchy and Britain's brutal historical involvement with slavery.

In Canada, Charles has not faced such vocal public opposition. But polls show that an ever-declining number of Canadians want to swear allegiance to another British monarch, because the institution appears increasingly irrelevant to their lives.