

## **Winnipeg Free Press – Opinion**

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### **Historic moment for Manitoba, great expectations for Manitobans**

IN his first official act as premier of Manitoba, Wab Kinew put the “ceremony” back in ceremony. By tradition, the swearing-in of a new premier and cabinet has been referred to as a “ceremony.” It was mostly a perfunctory title for an event that is more legal than symbolic in nature.

On Wednesday, however, when it was time for the leaders of the new NDP government to be sworn in, Kinew showed Manitobans what ceremony means in an Indigenous context.

Indigenous ceremonies are not about legal vagaries. They are celebrations of community and the relationships that exist between people and the land. They are, first and foremost, spiritual events to celebrate great successes, or commemorate a great life in death.

And that is what Kinew brought to the Leaf, Winnipeg’s botanical attraction at Assiniboine Park.

It started with the lighting of a qulliq, a traditional soapstone oil lamp used for heat and cooking that has also become a symbol for Inuit people of the strength of women.

From there, Indigenous elders and leaders offered prayers, land acknowledgments. There was a drum circle and the presentation to Kinew of a war bonnet, a headdress typically given to Indigenous male leaders.

And the dancing. Manitoba’s own Norman Chief Memorial Dancers performed a rousing rendition of the Red River Jig, a traditional Métis dance.

What had largely been an event of legal necessity had suddenly become a deeply meaningful, deeply spiritual acknowledgment that politics in this province and, in some ways across this nation, has changed forever.

Former senator and judge Murray Sinclair, who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, was present to help swear in Kinew and his ministers. Sinclair urged all Manitobans to see the confirmation of Kinew as the first First Nations premier of a Canadian province as a truly historic achievement.

“It really is Manitoba’s true act of reconciliation, and I want you to think of it that way,” Sinclair said. “I want you to think of the fact that we are now entering a new phase. That phase ultimately is going to lead to a relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in which we are able to show true respect to all of those who are here and all of those who come here.”

Wearing his war bonnet and carrying a ceremonial pipe throughout, Kinew offered greetings in the languages of the seven Indigenous Peoples who call Manitoba home to amplify his message of unity for Manitobans of all cultures, races and faiths.

“The people of this province have come together to declare that we are one people, one Manitoba, who are going to build one future together,” the premier said in his remarks.

The grandiose ceremony was, in every respect, history-making. But it also signalled the beginning of an incredibly daunting, two-pronged challenge: to convince Indigenous people that they are finally full partners with the provincial government; and that in bringing Indigenous people to the table, Kinew will not be neglecting the needs of any other group.

That is going to be difficult. The swearing-in ceremony took place against the backdrop of a province that remains deeply divided after a defeated Progressive Conservative election campaign that tried to deliberately provoke anti-Indigenous, anti-reconciliation and even racist sentiments among the electorate.

Those darker sentiments were summoned to the debate on whether to search the Prairie Green Landfill north of the city for the remains of two missing Indigenous women believed to have been slain by an accused serial killer. The Tories tried to turn the issue into a proxy referendum on reconciliation and on Kinew's First Nations heritage.

A *Free Press*- Probe Research poll showed Manitobans almost equally divided on whether to search the landfill, proof that while it was not successful at winning re-election, the PC campaign was successful in fracturing the electorate.

If non-Indigenous Manitobans are somewhat split on such issues as the landfill and its connection to the broader challenge of reconciliation, Indigenous Manitobans are enjoying what appears to be a moment of hope. Throughout Wednesday's ceremony, there were cheers, standing ovations and more than a few tears.

Notwithstanding the joy and excitement of Wednesday's ceremony, political history provides many examples that all those hopes and dreams can be easily dashed if the leader in question does not live up to lofty expectations.

That was certainly the case for former-U.S. president Barack Obama who, in his autobiography, described the daunting challenge he faced of managing "outsized" expectations from both Black Americans, who viewed him as a saviour, and other Americans who were more skeptical.

"I think that the danger for someone like me, who was elected with outsized expectations and a lot of symbolism, is that sometimes your supporters feel as if you're going to wave a wand and it's all going to get done," Obama told the CBC in 2020. "And it's not possible."

In many ways, Kinew is facing the same "outsized" expectations.

He must deliver enough to satisfy some of the expectations held by all of the people who voted for him, and for others who didn't vote or who accepted the Tory invitation to give into their fears about reconciliation.

Fortunately for Kinew, and for Manitobans who believe this province is better than the images summoned by the recent election campaign, outsized is not a synonym for insurmountable.

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