

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Report and the crimes against the native people

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) issued its report Tuesday documenting the horrific abuse suffered by 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis children at residential schools between the 1840s and 1996.

The century-and-a-half policy of forcibly removing aboriginal children from their families and communities and herding them into faraway schools run mainly by the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, amounted, said the report, to nothing less than a “cultural genocide.” One, moreover, that has left deep scars on indigenous people up to the present day. At the height of the program in 1931 there were 80 residential schools across the country with 15,000 captive native children.

The TRC—comprised of its chair, Manitoba Justice Murray Sinclair, journalist and broadcast executive Marie Wilson, and lawyer and former Conservative MP Chief Wilton Littlechild—was appointed by the federal Conservative government in consultation with the Assembly of First Nations as part of a negotiated settlement to a class-action law suit against the federal government and Canada's churches brought by residential school survivors.

Over the course of six years, the TRC took testimony from 7,000 residential school survivors and reviewed hundreds of thousands of documents. It found that the residential schools were a central component of a Canadian state policy designed to “cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious and racial entities in Canada.”

In releasing the Executive Summary of the TRC report (six volumes of documentation will be forthcoming), Sinclair noted that between 5,000 and 7,000 children died whilst in the custody of the residential schools from disease, malnutrition, fires, suicide and physical abuse. Many were buried even without a name recorded. Parents were not notified as a matter of course. Many residential schools had no playgrounds for the children, but did have cemeteries. Healthy children were consciously placed in dormitories with children suffering from tuberculosis. Sick and dying children were forced to attend class and sit up in church. Malnutrition was rampant. Testimony from school survivors recounted how hungry children would raid the slop-buckets of livestock for additional sustenance.

Discipline was harsh. Children were often corporally punished for speaking their native language. Teachers would berate them as “stupid Indians.” Humiliation and de-humanization were part of the regime. One survivor recounted that the shoving of children's faces into human excrement was a standard punishment. In some

institutions, children were not addressed by name but by number. Survivor testimony described a life without love or human warmth but fraught with fear, beatings, hopelessness and, in the dreaded dead of night, rampant sexual abuse.

Despite the government's purported aim of providing education to residential students, especially in the form of workplace skills, school administrations more often used the children as indentured labour, imposing back-breaking chores for up to half of the school day. School text books were a rarity, with Christian religious indoctrination a priority.

TRC Chair Sinclair received a loud ovation Tuesday from a ballroom full of school survivors, Band Chiefs and aboriginal advocates when he characterized the more than century-long government residential school policy as “cultural genocide.” The term comes from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a non-binding document reluctantly signed by the federal government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, but deemed only “aspirational” and not immediately implementable. Those cheering Sinclair's declaration were also cognizant of the 2011 statement from John Duncan, Harper's former Aboriginal Affairs Minister, that the residential school system was not part of a program of “cultural genocide,” but rather simply “education policy gone wrong.”

The TRC report, however, avoids a crucial conclusion arising from any objective study of the horrendous history of the program—that the aboriginal policy pursued by the Canadian capitalist state was not simply aimed at the eradication of a culture but at the eradication of a people. The 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, defines genocide in legal terms as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the group's physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

The tribulations suffered by generations of aboriginal children in the residential schools fall into most, if not all, of these categories. But many of those pulling back from a characterization of Canadian government policy towards the native population as genocidal—including the administration at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights—downplay the question of conscious “intent.”

The historical record contradicts this approach.

Policies geared towards physically expunging native populations as part of the Canadian state's westward expansion have been documented by many historians. James Daschuk in his recent book *Clearing the Plains*, for example, describes the approach of Canada's first governments towards its aboriginal population as "outright malevolent." Policy statements called on government agencies "to starve uncooperative Indians onto reserves and into submission." Treaty guarantees for food in times of crisis were ignored. Government agents allowed food to rot rather than distribute it to starving native bands. The 1876 Indian Act codified aboriginals as an inferior group and made them wards of the state. In 1885, Canada's "founding father" and first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, bragged to parliament of his government's fiscal stewardship, pointing to its refusal to give food to hungry, malnourished First Nations people "until the Indians were on the verge of starvation, to reduce expense."

Under Macdonald, who presided over the Canadian state's dispossession of the native peoples in today's Prairie provinces, the residential school system was greatly expanded and systematized and, in the process, directed even more deliberately against the indigenous population. In 1883, he told an agreeable parliament: "When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write his habits, and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has strongly been pressed on myself, as the head of the (Indian Affairs) Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men."

The argument that "intent" to destroy native populations was not evident in the policy of Canada's capitalist elite flies in the face of subsequent developments.

In 1909, Peter Bryce, an official of the Ontario Health Department was commissioned by the federal government as the country's first Chief Medical Officer to report on the health conditions of aboriginal children in residential schools in western Canada. Bryce, citing an average death rate of between 30 and 60 percent, reported that children in the schools were malnourished, living in squalid, freezing conditions and being systematically exposed to tubercular patients. He accused officials of deliberately killing the students through their actions and inactions. Furthermore, church and school officials were consciously falsifying mortality records.

The report was quashed by the Department of Indians Affairs and the recommendations ignored. Bryce was later dismissed from his post. Said Duncan Scott, then head of Canada's residential schools program, Bryce's report "does not justify a change in the policy of this Department which is geared toward a final solution of our Indian problem."

In Alberta in 1928 and British Columbia in 1933 acts were passed allowing for the forcible sterilization of residential school students. It has been estimated that as many as 3,000 children underwent this procedure. And recently, a report surfaced showing

that in the 1940s and 1950s malnourished aboriginal children in residential schools were used by government researchers in dubious medical experiments that systematically kept them on starvation diets, denying them milk, nutrients, vitamins and dental treatments to measure health outcomes. The "research" was done with the full knowledge of Canada's then Liberal government.

The government's subsequent treatment of native children changed little. From 1960 until 1986, as many as 20,000 aboriginal children were taken from their families, placed in either residential schools or non-indigenous foster homes, or put up for adoption.

Even today, as a result of the deplorable poverty and squalor to which large parts of Canada's native population are subjected and the paternalistic attitude of the state, First Nations children make up more than 50 percent of Canadian children in foster care. Under Manitoba's NDP government others are housed, without proper care and supervision, in run-down "welfare" motels.

The continuing abuse and neglect of the aboriginal peoples is one of the historic crimes of Canadian capitalism and one that exemplifies the true character of Canadian "democracy." It is critical for the political development of the Canadian working class that it recognizes this and fights vigorously to oppose the oppression of the native population.

In a second article, to be published at the beginning of next week, the WSWs will detail the political context and debate over the Truth and Reconciliation report. This will include an examination of the dismissive attitude adopted by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the report's ostensible embrace by the opposition parties and much of the corporate media, as well as the government-appointed Commission's recommendations. These are aimed at reconciling the native people to Canadian capitalism and the Canadian state, not ending the system responsible for their oppression.



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