

Canada's aboriginal Truth and Reconciliation Report—the class issues

Carl Bronski and Keith Jones
13 June 2015

The report issued last week by the government-appointed Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian residential schools documents a horrific crime perpetrated by the Canadian capitalist ruling elite and its state—a crime whose impacts reverberate to this day.

For well over a century, beginning in the 1870s, Indian and Inuit children were systematically stolen from their parents and communities and placed in Church-run schools, generally hundreds, even thousands, of miles from their homes. There they endured prison-type conditions; were systematically denied proper medical treatment and nourishment, punished for speaking their native languages, and subject to physical and sexual abuse.

150,000 children—as many as one in every three aboriginal children in the first half of the 20th century—were captives of the government-enforced, Church-run residential school system. An estimated 6,000 died of disease, neglect, and abuse. Many were buried in unmarked graves with their parents not even informed of their deaths.

All with the aim, as the principal father of Confederation and Canada's Prime Minister for two decades (1867–73 and 1878–91) Sir John A. Macdonald, put it, of killing the Indian in the child.

That Macdonald played a pivotal role in the development of the residential school system is not accidental. It was an integral part of the consolidation of the Canadian nation-state, which he spearheaded, acting in close concert with a cabal of bankers, railway-promoters, and industrialists.

In the more than 300-page “Executive Summary” of its final report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concludes that the Indian residential school system was a “central element” in a century-long Canadian state Aboriginal policy that aimed “to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious and racial entities.” Terming this policy “cultural genocide” (i.e., the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group), the Commission found that the Canadian government pursued it, “because it wished to divest itself of” its “legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources.” (For a more exhaustive discussion of the report's finding see: “Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Report and the crimes against the native people”)

The report makes 94 recommendations. Many of these are for increased state expenditure on health-care, education, housing, and child welfare, so as to help lift Canada's aboriginal people out of the Third World-type conditions that prevail on most native reserves and, increasingly, in the urban ghettos many now call home. A host of other recommendations revolve around commemorating the victims of the residential school system and making Canadians aware of this historic injustice. The Commissioners also reiterated longstanding demands of Canada's aboriginal elite for increased legal-constitutional recognition of, and powers for, native self-governments, and for the speedy and equitable

resolution of land claims.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report has undoubtedly shocked and disturbed working people. Not only has this monstrous crime been ignored and covered up, meaning that prior to last week most Canadians knew little if anything about the residential school system. The report flies in the face of the official Canadian nationalist narrative which portrays Canada as a “kinder, gentler,” and “more-caring” society—one fundamentally different from the rapacious dollar-republic to the south. This narrative, to be sure, has been increasingly exposed as a sham, as Canada's ruling elite rallies behind one US-led war after another and guts public and social services. But it is sustained by powerful social interests and appetites.

The Harper government's assault on native people

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative government are clearly intent on burying the TRC report and its finding that Canada committed “cultural genocide.” On the pretext that his government awaits publication later this fall of the remaining six volumes of the commission's report, Harper has baldly refused to respond to the “Executive Summary” or its recommendations.

Harper could not entirely turn his back on the TRC last week. After all, his government had formed it, as part of a 2007 settlement of a class-action suit brought by residential-school survivors against Ottawa and its Church partners. But the prime minister sat stonily silent through the official proceedings marking the termination of the TRC's work and when questioned about the report in parliament had the gall to say that Canada has one of the world's best records on the treatment of indigenous peoples. Harper, whose general demeanor suggests nothing so much as a calculating, vindictive accountant, further claimed that his government has spent “vast amounts of money” on improving the lives of Canada's native population.

In fact the Conservatives government has systematically attacked Canada's aboriginal people as part of its offensive against the working class as whole. This offensive has included massive social spending cuts, an increase in the retirement age, further cuts to jobless benefits, the effective outlawing of strikes in the federally-administered industries, and a dramatic expansion of the powers of the national-security apparatus.

Harper has cut billions from programs that benefit native people, beginning with his government's repudiation of the commitments made by the previous Liberal government under the 2005 “Kelowna Accord.” Central to the Conservative government's agenda has been the push to develop new mineral deposits in the Canadian North and pipeline-projects that will transport Alberta tar-sands oil to U.S. and Asian markets over the strenuous objections of indigenous groups. Under legislation passed in

2012, the Conservatives made changes to the Indian Act and Navigable Waters Act that open the way for the de facto privatization of native lands and significantly reduce environmental protection.

The world capitalist crisis and opposition from native communities have impeded the government's plans. But in a spate of policy papers, think-tank reports and academic studies, the Conservatives and their big business and neo-conservative supporters have explained that their goal is to integrate the native Indian reserves much more fully into contemporary Canadian capitalism, including throwing them open to private land ownership, so as to more profitably exploit their natural resources and pools of cheap-labour.

If Harper and his government are publicly dismissive and privately disdainful of the TRC report, it is because they view it as cutting across this predatory agenda.

The opposition parties and the TRC

The opposition parties, joined by a significant section of the capitalist press have taken a different tack.

The NDP and the Liberals were quick to endorse the report and its recommendations. Liberal leader Justin Trudeau went so far as to pledge that a Liberal government would enact all 94.

There is a huge dollop of cynicism and hypocrisy in this.

When last in power federally, the Liberals implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history and all but completely ignored the 440 recommendations outlined in the 1996 final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People. That commission had been set up to contain mounting native discontent as exemplified by the 1991 Oka crisis, which had ended with the Canadian army suppressing a Mohawk occupation of ancestral lands that were being transformed into a private golf course.

While the NDP has never held office in Ottawa, its provincial governments, including the current Manitoba NDP government, have presided over appalling conditions for native people, on- and off-reserve.

Moreover, both parties are committed to balanced budgets and maintaining the reactionary fiscal framework, established by decades of federal Liberal and Conservative governments, under which corporate taxes and income and capital gains taxes for the rich and super-rich have been reduced to record lows. Should they come to power, the Liberals' and NDP's claims of support for the TRC's call for a major boost in social spending to alleviate the social misery of Canada's native people will prove to have been a cruel hoax.

In the wake of the TRC report and the litany of horrors it has documented, the mainstream press has published statements abhorring the treatment of native children in the residential schools. However, the editorials and commentary have pointedly skirted the central issue of funding a massive expansion of public and social services for the Aboriginal population, preferring to concentrate on the need for public apologies from various political and church entities and reconciliation.

This is not to suggest there are no differences within Canada's ruling elite. In his push for resource development and neo-liberal "reform" of the reserve system, Harper has repeatedly clashed with those hitherto recognized by Ottawa as Canada's native leadership, such as the Assembly of First Nations. By contrast, those ready to commend the TRC report, including the NDP and Liberal politicians, generally favour the continuation of policies first elaborated in the 1970s and 1980s to give Canadian capitalism's continuing oppression of the native people an ostensibly more humane face, through the promotion of native "self-government" and land-claim negotiations.

This section of the elite notes Harper has manifestly failed to realize his pipeline-building plans. Furthermore, like Harper, they are acutely aware of mounting discontent among native people. (Reports made available by leaks and access-to-information requests, reveal that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and other state agencies have repeatedly warned of the threat of widespread native social unrest.)

Those sections of Canada's elite who are embracing the TRC report hope to use it to carry out something of a course correction. They favour relying more on the aboriginal elite nurtured over the past four decades and propose to do so by more systematically incorporating them into government and into resource development. The three TRC Commissioners—Manitoba Justice Murray Sinclair, journalist and broadcast executive Marie Wilson, and lawyer and former Conservative MP Chief Wilton Littlechild—are themselves representatives of this aboriginal elite and their report is imbued with the perspective of "reconciling" the native population with Canadian capitalism.

Justice McLachlin and Canada's "most glaring blemish"

In this regard, it is highly significant that just five days before the public release of the TRC report, the head of Canada's Supreme Court, Justice Beverly McLachlin, delivered a major address in which she affirmed that Canada's treatment of the native people had been tantamount to "cultural genocide"—in effect endorsing the TRC's central conclusion in advance.

A Supreme Court Justice since 1989, McLachlin has been involved in a series of Supreme Court decisions that delimit "native land rights" and "self-government." These decisions are aimed at giving legal imprimatur to the dispossession of the native peoples and are serving to fashion a modern-day system of native self-government that is fully-incorporated into the Canadian capitalist state and, as such, an instrument for the further dissolution of traditional communal land and its transformation into capitalist private property.

In her May 28 speech McLachlin termed the treatment of the First Nations "the most glaring blemish" on Canada's historic record as a "peaceful multi-cultural country"—a statement that typifies the attitude of the ostensibly progressive section of Canada's elite to the TRC and the continuing plight of the native people.

In reality, the dispossession of the indigenous population was not a blemish, nor a birth pang. It was integral to the rise of Canadian capitalism and the consolidation of the Canadian nation-state. Moreover, it lays bare the violent and oppressive character of the Canadian state, as the instrument of organized violence for upholding capitalist exploitation, to this day. Canadian capitalism's rise involved the destruction of aboriginal society—a genocide—because the communal relations on which aboriginal society was based were incompatible with the imposition of capitalist private property.

The last four decades of land rights struggles, based on the acceptance of capitalism and the promotion of native nationalism with a view to negotiating a new "relationship" with the Canadian state, have led native people into a political and social dead end. Self-government and land-claim settlements have nurtured a small elite that manages the reserves for six-figure salaries and is immersed in business deals, from construction and transport to casinos and cigarette smuggling, while hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of their fellow band members live in abject poverty.

Ending the historic oppression of the native people, like securing the social and democratic rights of all working people, will only be possible through the independent political mobilization of the working class to reorganize society from top to bottom along socialist lines.

The authors also recommend:

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

[6 June 2015]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact