

# Canada's Liberals launch inquiry into “missing and murdered indigenous women”

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The Liberal government-appointed National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) was officially launched last week.

Led by British Columbia's first female First Nations or indigenous judge, Justice Marion Buller, the five-member MMIW commission is tasked with identifying the “systemic causes of all forms of violence—including sexual violence—against Indigenous women and girls in Canada, including underlying social, economic, cultural, institutional and historical causes.”

The organization of the MMIW inquiry was a major campaign promise of both the Liberals and the social-democratic NDP in last year's election campaign. They were appealing to popular outrage at the then Conservative government's callous indifference to the abject poverty in which the majority of Canada's indigenous population live and at the disproportionately higher rates of violence visited on native people, including by police forces.

The inquiry is part of the Liberals' native “reconciliation” agenda. This agenda is presented as a means of advancing “social justice” and “equality” for native people and making them “full partners” in Canada. In reality, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberals are seeking to “reconcile” the impoverished indigenous population to Canadian capitalism by cultivating a privileged First Nations elite with which Canadian big business can collaborate to deepen the integration of the Indian reserves and Canada's north into the capitalist profit system and to suppress growing unrest, both on- and off-reserve.

Canada's ruling elite is alarmed by growing signs of social opposition among the native population, especially young people, and by the weakening support, as exemplified by the sudden eruption of the Idle No More Movement in 2012-13, for the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and other officially recognized native groups.

There is a wide range of socioeconomic data documenting social distress among Canada's native population. Poverty, unemployment, educational attainment, substance abuse and incarceration rates are far higher than the rest of the Canadian population and life expectancy significantly shorter.

These miserable social conditions are the product of a century and a half of exploitation and discrimination by the Canadian capitalist state. To lay the basis for the expansion of capitalist private property into western Canada, it dispossessed indigenous people of their land in the 19th century and continued to suppress and eliminate the native population through genocidal policies, like the native residential school system, well into the second half of the 20th Century.

The Liberals' inquiry seeks to turn attention away from the responsibility of Canadian capitalism and its state for the plight of the

native people, by promoting a reactionary narrative that attributes the primary cause of the higher rates of violence visited on native women to sexism and the racism of “white society.”

Native women's groups began campaigning for an inquiry after a number of high-profile cases came to light of police and other state authorities outright ignoring or showing scant interest in investigating the disappearances of native girls and women—most notoriously in the case of the victims of the Vancouver-area serial killer Robert Pickton.

In response to the complaints of official indifference and neglect, the RCMP issued a report in 2014. It said more than 1,180 indigenous women had either been murdered or had disappeared in the previous thirty years and attributed what it conceded was a significantly higher rate of murdered indigenous women to “family violence.”

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper then curtly dismissed the calls for an inquiry, saying that the higher rates of violence against indigenous women were not a “sociological phenomenon”—i.e. a product of poverty and oppression. “We should not view this as a sociological issue,” declared Harper. “We should view it as crime.”

Harper's stance was in keeping with his openly confrontational approach toward the native population. Not only did the Conservatives scrap a planned \$5 billion boost in spending on native health care, education and housing (the 2005 Kelowna Accord) and otherwise make them a target of its austerity drive. They sought to ram through pipelines and other resource extraction projects over the objections of native groups whose livelihoods would be threatened by rapacious capitalist development. In implementing this rightwing agenda, Harper oscillated between ignoring and bullying the petty-bourgeois native leadership that previous governments, Liberal and Progressive Conservative alike, had cultivated from the 1970s on as a mechanism for controlling the native population.

The Liberals, who when in opposition derided the Conservatives for failing to get a single kilometer of pipeline built, have taken a different tactical approach, promising reconciliation and a supposed “nation-to-nation” relationship with the native people. By reviving Ottawa's ties to the AFN, courting a small but growing layer of native business owners and professionals, and giving the indigenous elite a seat at the table in resource development, the Liberals aim to give a more “humane face” to Canadian capitalism's continued oppression of the native population and secure “social license” for its resource development projects.

This is exemplified by Trudeau's much-trumpeted appointment of Jody Wilson-Raybould—the daughter of a BC Chief, who followed her father in becoming a lawyer, then emerged as a leader of the Idle No More movement—as Canada's justice minister.

The MMIW commission's government-dictated terms of reference

explicitly restrict it to investigating violence directed at girls and women.

The reality is that most indigenous Canadians, both men and women, experience a high risk of violence as a result of the historic crimes of the Canadian capitalist state and the very great levels of poverty and social inequality that they experience each day.

Sexism and racism are not the causes of this, although they both exist in Canadian society, and the Indian Act, which denied First Nations people basic rights of citizenship until the 1960s and continues to govern their lives, is intrinsically racist.

National homicide rate data collected by Statistics Canada show that in 2014 Canadian indigenous males were seven times more likely to be victims of homicide than nonindigenous males, and three times more likely to be killed than indigenous females. Indigenous females were killed at a rate of 3.64 per 100,000 in 2014, meaning they were at a six times greater risk of being slain than nonindigenous women.

Despite representing just 4.3 percent of Canada's total population, indigenous people accounted for 23 percent of all homicide victims in Canada in 2014, 117 out of 516. Aboriginal people also made up about one-third of the 431 people accused of homicide and almost a quarter of all Canadians incarcerated.

The inquiry's terms of reference also omit any specific directive about examining the role of the police, even though the brutality and frequent racism of law enforcement towards Native men and women is a major complaint from communities across the country. The commission will not be able to reopen cold cases, meaning there is no prospect of families obtaining answers about the fate of their loved ones in cases where police investigations were cursory, slipshod or nonexistent. The commission also has very little power to scrutinize police conduct. The RCMP and the provincial governments, which administer much of policing in Canada, lobbied hard to restrict the Commission's mandate in this regard.

The very idea that the police, whose contempt for the impoverished Native population is barely concealed, can be pressured into reforming itself and "serving" native communities is as absurd as it is reactionary. The RCMP's origins go back to 1873 when Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, established the North-West Mounted Police as a mechanism to suppress and dispossess the Native population in western Canada. Ever since, the RCMP, like the rest of the police and the entire capitalist state, have served to uphold the exploitation of the vast majority—native and nonnative—by a tiny ruling elite.

The Trudeau government's "reconciliation" agenda has nothing to do with laying bare the real reasons for the desperate conditions faced by the majority of the Native population, let alone confronting them.

Rather, it is part of the Trudeau government's efforts to provide Canadian capitalism's brutal exploitation of the Native population and the working class with a more "progressive" face. This includes the promotion of various privileged layers to smother social opposition—the trade union bureaucracy and, in the case of the native population, a privileged petty-bourgeois layer charged with administering the reserves, leading the government-recognized native organization, and partnering with big business in northern development.

This is underscored by the Liberals' much ballyhooed increases in native funding. After two decades of massive cuts, the government has committed to a one-time \$8.4 billion increase in spending on the native population spread over five years. The government has otherwise left in place the two-decade-old, 2 percent annual cap on

increases in "on-reserve" funding for education, health care, housing and social services that the Chretien Liberal government first imposed in 1996. Due to population growth and inflation, this 2 percent cap has translated into a massive per capita drop in "on-reserve" spending.

Based on the identity politics that underpins the MMIW, the so-called systemic causes that the commission will identify in its final report, due December 2018, can already be predicted. They will include a lack of Native judges, police officers and other officials in the capitalist state, and the absence of a "nation-to-nation" relationship between the Canadian capitalist state and the structures of Native "self-government"—i.e. of their formal incorporation as a "third order" of government in Canada's constitution as the Mulroney Conservatives proposed in their failed 1992 Charlottetown Constitutional Accord.

The Liberals' big-business agenda precludes an honest examination of the root causes of the high levels of violence faced by the indigenous population. Such an investigation would be compelled to acknowledge the direct connection between the emergence of Canadian capitalism in the 19th century and the systematic dispossession, impoverishment and suppression of the Native population. The terrible conditions that confront the majority of the Native population, on- and off-reserve, are among the sharpest manifestations of the social disaster facing the entire Canadian working class as the capitalist crisis intensifies. These conditions will only be overcome through the joint struggle of workers and youth—native and nonnative—for the socialist reorganization of society.

*The authors also recommend:*

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