

Whitewashing Canadian capitalism's crimes:

# Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's inquiry issues final report

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The Canadian government's public inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIW) issued its final report June 3.

The product of a three-year investigation into the "systemic causes of all forms of violence—including sexual violence—against indigenous women and girls in Canada," the report references many of the crimes that Canadian capitalism and the Canadian state have inflicted on the native people. These include their violent dispossession; the residential school system under which generations of native children were systematically separated from their families and culture; and the racist Indian Act, which continues to regulate the lives of hundreds of thousands of native people.

However, the report obscures the responsibility of Canadian capitalism and the Canadian ruling elite for these crimes. Infused with racial, gender, and native identity politics, it instead blames a "colonialist" mindset and "white society" for an ongoing "genocide" in which all non-native Canadians are complicit.

The MMIW report's "Calls for Justice" include demands for increased funding for housing, health care, and education for indigenous women, girls, and "2SLGBTQQIA (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual)" people. Similar recommendations have been made by the many previous government inquiries into the horrific social conditions that confront the vast majority of Canada's native peoples. Invariably, Canada's big business politicians have failed to implement them.

Reactionary "law and order" demands for harsher sentences for those guilty of violent crimes and increased funding for the police also figure in the report's recommendations. But most of the "Calls for Justice"—like the demand for native representation on the Supreme Court—are aimed at advancing the ambitions of the small but influential native elite for an increased role in Canadian capitalism's political and legal establishments, and more generally greater access to wealth and privilege.

## **The fraud of "native reconciliation"**

The MMIW inquiry was set up by the Trudeau Liberal government shortly after it came to power in October 2015 as part of its much-vaunted native "reconciliation" agenda. This agenda, one of whose cornerstones is a pledge to build a "nation to nation" relationship with the native peoples, enjoys widespread public support. This is because it is perceived as a repudiation of, and an attempt to redress, the historic oppression of Canada's native people.

The Liberals' rhetoric about "social justice" and "equality" notwithstanding, their "reconciliation" agenda is in reality aimed at

bolstering Canadian capitalism. The Liberals, Canadian big business' preferred party of government in the 20th century, along with much of the ruling class, see the cultivation of a native elite as a means of gaining "social license" for resource extraction projects and energy pipelines, and otherwise opening up traditional native lands to corporate exploitation. They are also anxious to reinforce a petty bourgeois native elite, comprised of professionals and small business people, to serve as a social buffer to suppress growing social discontent among native people, who constitute an increasingly important part of the workforce in western Canada.

This push to "reconcile" native people—First Nations, Inuit, and Metis—to Canadian capitalism is supported by the trade union-backed NDP and upper-middle class pseudo-left. In an earlier iteration, the cultivation of a petty-bourgeois native leadership as a mechanism for controlling the native population was also backed by Conservative governments. Under the Mulroney government's failed 1992 attempt to amend the constitution (the Charlottetown Accord), native "self-government" was to have been recognized as a "third order" of government within the Canadian federal state.

However, as part of its rapacious drive to restructure social policy and class relations as a whole in the interests of big business, Stephen Harper's Conservative government abandoned this stratagem. Harper snubbed and bullied the native elite and their organizations, such as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), while slashing billions in funding for native health care, education, and housing.

Native anger against the Harper government, and more generally the deprivations, state abuse and violence native people are subjected to, exploded in the "Idle No More" movement. These 2012-13 protests erupted outside the control of the AFN and the official native leadership. It was in their wake that calls for an inquiry into the mistreatment and blatant discrimination that native people have faced at the hands of the police and judiciary, including official indifference to the plight of the large number of murdered and missing indigenous women, gained prominence.

When the Trudeau government established the MMIW, making good on a 2015 Liberal election promise, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that it was part of a wider ruling-class effort to use identity politics to provide a phony "progressive" face to Canadian capitalism and cultivate support among privileged petty-bourgeois layers, while pursuing austerity at home and aggression and war abroad. (See: Canada's Liberals launch inquiry into "missing and murdered indigenous women").

## **Canadian capitalism and native dispossession and social deprivation**

During its two years of public hearings, the MMIW inquiry heard poignant testimony from the families and friends of murdered and missing indigenous women and girls. They detailed the abuse and discrimination that many of their loved ones had suffered at the hands of the state, and attested to the ongoing trauma and hardship produced by their loss, and by the callous indifference of the police and other authorities.

Poverty, homelessness, myriad other forms of social deprivation, state repression, and racism have resulted in native people being the target of violence at rates far in excess of the general population.

In recent years native people have consistently accounted for almost a quarter of all homicide victims, although they constitute less than 5 percent of the Canadian population. Native people—men and boys, as well as women and girls—are also incarcerated at rates far in excess of all other groups. According to Statistics Canada, aboriginal youth accounted for 46 percent of all admissions to youth correctional services in 2016/17, and aboriginal adults 28 percent and 27 percent, respectively, of all admissions to provincial and federal correctional services.

Suicide and self-inflicted injury are the leading cause of death among First Nations people aged 44 and under.

The brutal social conditions that native people face are rooted in the rise and development of Canadian capitalism. Capitalist private property was imposed and the Canadian nation-state

consolidated through the dispossession and subjugation of the Native people, the seizure of their lands, and the destruction of their communal property relations. Under the “treaty-system,” native people were shunted onto reserves that were denied basic resources and subject to intrusive state control.

Today conditions on many First Nations reserves are akin to those in the so-called developing world. Many lack access to clean drinking water, healthcare and other basic public services.

The MMIW inquiry report criticizes numerous government actions past and present. However, it does so as part of an identity-politics driven narrative that blames the subjectively-motivated racial prejudices of a “white society” trapped within “colonial” ways of thinking for the mistreatment and oppression of the native people.

Capitalism, the Canadian state and their leading representatives are effectively absolved of their political responsibility for the dispossession and extermination of large sections of the indigenous population. The incompatibility of the drive of figures like Sir John A. Macdonald, the principal architect of Confederation and Canada’s first prime minister, to establish, consolidate, and maintain private property relations, from coast to coast to coast, with native societies grounded in communal forms of property, is covered over. Instead, the report indicts the entire “white” or “settler” population, willfully ignoring that the vast majority of the “settlers” were destitute workers and small-farmers, themselves the victims of capitalist exploitation.

Similarly, the report points the finger at the entire population, i.e., working people across Canada, for the ongoing “genocide” against native women and girls.

Claiming that racist colonialist ideology, not capitalism, bears responsibility both historically and today for the plight of the native peoples, the MMIW report demands, in the name of indigenous “self-determination,” a greater role for the native elite in the Canadian establishment, its state institutions and profit-making.

This reactionary agenda—which in its essentials conforms entirely with the Trudeau government’s native reconciliation agenda—is covered over with declamations against a racism (that is entirely ripped from its social roots in class oppression), and with essentialist native nationalist rhetoric. Thus the report declares, “‘Decolonizing’ is a social and political process aimed at ... re-establishing strong contemporary Indigenous Peoples, Nations, and institutions based on traditional values, philosophies, and knowledge systems.”

The remarks of Marion Buller, the head of the MMIW inquiry and the first indigenous judge in British Columbia’s history, typify its attempt to shift responsibility for the plight of the native people from the Canadian ruling class to working people. Asked after the report’s publication what the Canadian population could do to support the native people in fighting oppression, she declared, “Decolonize themselves.”

## The charge of Genocide and Human Rights Imperialism

The establishment’s response to the MMIW inquiry’s final report has largely focused on rebutting its charge that the large number of murdered and missing indigenous women and girls constitutes a “genocide.”

Today, as under Macdonald’s two decades-long premiership, Canada’s elite is impervious to the social devastation that it has wrought in native communities, from coast to coast to coast.

The grim toll of native suicides, the tuberculosis epidemic in the far north, the mercury poisoning of the Grassy Narrows First Nation in northern Ontario, and innumerable other tragedies are blithely ignored, or farmed out for further study.

But because it has foreign policy implications, Canada’s political establishment and corporate media were quick to take umbrage at the MMIW’s “genocide” claim.

As prime minister, Stephen Harper rejected calls for an inquiry into the large number of murdered and missing indigenous women and girls, insisting that it was not a social issue, let alone a social crisis—simply a criminal matter. Andrew Scheer, his successor as Conservative leader, rushed to declare the use of the term genocide “inappropriate.” He then cynically proclaimed “it is its own tragedy,” refusing to even acknowledge that this “tragedy” is a social crime—one of many inflicted on native people in contemporary Canada.

The Liberal government was initially more circumspect in its response, for it did not want to be seen to be publicly repudiating a key finding of its own inquiry. However, after the corporate media, from the liberal *Toronto Star* to the neo-conservative *National Post*, railed against the sallying of Canada’s “good name,” the government announced that while it “respects” the inquiry’s genocide finding, it rejects it.

This ruling class counter-attack has been motivated by the most base predatory self-interest—concern that the inquiry’s charge of genocide cuts across Canadian imperialism’s manipulation of human-rights claims to advance its interests around the world, through aggression and war. Currently, the Liberal government is playing a leading role in the US drive to overthrow Venezuela’s elected government—an act of imperialist brigandry that it justifies with cynical claims that President Nicolás Maduro is a human rights violator.

That Canadian capitalism expanded and the Canadian nation-state was consolidated through genocidal actions against the native people is indisputable. Claims that the residential school system practiced “cultural genocide” are also warranted.

Educating workers and young people about these crimes is an important element in the fight to develop socialist consciousness and a spirit of intransigent opposition to the Canadian capitalist state in the working class.

The MMIW’s charge of an ongoing genocide, however, is of a different kind. Were it simply a matter of a rhetorical excess born of anger at what is indisputably an outrage, one moreover with deep roots in the dispossession and ongoing oppression of the native people, it could perhaps be excused. But it is tied to a very definite and retrograde political agenda: the covering up of Canadian capitalism’s responsibility for the destruction of native society and the social deprivation that continues to

ravage native communities; support for the Liberal government's pro-big business native "reconciliation" agenda; and the promotion of a native nationalism that serves to advance the selfish interests of the native petty-bourgeois elite, and divide native workers and youth from the rest of the working class.

The democratic rights of native people will only be secured as part of a united struggle of the working class against the capitalist social order, responsible for their historic dispossession and continuing oppression, including discrimination.

*The authors also recommend:*

Canada's Liberals launch inquiry into "missing and murdered indigenous women"

[6 September 2016]

Canadian capitalism and the subjugation and decimation of the indigenous population

[23 April 2016]

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