

Toronto high schools to replace Grade 11 English with compulsory Indigenous literature class

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17 April 2023

In February, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) voted by 18 to 3 to replace its current Grade 11 English course with a mandatory one devoted to “Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Metis and Inuit Voices.” The previous course introduced students to Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, J.D. Salinger and F. Scott Fitzgerald, among others.

The proponents of the new course, including Indigenous student trustee Isaiah Shafqat, proclaimed it a “historic change” and a “win for the Indigenous community.” Other supporters described it as “transformative.”

These are bold claims. But are they sustained by the facts? Wide layers of the Canadian population, familiar with the history of the brutal treatment of the Indigenous peoples, will no doubt feel an instinctive sympathy. And, indeed, the study of Indigenous culture and history is both entirely legitimate and necessary.

However, anyone who pays attention to the ways of governments and ruling elites, as well as to the operations of the middle-class identity politics practitioners, ought to proceed cautiously and subject the situation to serious analysis. Who will truly benefit from these changes? Will the Indigenous population? Will the Grade 11 students? What are the *real* motives of the Canadian political establishment at all levels behind its *publicly stated* motives?

No substantive explanation was given for the decision to replace a required course in English literature that included texts such as *Macbeth* and *Catcher in the Rye* with a course on Indigenous culture. Somewhat defensively, TDSB chair Rachel Chernos Lin could not ignore the obvious implications of the substitution, asserting that “It’s not meant to replace, it’s meant to enrich.” One is obliged to ask: why then replace? The next step is for the TDSB to prepare a report to be delivered in June outlining details and timeline for implementation.

Other local school boards have introduced Indigenous courses in recent years with little fanfare—neighboring York and Durham school boards have made a similar course a compulsory high school credit, as have the Greater Essex County, Lakehead, Simcoe County and Upper Canada school boards. The course is already taught as an elective in 29 of 110 schools within the TDSB, but the move to make it compulsory while replacing standard English is unprecedented.

To a considerable extent, the school board action in February was a decision reached by a small number of people imposed on the broader population. The form of the process expresses something about its content. If this were a genuinely democratic-popular development, it would not be carried out largely behind the backs of the city’s residents.

While it is appropriate that Indigenous history and culture be offered in school curricula, directly counterposing Indigenous to English literary studies runs counter to the interests of the Indigenous people and to their cultural enrichment, along with that of the working class in general.

The argument, stated openly or muttered under one’s breath, that Shakespeare and Dickens are “dead white men” and their work is unrelated to the lives of contemporary students, along the lines of the deplorable “Disrupt Texts” campaign in the US, needs to be addressed head-on and rejected as reactionary and ignorant.

Shafqat, the Indigenous student trustee who advocates for awareness of “intersectionalities between Indigenous and Queer communities,” observed that Toronto “being the largest school board in Canada and having this course mandatory, people will have to listen and they’ll have to learn.” He told *Toronto Life* that “I’ve had some friends say that Shakespeare is irrelevant.” Student trustee Naomi Musa criticized the previous Grade 11 English course, calling it “Eurocentric and not reflective of different intersectionalities.” This is backward and misguided.

One can be thoroughly supportive of introducing Indigenous authors and others without for a moment losing sight of the fact that writings long recognized to be major contributions to culture, shedding important light on what it means to be human, are of immense “relevance” to youth, including Indigenous youth, in the 21st century.

Although of course political and ideological motives are never absent, Shakespeare, Dickens, Fitzgerald and others continue to be read and valued *primarily* because of their enduring artistic, social and psychological qualities, including their subversive attitude toward conventional wisdom and existing structures.

The proposed displacement of Grade 11 English will not improve the situation for any oppressed minority. Retrograde accommodations of this sort, that dress up what amounts to the degradation of learning standards as in some way a step forward, are being made by education officials confronted with identity ideologues backed by government.

The regular revelations of unmarked graves of Indigenous children torn from their families and interned at Church-run residential schools testify to the decades of horrific treatment of native peoples by the Canadian state and its agents. Public outrage has been met by the ruling class with various strategies to mute or divide its critics. The present-day conditions of the Native peoples continue to be abominable, even as the various government officials proclaim their love and esteem for the country’s First Nations.

But more than mere obscene hypocrisy is at work here. The Liberal government of Justin Trudeau has definite aims, which are not difficult to make out. Its policy on Indigenous culture, a great deal of hot air that costs very little, is part of a broader strategy that purports to address the grievances of identities and minorities of various sorts, but, in fact, merely provides a “progressive” cover for its class-war agenda.

The Trudeau government and its counterparts at the provincial and local levels would like to divert attention from the responsibility of Canadian

capitalism and its state for the deplorable circumstances in which most Indigenous people live, whether on or off-reserve, as well as to cultivate a privileged petty bourgeois layer of the Indigenous population to serve as a buffer against the outrage that exists about the existing conditions.

By appealing to this layer to participate more fully in bourgeois rule, the federal government seeks to win their cooperation in the cynical fraud of “native reconciliation” based on “Nation to Nation” equivalence. The official policy of multi-culturalism, which promotes and seeks to entrench a system of discrete communities as defined by ethnicity, race and religion, has been central to the effort to redefine social antagonisms in racial and cultural terms.

The Toronto school board measures have been adopted by officials in ready compliance with recommendations of the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)—a government-appointed body—that have shaped Liberal government policy on Indigenous affairs in recent years. Like other boards offering this course, the TDSB refers explicitly to the TRC and its recommendations as motivating the change in curriculum.

Support for these changes have come from prominent Indigenous professionals and artists like Tanya Talaga who stand to gain personally and professionally, but takes place at the expense of Indigenous people more broadly. The historic dispossession and decimation of the Indigenous population cannot be understood, let alone properly addressed, separated from the development of Canada as a capitalist society, and the class struggle as a whole. Approaching Indigenous history and culture through a nationalist/identity politics lens gravely distorts the issues and puts a misplaced emphasis on racial and cultural difference that prevents uniting against the common class enemy.

The school board decision fits seamlessly into the agenda advanced by the pseudo-left: Canada was and remains a “white, colonial-settler state,” still in need of “decolonization,” a process that can apparently be advanced by incorporating an Indigenous elite into governments, corporate boardrooms, academia, etc.

Implicitly, according to the logic of the school board and its apologists, the general Canadian population in 2023 is being held responsible for the crimes committed by the ruling elite, and must be made to pay. The mandatory course is presented moralistically as a kind of punishment. The fate of the Indigenous people may be one of the sharpest proofs of the ruthlessness of Canadian capitalism. But it would be all to the good if high school students were also taught about the history of government and corporate strike-breaking, political repression and spying carried out by the RCMP, Canadian participation in colonialism, imperialist wars and the activities of the US CIA and military, etc.

The Indigenous “reconciliation” project had a certain popular appeal. There was legitimate anger, regret, even shame over what was done to the Indigenous population. However, in the absence of an understanding of the connection between that process and the overall development of capitalism, naturally covered up by the government and the media, this genuine outrage has been exploited. Exploited to pursue an agenda aimed at “reconciling” the Indigenous peoples to Canadian capitalism. Various opportunists and operators within the Indigenous population and their middle class backers, meanwhile, have taken advantage of the situation to promote their own economic and political interests.

As noted, the Liberal government hypocritically portrays itself as a friend of the Indigenous even as it continues to spend hundreds of millions of dollars battling their rights in court. The promotion of Indigenous government is part of a strategy pursued by consecutive governments as a means of managing and delimiting its financial obligations.

Faced with mounting popular anger around historical abuses at government financed residential schools, Prime Minister Stephen Harper was obliged to convene the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, offering his famously insincere apology in 2008. Seeking to contain widespread and growing dissatisfaction within the Indigenous community,

which culminated in the “Idle no More” movement, the Liberal government adopted its policy of “nation to nation reconciliation” in 2015.

In accepting the Liberals invitation to greater “self-government,” the leadership that gained ground based on Indigenous identity has extended a certain legitimacy to the ruling elite. In turn, these figures have been rewarded with lucrative careers and opportunities when TRC recommendations on Indigenous education have been implemented.

This strategy has appealed to more narrow material interests at work. In keeping with federal policy, the Ontario Ministry of Education grants extra funding to school boards that offer qualifying courses in Indigenous studies. As a result the TDSB gets an additional \$1,200 in funding from the Ministry for each student taking the new course, which, in light of shrinking government expenditures on education, can be seen as a significant factor behind board support.

The TDSB decision on Grade 11 curriculum changes takes place within a context in which powerful ideological and political pressures are at work, along with severe economic constraints and a general policy of austerity pursued by governments at every level.

The decline in education funding has become particularly acute in Ontario in recent years. According to a Statistics Canada report last year, national spending on education fell for the first time in 17 years, with Ontario and Alberta accounting for the bulk of the decrease. Although the growth in school enrolment slowed marginally during the COVID pandemic, funding cuts have taken place alongside an otherwise steady growth in student numbers.

The allocation of academic resources and postings on the basis of racial identity, far from protecting or advancing Indigenous culture, will isolate and further alienate it. This sort of affirmative action, as history has shown, will benefit and enrich a handful of professionals and band leaders while sharpening class differences within their communities.

Academic curriculum determined on the basis of race, gender or ethnicity devalues and displaces a genuine appreciation of art and literary works on their actual merits. A serious and enlightened teaching of cultural achievement would require the broadest exposure to social experience and expression, across generations and across the globe.

The political outlook behind the displacement of English studies in high schools, based on the undifferentiated identification of European and ‘white’ culture and art with colonialism, has further reactionary implications as demonstrated in the disgraceful examples of persecution of academics and artists in recent years. The takedown and canceling of figures such as Carrie Bourassa, Michelle Latimer and Joseph Boyden, who have been targeted as lacking sufficient Indigenous racial credentials, has been prosecuted by the same nationalist Indigenous elite pushing for divisive changes in school curricula.

Youth and workers should be suspicious of and hostile to every effort to pit one section of the working class and oppressed against another, and every striving for privileges by petty bourgeois layers of one ethnicity or another. Socialists stand instead for the unity of English-speaking, French-speaking, immigrant, Indigenous and every other section of the working class against the entire ruling class.



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