

Residential Schools

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plain
talk

it's
our
time

Never again will the awesome power of government attempt to destroy us,
to obliterate our cultures and our languages from this land,
the land we have occupied since time immemorial.

From the response of the Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine to the Government of Canada's apology to the former students of the Residential Schools, made on June 11, 2008, by The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada.

1. What are residential schools?

Residential schools were boarding schools for Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) children and youth, financed by the federal government but staffed and run by several Christian religious institutions— the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, United and Methodist Churches. Children were separated from their families and communities, sometimes by force, and lived in and attended classes at the schools for most of the year. Often the residential schools were located far from the students' home communities.

Although what we now refer to as residential schools officially started in 1883, similar boarding schools had been run by French Christian missionaries in the early 1600s. Some of the early types operated with grants from the federal government. Some were called "industrial" schools because they provided training in trades as well as the basics of farming and carpentry. Some of these early versions were on-reserve while others were off-reserve. All of these schools emphasized religious instruction.

2. How long did residential schools exist?

From their start in the 1800s until the last one closed in 1996, about 130 residential schools operated in every province and territory in Canada, except for the provinces of New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland. During this period, over 150,000 Indigenous youth were enrolled in residential schools. Enrollment reached a peak about 1930, with over 17,000 students in 80 schools. As of 2012, about 93,000 Indigenous adults who attended residential schools are still alive to tell their stories and describe their experiences.

In 1972, *Indian Control of Indian Education* asserted the right of First Nations to control their own schooling. This document, updated in 2010 as *First Nations Control of First Nations Education*, laid out the values and principles underlying First Nations education and reinforced the importance of language and culture as the foundational elements to support student success. The implementation of these policies has proved an on-going challenge for First Nations due to outdated legal and policy frameworks, and significant funding disparities that exist to this day.



3. Why were residential schools created?

A number of factors laid the foundation for the creation of residential schools:

a) The dominant European mentality and view of Canada's original inhabitants was racist and backwards. The federal government considered it necessary to "assimilate" Indigenous people, to have Indigenous nations conform to the European/Canadian customs, attitudes and ways of dressing, believing, behaving and working. Some politicians (and others) of the time sought to "kill the Indian in the child" and "civilize" Indigenous youth by separating them from their heritage and customs and indoctrinating them to European and Christian ways. This false, misguided and racist perspective denied and rejected the validity of First Nations languages, customs, spirituality and traditions. The main reason for the assimilationist policies was for land and resource exploitation. Dispossession and extinguishment of rights would also help to ensure the establishment of Canada as a legitimate nation state.

b) In 1876, the federal government introduced the Indian Act. Under the Act, the federal government took control of all aspects of the lives of First Nations people, including their means of governing themselves, their economies, religions, customs, traditions, land use and *education*. The Indian Act includes criteria and a definition of who is an "Indian."

c) First Nations leaders supported education of their young. They recognized that providing their youth with the skills and knowledge relevant to the times would be important in the adaptation of their Nations and communities to the new situations arising from the presence of European settlers. However, the idea of separating children from their communities to attend school was not supported by parents and Elders.

First Nation leaders always insisted that schooling should be *within*, not *distant from*, their communities.

d) Treaties with First Nations obligated governments to fund the education of First Nations youth. Residential schools were the federal government's way of meeting their treaty commitments to education.

e) Indigenous people were considered to be a "problem" because their presence was getting in the way of the continuous expansion of settlement and exploitation by the European powers. Assimilation and absorption of Indigenous people into the "mainstream" were considered to help eliminate the "problem."

f) Christian missionaries considered it their duty to convert the First Nations to what they considered to be the only true religion, Christianity.

4. How did residential schools operate?

For almost their entire history, residential schools were run by religious organizations—Christianity's Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, United and Methodist Churches. Their missionaries, ministers, priests and nuns administered the schools, taught the classes, and looked

after the students all within a Christian framework. Many of these people were sincerely devoted to making a positive change in the lives of their students, although overwork, poor pay, isolation and colonial attitudes took their toll on the quality of education and on the well-being of the students. As part of the assimilation process, students were forbidden to respect or continue their First Nations customs, traditions and languages.

The federal government provided most of the funding for residential schools. However, as the system grew and expanded, there were continuing reductions, leading to severe underfunding for much of the time. From the beginning of the residential school system, federal politicians were aware of the problems caused by inadequate funding and poor instruction, but such observations were suppressed and ignored.

5. What were students' experiences at residential schools?

Students typically attended these schools for 10 years or more. They were usually taken from their homes at five years of age, and generally finished school at age 15. Some students were able to go home for the summer, but it wasn't uncommon for students to remain at residential school for the entire duration of their schooling years and not ever see or visit their parents and family members and community.

When youth arrived at their residential school, they were stripped of their First Nations identity. Possessions and clothing were taken away. Youth were assigned uniforms. Their First Nations name was abandoned and replaced with a Christian name. While at the schools, students were deprived of their First Nations heritage—language, customs, and spirituality—without being provided with a sustainable and viable alternative.

Some students had positive experiences and received decent educations. However, many students were subjected to or witnessed a wide range of indignities, including humiliation and nutritional, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. In addition, because visits by family and community members were rare and often forbidden or impossible, students experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation. Not surprisingly, students were susceptible to disease and poor health. Suicide was not uncommon.

To reduce costs of operation, some residential schools exploited the students by requiring that the students work for half the day, thereby limiting the time available for education. Funding limitations also affected the quality of education. Many of the teachers at residential schools were not properly trained, lacking professional certification and qualifications. Poor housing conditions caused by inadequate funding adversely affected student safety and well-being. It is estimated that up to 50% of students who attended residential schools died there!



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6. How did residential school students fare as adults?

Residential schools were created and designed to prevent students from acquiring the skills, knowledge, attitudes and understandings of their First Nations culture. First Nations youth attending residential schools were deprived of their families, communities, and heritage. The residential school experience prevented students from learning the traditional ways and patterns of their culture—the customs, stories, ideas, language, spirituality, ethics, morality, language, etc. The Indian Act compounded these losses by declaring it illegal for First Nations to take part in sacred ceremonies like the Potlatch and Sun Dance. Added to the cultural interference was the humiliation, deprivation and abuse many First Nations youth encountered in residential schools. Many adults who had attended residential schools subsequently had profound identity problems, confused about who they were and their place in their First Nations culture and in the wider Canadian culture.

The adult behaviour of many residential school students reflected these insults. Parenting skills appropriate to their First Nations culture were disrupted or absent, passing on negative effects to their children, their spouses and their communities. The psychological and physical pain that was the legacy of the residential school system led many to seek comfort and solace in drugs and other undesirable practices.

7. How did the residential school experience affect others?

Residential school experiences have had profound effects on other members of First Nations communities. These effects have come to be known as the “intergenerational legacy” of the residential school system, influences that have been passed on from generation to generation. This intergenerational legacy has been described as the “effects of physical and sexual abuse that were passed on to the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Indigenous people who attended the residential school system.” From an Indigenous perspective, these effects are expressed in the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual dimensions of the Indigenous life experience.

This intergenerational legacy is expressed in many ways, including:

- alcohol and drug abuse
- low self-esteem
- dysfunctional interpersonal relationships
- suicide
- depression
- eating disorders
- oppression and abuse of others
- cultural identity confusion

8. When did the general public learn about residential schools and their problems?

It wasn't until the 1990s that the general public became aware of how the events at residential schools had impacted generations of First Nations communities. Although problems of disease, hunger, overcrowding, staff training, low quality of education and building disrepair had been pointed out long ago, little or nothing has been done for decades.

Former students of residential school, who came to be known as "Survivors" of residential schools, reported their own experiences. Finally the media and politicians paid attention. A period of lawsuits and hearings resulted in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history. In addition to providing financial compensation to residential school Survivors, the Agreement established the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission to document the real events at residential schools and make that information available to all Canadians. The Commission's purpose is to "guide and inspire First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples and Canadians in a process of truth and healing leading toward reconciliation and renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect."

9. How did religious institutions react to the disclosure?

Between 1986 and 2009, all of the Churches directly involved with the residential school system made public apologies for the abuses, neglect and suffering the First Nations youth had experienced while under their care.

10. How did the Government of Canada react?

In June 2008, the Government of Canada formally apologized for the residential school system and the government's role in isolating Indigenous children from their homes, families, and cultures. Prime Minister Stephen Harper called residential schools a sad chapter in Canadian history and that the policies that supported and protected the whole process were harmful and wrong. A copy of this apology is included on the USB stick included in the Tool Kit.

11. What was the response of the Assembly of First Nations?

National Chief Phil Fontaine issued a moving statement that honoured the many First Nations people who had suffered the consequences of the residential school system, and reaffirmed the strength and survival of First Nations peoples in Canada. The federal apology pointed the way to "a respectful and therefore liberating relationship between (First Nations people) and the rest of Canada.... We must capture a new spirit and vision to meet the challenges of the future." A copy of this response is included in the Tool Kit.



12. What other actions have been taken?

In 2010, the Canadian Senate adopted a motion to study and report on the progress made on the Government of Canada's commitments since the apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools.

All witnesses noted that education is the foundation upon which reconciliation may be built, and underscored the importance of education on Residential Schools for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Areas in need of attention include the development of new curricula, materials and teacher training with a view to educating all Canadians on this dark chapter in our shared history and its ongoing legacy. Measures to support Aboriginal languages and culturally appropriate educational systems will allow Aboriginal youth to develop the skills and perspective necessary to succeed through greater knowledge and appreciation of their history and identity.

There is still a strong concern that little progress has been made by the federal government to truly address the magnitude of damage created by the residential school experience. True and meaningful reconciliation is critical to healing and moving forward. First Nations are working hard to overcome this legacy and have demonstrated many successes that attest to the spirit and resilience of First Nations people.

13. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's overarching purposes are to reveal to Canadians the complex truth about the history and the ongoing legacy of the church-run residential schools, in a manner that fully documents the individual and collective harms perpetrated against Aboriginal peoples, and honours the resiliency and courage of former students, their families, and communities; and guide and inspire a process of truth and healing, leading toward reconciliation within Aboriginal families, and between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal communities, churches, governments, and Canadians generally.

Mission Statement

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will reveal the complete story of Canada's residential school system, and lead the way to respect through reconciliation ... *for the child taken, for the parent left behind.*

Vision Statement

We will reveal the truth about residential schools, and establish a renewed sense of Canada that is inclusive and respectful, and that enables reconciliation.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission spent six years examining Canada's residential schools. Under the leadership of commissioners, the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, Dr. Marie Wilson, and Chief Wilton Littlechild, the TRC produced corroborating evidence of physical

and sexual abuse, institutionalized child neglect, higher than normal mortality rates in schools, and horrific government-directed assimilation tactics. The report confirms much of what we already knew or suspected about the federal government's apartheid-like assimilation policies and how they were driven by a European sense of racial superiority. The TRC's work is critically important to ensure Canadians have a full understanding of their history.

Commission chair Justice Murray Sinclair said: *"We must remember that at the same time that aboriginal children were made to feel inferior, generation after generation of non-aboriginal were exposed to the false belief that their cultures were superior. Imperialism, colonialism and a sense of cultural superiority linger on. The courts have agreed that these concepts are baseless and immoral in the face of inalienable human rights."*

Indigenous leaders greeted the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's summary report on residential schools with openness while urging all Canadians to embrace the findings and close the gap between aboriginals and those who came after.

14. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action

All Canadians are affected by the impacts of the Indian residential schools system and it is time to commit ourselves to reconciliation and action.

The impacts of residential schools are still with us and are contributing to the gap in the quality of life between First Nations and Canadians. We must close that gap.

The schools operated on the assumption that First Nations cultures and languages had to be eradicated and profoundly damaged the relationship between First Nations and Canada. We must repair that relationship.

Action is long overdue, and I believe that the Government of Canada must formally commit to working with First Nations and engaging Canadians in implementing the Commission's calls to action.

National Chief, Perry Bellegarde

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau has declared that his party would adopt and implement all 94 recommendations from the TRC's report. Those recommendations, or Calls to Action, range from drafting new and revised legislation for education, child welfare and aboriginal languages to implementing the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and creating a national inquiry into murdered and missing Aboriginal women.

National Chief Bellegarde said that although all 94 recommendations are vital, addressing the education gap is one of the most important. One of the key recommendations in the report is that the history of aboriginal peoples, the residential school system and its legacy become part



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of the curriculum, from kindergarten to the end of high school.

Drawing from the strength of survivors, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has put us on a path towards reconciliation.

For the complete list of 94 Calls to Action, please refer to Plain Talk 15, *Official Documents*. We have included the calls to action on Education and Language.

TRC Calls to Action on Education

6. We call upon the Government of Canada to repeal Section 43 of the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

7. We call upon the federal government to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

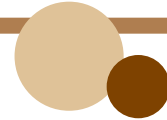
8. We call upon the federal government to eliminate the discrepancy in federal education funding for First Nations children being educated on reserves and those First Nations children being educated off reserves.

9. We call upon the federal government to prepare and publish annual reports comparing funding for the education of First Nations children on and off reserves, as well as educational and income attainments of Aboriginal peoples in Canada compared with non-Aboriginal people.

10. We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:

- i. *Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.*
- ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.
- iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula.
- iv. Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.
- v. Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.
- vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.
- vii. Respecting and honouring Treaty relationships.

11. We call upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education.



12. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally
- i. appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families.

*TRC Calls to Action on **Language and Culture***

13. We call upon the federal government to acknowledge
- i. that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights
14. We call upon the federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following principles:
- i. Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.
 - ii. Aboriginal language rights are reinforced by the Treaties.
 - iii. The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation.
 - iv. The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.
 - v. Funding for Aboriginal language initiatives must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal languages.
15. We call upon the federal government to appoint, in consultation with Aboriginal groups, an Aboriginal Languages Commissioner. The commissioner should help promote Aboriginal languages and report on the adequacy of federal funding of Aboriginal-languages initiatives.
16. We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages.
17. We call upon all levels of government to enable residential school Survivors and their families to reclaim names changed by the residential school system by waiving administrative costs for a period of five years for the name-change process and the revision of official identity documents, such as birth certificates, passports, driver's licenses, health cards, status cards, and social insurance numbers.

The TRC report is in the public domain. Anyone may, without charge or request for permission, reproduce all or part of this report.



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2015

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012
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References

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AFN Response to Apology Statement. National Chief Phil Fontaine, Assembly of First Nations

Indian Residential Schools. Residential_Schoolshandout2.pdf www.afn.ca

Living a Life of Integrity Video

This AFN Youtube video supports the violence against women piece, role models, and residential schools: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9-jc27eLsg>

Prime Minister Harper offers full apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian Residential Schools system. <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2149>

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The Healing Has Begun: An Operational Update from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. May 2002. <http://www.ahf.ca/publications/residential-school-resources>

The Journey Ahead: Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples

The Journey Ahead: report on progress since the government of Canada's apology to former students of Indian residential schools.

They Came for the Children_TRC INTERIM REPORT. ResSchoolHistory_2012_02_24_Webposting.pdf. <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=580>

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=4>

Where are the Children? Healing the Legacy of the Residential Schools. <http://www.wherethechildren.ca/en/exhibit/impacts.html>

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) <http://nctr.ca/> is committed to supporting educators in clearing a path of truth, enlightenment, social justice and reconciliation for our children now and in future generations. The NCTR is ready to embark upon the journey to reconciliation through education on a pathway, which much like the 2 row wampum, is not a singular trail, but a multilane highway of learning.

Doug Saunders, The Globe and Mail,

June 5, 2015

The first thing worth knowing, in understanding the specific nature of the crime Canada stands accused of, is how recent it all really was. Keep in mind that, until 1960, no First Nations were permitted to vote in a Canadian election. In other words, they had a legal status not of citizens but much more like that of wildlife. They could not, for much of the 20th century, leave the confines of a reserve without permission from a government agent. Indigenous Canadians often could not run businesses, borrow money, own property, or, in the case of Inuit from the 1940s to the 1970s, even have a name. And at the centre of all this, the practice of seizing aboriginal children permanently and usually unwillingly from their parents, placing them in state custody, and subjecting them to the forced labour and isolation of residential “schools” – the subject of this week’s monumental Truth and Reconciliation Commission report – reached its peak at the very end of the 1950s and continued in significant numbers through the 1970s (the last residential school didn’t close until 1996).

Almost a third of aboriginal Canadians – 150,000 people – were raised, without access to their families, in these institutions (which were by any normal definition not educational but penal). In other words, this is not about acts of vanished generations: A very significant proportion of still-living indigenous Canadians were personal victims of these abuses; the effects of such deprivation will last many generations, and may have only begun. This is about modern Canada. And it is about a crime that carries the word “genocide.” Many people will find both new and hard to accept the notion that Canada, and current Canadians, are accused of a crime as serious as genocide under international law. The phrase “cultural genocide” has escalated almost overnight from an activist slogan and academic obscurity into official Canadian language, after the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada used it last week to describe the indigenous experience, and then the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created and authorized by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, used it as its central organizing concept in characterizing the experience of the last century.

It is a real crime with a real, internationally accepted definition. The commission’s report provides voluminous and very quotable evidence that everyone from John A. Macdonald to the 1950s managers of the residential school system explicitly intended that program, and the wider Indian Act, to strip indigenous people of any racial, linguistic, cultural or family identity – to, in the words of our first prime minister, withdraw them from parental influence so that they would “acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.” It was not just cultural. The residential school archipelago, when it was created in the 1870s and 1880s, was modelled not after European boarding schools but after the British reformatories and industrial schools designed in the early 19th century to support a child-labour regime – and which were gradually abolished in Britain after 1848.



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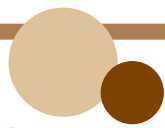
This Canadian system was meant to receive no government or private financing whatsoever: It was to be funded entirely (and in practice was funded “on a nearly cost-free basis,” according to the report) from the products of the unpaid labour of its “students.” The resulting revenues proved grossly inadequate to the nutritional, physical and health needs of the children, and as a result, more than 4,000 of them died. If, in any other part of the world, we learned that tens of thousands of children had been forced into involuntary labour strictly because of their racial identity, and that thousands of them had died as a result, we would probably use a phrase stronger than “cultural genocide.”

It seems absurd, to many Canadians, to be shamed with a label coined to describe the mechanical near-destruction of Europe’s Jews. Canadians did not force entire families into ovens and gas chambers by the millions, as in the Nazi Holocaust; we did not walk into villages and hack hundreds of thousands of people to death, as in the Rwandan genocide. Canada’s case falls into a category occupied by two other crimes against humanity that Mr. Harper’s government has recognized as genocides. There is at least a functional similarity (albeit at a slower and less lethal scale) to the acts committed by the Ottomans against Armenians on Turkish territory in 1915: Those acts involved the mass, violent uprooting, force-marched relocation and forced-labour institutionalization of an entire people, with considerable disregard for life (as well as some considerable acts of outright murder). One cannot help noting a similar pattern and motive, on a less explosively militaristic scale, in historian James Daschuk’s chronicle of the broader events of Canada in the 1880s in his book *Clearing the Plains*: “Years of hunger and despair that coincided with extermination of the bison and relocation of groups to reserves, exacerbated by inadequate food aid from the dominion government, created ecological conditions in which the disease (tuberculosis) exploded (and) kept plains people in a constant state of hunger,” killing countless thousands and wiping out entire communities – a forced relocation mixed with deliberate starvation and disease, with involuntary work camps added to the mix.

In other words, Canada’s crime fits into the historical pattern of a certain sort of genocidal act, one that has been recognized and condemned by Ottawa when it has taken place in other countries.

The system of institutionalized cultural control and domination described in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report arose in the 1870s when the new bureaucratic order of postcolonial Canada began to apply structure and order to newly added territories – many of which it wished to parcel up and hand to newcomers, cleansed of pre-existing people – and also applying discipline and institutional homogeneity to what it saw as lost and unhygienic populations. The result was the simultaneous emergence of the reserve system and the residential-school archipelago. The system of total control over indigenous lives began to wane after the 1970s – at which point Canada’s courts began to recognize treaties with aboriginal nations as part of the constitutional and legal fabric of Canada, and the term “First Nations” was coined by these treaty people to describe their status.

The period of what we now call cultural genocide lasted just a century, though its consequences could continue much longer if we do not intervene to reverse the toll of this period. In many ways, the artifacts of this system continue to function. We still have the forced collectivization of reserves, and large-scale non-ownership of aboriginal land. We are still



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perhaps the only country in the world with federal government offices whose function it is – under the “status Indian” policy – to determine racial purity. We still have terrible schools, staffed with ill-equipped teachers and given pathetic levels of funding, on reserves. This newly named crime may be a source of national shame, but it does not have to define Canada: Another century of progress and co-operative relations could transform it from a current event into a piece of history. We have a chance, in the aftermath of this report, to begin a less shameful era of Canadian and indigenous history.