

"Kill the Indian in the Child": The Ideology and Legacy of Canada's Residential School System

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Abstract

This paper examines the devastating impact of Canada's Indian Residential School system on Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures. The phrase "Kill the Indian in the Child" encapsulates the explicit state-sanctioned policy of forced assimilation and cultural destruction systematically implemented by the Canadian government and collaborating churches from the nineteenth century until 1996. Drawing upon survivor testimonies and the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, this paper argues that the residential school system's legacy persists today through intergenerational trauma, the disruption of familial and cultural structures, and ongoing socio-economic disparities within Indigenous communities. Understanding this history remains essential for the long and necessary process of reconciliation, a journey in which all Canadians are called to participate.

Introduction and Historical Context

The Indian Residential School system represents one of the gravest injustices in Canadian history. From the 1830s until the last school closed in 1996, approximately 150,000 Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and compelled to attend 135 schools across Canada (Arsenault 2015, 2-3). The federal government administered these institutions in partnership with major Christian denominations, with the Catholic Church operating approximately 60 percent of the schools, while Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches managed most of the remainder (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 431).

The stated objective of this system was to "civilize and Christianize" Indigenous children through the systematic erasure of their cultures. Public Works Minister Hector Langevin articulated this rationale in 1883 when he declared: "in order to educate the children properly we must separate them from their families. Some people may say that this is hard but if we want to civilize them we must do that" (Arsenault 2015, 2). Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott expressed an even more explicit vision in 1920: "I want to get rid of the Indian problem... Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politics and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department" (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 432).

The 1920 amendment to the Indian Act made school attendance mandatory for Aboriginal children between the ages of seven and fifteen. Government agents subsequently began forcibly gathering children from their communities, sometimes obtaining court injunctions that threatened parents with arrest for non-compliance (Arsenault 2015, 2). Upon arrival at the schools, children experienced immediate cultural dislocation: their traditional clothing and belongings were confiscated, their braided hair—which held deep cultural significance—was cut,

and they were assigned new Christian names (Arsenault 2015, 2). Speaking Indigenous languages was strictly forbidden and punished severely. Celia Haig-Brown records how her father "was physically tortured by his teachers for speaking Tseshath; they pushed sewing needles through his tongue, a routine punishment for language offenders" (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 432).

The conditions within these institutions were consistently deplorable. Students received an inferior education because schools depended on student labour to function, with older children spending half their days engaged in farming, maintenance, and domestic work (Arsenault 2015, 3). Health conditions proved catastrophic. Diseases including tuberculosis, smallpox, measles, and influenza spread rapidly through overcrowded and unsanitary facilities. Dr. Peter Bryce, the chief medical officer of Indian Affairs, conducted inspections in 1907 and 1909, finding mortality rates of 25 percent in 1907 and up to 50 percent in some schools in 1909 (Arsenault 2015, 3). At least 6,000 children died while attending these institutions or shortly after returning home (Arsenault 2015, 3).

Physical and sexual abuse were endemic throughout the system. Although a staff member was charged with sexually abusing two students as early as 1868, criminal prosecutions remained exceedingly rare (Arsenault 2015, 3). One survivor described how "the threat of being sexually violated loomed 'like a dark cloud' on the horizon" (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 432). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has documented that the consequences of this abuse were "devastating and continue to be felt today" (Arsenault 2015, 3).

Survivor Testimony and Lived Experience

The individuals who endured these institutions have provided powerful testimony about their experiences. Zitkala-Ša, a Yankton Sioux writer who attended boarding school and later taught at the Carlisle Indian School, published her account in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900. She described the trauma of having her long hair forcibly cut: "I felt only the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids" (Robbins 2017, 164). She also recalled the disorientation of her first meal at school, sitting down too early and catching "the eyes of a paleface woman" staring with disapproval, which reduced her to tears rather than eating (Robbins 2017, 164).

In N. Scott Momaday's play *The Indolent Boys*, a character articulates the existential destruction wrought by these institutions: "School here... is a camp where memory is killed. Our existence begins with the cutting of our hair and the taking of a Christian name... I am taught not to remember but to dismember myself" (Robbins 2017, 172). This testimony reveals how the schools sought not merely to educate but to fundamentally sever children from their identities and histories.

Laura Tohé's collection *No Parole Today* opens with a direct address to Richard Pratt, the American architect of the boarding school model, declaring: "Your quotation, 'Kill the Indian, save the man,' binds you to the attitudes that were already in place in your time, attitudes that would subject Indian people to cultural genocide" (Robbins 2017, 135). Tohé emphasizes that

"the most crippling legacy of boarding schools is the devastation of our native languages and culture" (Robbins 2017, 168).

One survivor summarized the total impact of the experience: "Everything that intertwines in my life, the main fibre is the residential school, where I can go back to find the source. But it's always the residential school. I had no other experience. That's it. I never had any experience except the residential school in my formative years" (Milloy 2013, 11). Another survivor simply recalled: "hunger is both the first and last thing I can remember about that school" (Arsenault 2015, 3).

The Legacy: Intergenerational Trauma and Legal Obstacles

The consequences of the residential school system extend far beyond the individual survivors who directly endured its horrors. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that "the legacy of the schools became joblessness, poverty, family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, family breakdown, sexual abuse, prostitution, homelessness, high rates of imprisonment, and early deaths" (Arsenault 2015, 4).

Because survivors were deprived of healthy parenting models during their own childhoods, they could not transmit those skills to subsequent generations (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 432). This phenomenon, known as intergenerational trauma, means that "continuing cycles of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, as well as addiction, suicide and other markers... within Aboriginal communities are considered residual effects of the residential-school experience" (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 432). John Tootoosis, a Cree survivor who became an Indigenous leader, described the resulting dislocation as being "left hanging in the middle... of two cultures and he is not a white man and he is not an Indian" (Roach 2014, 593).

The Canadian legal system, rather than providing redress, frequently compounded these harms. When survivors sought compensation through civil litigation, government and church defendants employed so-called "crumbling skull" arguments—they contended that survivors would have experienced difficulties regardless of abuse because of their family backgrounds, thereby attempting to reduce or eliminate their own liability (Roach 2014, 573). In one case, a judge reduced damages after noting that the plaintiff "was raised in poverty" and had "an alcoholic mother," factors that were themselves products of colonial disruption (Roach 2014, 573). As legal scholar Kent Roach observes, such reasoning effectively "put the former student and his family on trial" and "blamed the victim" while allowing the government and churches to avoid full responsibility (Roach 2014, 574).

Even in cases where sexual abuse was admitted, the Supreme Court of Canada held that damages must be reduced to account for non-sexual, statute-barred abuses inflicted by the same defendants (Roach 2014, 577). The Court acknowledged that "untangling the different sources of damage and loss may be nigh impossible," yet insisted on attempting to isolate the effects of sexual abuse from other harms (Roach 2014, 577). Consequently, "the defendants benefited from their own wrongs" and survivors experienced additional victimization through the legal process (Roach 2014, 576).

Reconciliation and Pathways Forward

The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, approved by courts across Canada in 2006, represented the largest class action settlement in Canadian history (Moran and Roach 2014, 480). The agreement established Common Experience Payments for all former students, provided compensation for serious physical and sexual abuse through an Independent Assessment Process, allocated funding for Indigenous healing initiatives, and created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to document the history and legacy of the schools (Moran and Roach 2014, 481). In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered a formal apology in Parliament, acknowledging that "this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country" (Milloy 2013, 12).

Despite these developments, the path to reconciliation has proven challenging. John Milloy, who served as Director of Research for the TRC, observes that the Commission's mandate was "naively careless—its mandate too large, its time frame too short... and its budget... wholly inadequate" (Milloy 2013, 13). Access to government documents proved more difficult than during previous inquiries; Milloy found that his access during the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in the early 1990s "was more fulsome than anything we have had at the TRC" (Milloy 2013, 14). The Royal Canadian Mounted Police produced a report on their role that Indigenous academics criticized as failing "to accurately represent the past reality of police participation" and adding "nothing to a much needed process of reconciliation" (Milloy 2013, 17).

Some Canadians continue to view the nearly \$4 billion expended through the settlement as "a misallocation of resources" (Moran and Roach 2014, 481). As scholar John Borrows notes, many Canadians remain attracted to the notion that society should simply be "just in our time" without addressing historical wrongs (Moran and Roach 2014, 481). This perspective implicitly suggests that past injustices should remain in the past, disregarding their ongoing manifestations.

Nevertheless, important initiatives continue. The Missing Children Project works to identify children who died in the schools and locate their unmarked burial sites (Milloy 2013, 12). The TRC has collected thousands of survivor testimonies, creating a searchable archive so future generations can hear not only "the facts of their experience" but also "feel those facts, the emotions—the sorrow, loss, and lifelong pain" (Milloy 2013, 15). Commissioner Murray Sinclair has emphasized that reconciliation "is not a five-year journey, it is a generational journey" (Milloy 2013, 18).

Counterarguments and Limitations

The question of whether the residential schools constituted genocide under international law remains contested. The UN Genocide Convention, which defines genocide to include "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group," was ratified by Canada in 1952 (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 437). However, proving the specific intent (*dolens specialis*) required by the Convention presents substantial difficulties. MacDonald and Hudson argue that while "cultural genocide" accurately describes the attempted destruction of Indigenous languages, religions, and cultures, demonstrating intent to physically destroy Indigenous peoples as a group requires

stronger evidence (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 445). They conclude that "the evidence of genocide in Canada is building but is by no means conclusive yet" (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 446).

Canadian courts have consistently declined to apply the Genocide Convention to residential school claims. In *Re Residential Schools* (2000), the court ruled that it lacked "jurisdiction to award a declaratory order on the basis of a non-legal or political code of conduct," effectively treating the Convention as merely "political" rather than legally binding (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 437). The Criminal Code definition of genocide is even narrower than the Convention, omitting both forced child transfer and mental harm from its provisions (MacDonald and Hudson 2012, 435).

The TRC's work has also encountered practical limitations. Milloy candidly acknowledges that research plans "had to be scaled back or abandoned after much effort" due to funding constraints (Milloy 2013, 15). The digital database designed for public access could not be implemented as intended, and the Commission will receive documents in a litigation database "not... optimum" for non-professional users, undermining the goal of making information accessible to survivors and their families (Milloy 2013, 16). Government departments, not the Commission, determine what constitutes a "residential school document," raising concerns that the historical record will remain incomplete (Milloy 2013, 16).

Conclusion

The Indian Residential School system represents a profound betrayal of the trust that should exist between a nation and its children. For more than a century, Canada pursued a policy explicitly designed to "kill the Indian in the child," seeking to eradicate Indigenous cultures through the forced assimilation of Aboriginal children. The consequences of this policy extend through generations, manifesting in shattered families, lost languages, destroyed cultures, and ongoing social devastation. Yet despite the magnitude of this harm, acknowledgment has come late and incompletely. As one observer noted, "It is a testament to the courage and probably also the anger of the survivors that so many of them were prepared to run this victim-blaming gauntlet" of litigation (Roach 2014, 593).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has brought this history into public consciousness and has "set out concrete steps that can be taken" toward reconciliation (Milloy 2013, 19). Whether those steps will be taken depends on the willingness of all Canadians to engage with a history that many would prefer to forget. As John Borrows argues, strengthening Indigenous cultural, linguistic, and political differences is not backward-looking when these efforts are directed toward achieving "higher levels of education, employment, health, capital, and political participation for Aboriginal people" (Moran and Roach 2014, 481). The phrase "Kill the Indian in the Child" must be transformed from a description of past policy into a commitment never to repeat such harms—a commitment that honours the children who did not survive, the survivors who broke the silence, and the generations yet to come.

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