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TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT HAPPENED?

For centuries, the Indigenous peoples of Canada have suffered at the expense of settler-colonialism. The presence of European colonists has brought about many difficulties and changes to Indigenous life, one of them being Indigenous residential schools. These schools can be understood as government-funded religious schools that sought to integrate Indigenous youth into Euro-Canadian culture (Llewellyn, 2002). These schools were operated through the administration of religious nuns hired to monitor the children. The first residential school was opened in the 1830s, and the last one closed in 1996 (Llewellyn, 2002). The establishment of residential schools can be attributed to Indigenous people being perceived as uncivilized for their way of life, European colonists believed Indigenous youth needed to be integrated into Euro-Canadian culture to solve the “Indian problem” (Llewellyn, 2002).

During the century-long existence of residential schools, Indigenous youth were isolated from their families and native culture. They were forbidden from speaking their native languages, expressing themselves in their native culture, and were often subject to emotional, mental and physical abuse (Llewellyn, 2002). The consequences of these experiences linger into the 21st century due to the historically traumatic experiences of Indigenous youth and families (Llewellyn, 2002). However, despite the longevity of residential schools, many of them are responsible for the post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), and intergenerational trauma faced by Indigenous communities today.



KEY PARTIES - VICTIMS

WHO WERE THEY?

They were **Indigenous children.**

The residential school system harmed many individuals and communities, one of the main victims of these harms were Indigenous youth. Indigenous youth were stripped away from their families, culture and homes and isolated without any means of once again contacting loved ones. This psychological distress put many children into exceptionally anxiety-inducing situations that influenced their day-to-day experiences in the residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). While dealing with these heinous circumstances, many Indigenous children were unable to receive a visitation from family members, as well as going out to visit family was prohibited. Children were forced into exile in these schools and coerced into adhering to traditions and customs that they were not familiar with. If they did not adopt the new customs quickly enough, they were punished.

The manner by which these schools operated was very evidently predicated on notions of aggression, violence and abuse (Murray, 2017). Many victim-survivors have later testified of their experiences in these residential schools whereby they shared known, and personal experiences of sexual and physical assault. Moreover, in many residential schools, those who were in authoritative positions often abused their discretion and used it to harm the children. This harm has even resulted in death in some instances (Llewellyn, 2002)



KEY PARTIES - VICTIMS

WHO WERE THEY?

They were the **Indigenous families.**

Similar to Indigenous children, Indigenous families and communities were also greatly harmed because of residential schools. As previously stated, in many instances Indigenous youth were taken from communities before they could bid their goodbyes with loved ones. In several cases, many children and parents were unable to see each other for a final time to say goodbye, before being vanished from one another for months, if not years sometimes (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), as a result of thousands of Indigenous children that were taken away from their homes, several generations of Indigenous families were unable to share and pass on their familial and ancestral stories and customs to their children. By being unable to share these stories with younger generations demonstrates the potential loneliness experienced by many communities without their younger generations. In addition to this, due to the children not being present to indulge in their cultures and traditions, it also highlights how Indigenous people were unable to ensure their traditions would live on. In other words, this displays how the cultural genocide of the Indigenous peoples of Canada took place.



KEY PARTIES - PERPETRATORS

WHO WERE THEY?

They were the **Canadian federal government.**

One of the main perpetrators responsible for Indigenous residential schools, is the Canadian federal government under the administration of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister. Macdonald was the key figure responsible for the production of the residential school system as he served as the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. His position allowed for him to be responsible for overseeing the policies undergone in integrating Indigenous peoples into Euro-Canadian culture (Satzewich, 1997). Therefore, it was under Macdonald's leadership that the Indigenous residential school system was enacted in hopes of solving the "Indian problem", and steering Indigenous youth away from the "savage" tendencies displayed by their families and communities (Satzewich, 1997)

The Canadian federal government sought to completely remove Indigenous identity and presence on Canadian land. Through the establishment of residential schools, which contained strict educational, social, linguistic and physical rules, Indigenous youth were expected to abandon their roots and adhere to a new system. The objectives highlighted by the Canadian federal government are apparent in Sir John A. Macdonald's phrases such as his hope of "removing the Indian from the child" (Satzewich, 1997).



KEY PARTIES - PERPETRATORS

WHO WERE THEY?

They were the **Catholic Church.**

The second set of perpetrators responsible for the crimes committed in residential schools is the Catholic Church, specifically the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches (Murray, 2017). By employing religious texts and principles, Indigenous children were taught to read, write and speak English, as well as read the Christian Bible. By teaching the Indigenous children these things, the objective was to integrate them into becoming familiar with religious scriptures and messages that varied from the ones they recognized from their traditional cultures. Furthermore, by emphasizing the presence of God, through Christianity, Indigenous children were encouraged to identify with what was believed to be the 'moral' way of life, coinciding with the Christian religion. Therefore, the principle objective of these religious figures was to steer children away from their "uncivilized" (Milloy, 1999) lives from within their communities, and instead into the Euro-Canadian society that contained Christian ideals.

These ideals were forced onto the children by cutting their traditionally long hair, prohibiting them from speaking their native languages, dressing them in Euro-Canadian style clothing, among many other assimilationist strategies (Murray, 2017).

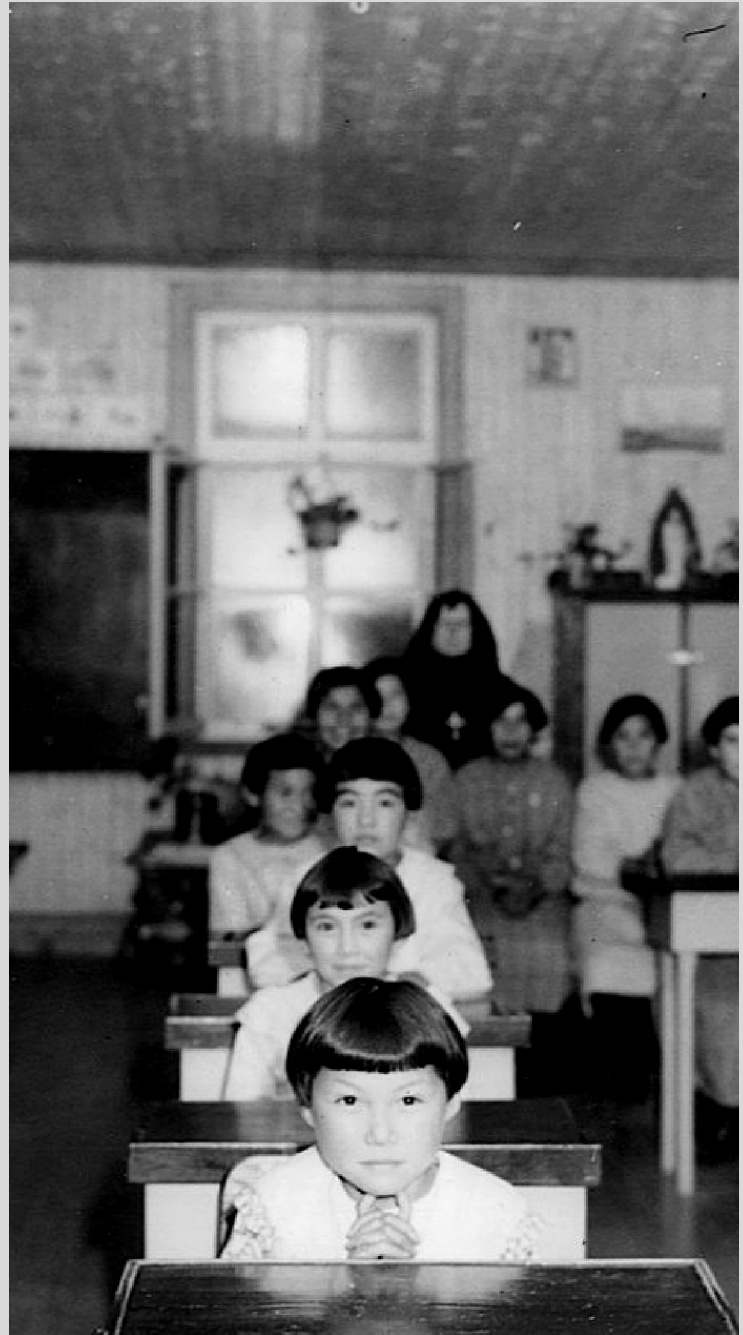


HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

WHAT WERE THEY?

Throughout the century-long presence of residential schools, many Indigenous communities and their children were harmed. Children were forcefully taken from their communities, and the forced removal left many struggling to feel safe in their new homes (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Since the mid-1800s, it is estimated that more than 150,000 Indigenous youth were enrolled in residential schools and sought to be integrated into a moralistic Christian society (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Testimonies received from surviving former students display an overwhelming amount of evidence which highlight widespread neglect, starvation, extensive physical and sexual abuse, and many student deaths related to these crimes. However, similar to the cases with state-inflicted mass atrocities, accurate records which determine rates of abuse and death at residential schools do not exist or are believed to be destroyed by the Canadian federal government and RCMP officers. With the information that does exist and is recorded, it is estimated that sexual abuse rates were as high as 75% in some schools, and rates of physical harm were higher (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).



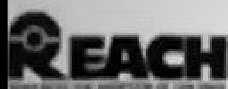
LEGACIES OF HARM

WHAT WERE THE LEGACIES?

By seeking to dismantle Indigenous peoples way of life, the Canadian federal government believed they were showing the Indigenous people the correct way of life (Francis, 1998). This correct way of life was projected onto Indigenous people by transforming their existences and societies into something that mirrored Euro-Canadian life. Settler-colonialism not only harmed Indigenous peoples' lives through means of unexpected communicable diseases that nearly massacred an entire civilization, but it also re-shaped Indigenous peoples' relationships to their land and space. These transformations were achieved not only through residential schools, however, also through the "sixties scoop". The sixties scoop can be understood by the large-scale removal, or "scooping", of Indigenous children from their homes, communities and families of birth through the 1960s. Moreover, Indigenous children were moved to adoption centres whereby non-Indigenous, middle-class families across the United States and Canada would take them in (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). This experience resulted in dozens of Indigenous people who were adopted to feel a sense of cultural identity loss (Milloy, 1996). This feeling stemmed from the physical and emotional separation from their birth families, which continues to affect adult adoptees and Indigenous communities to this day. Therefore, this system, similar to that of residential schools, brought about significant trauma for Indigenous peoples.



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EMERGENCE OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT IN WHICH THE TRUTH COMMISSION AROSE?

The emergence of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada can be attributed to the horrific conditions that occurred throughout Canada's historical residential school system. With respect to the historical, social and political challenges faced by the Indigenous peoples of Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to remedy the on-going destructive legacies that are linked to colonialism. Canada's settler-colonial federal government who initiated assimilationist policies resulted in the harrowing ramifications that linger into the 21st century.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was created with the objective of seeking out the truth from the conditions that took place during Indigenous peoples' contact with European settlers, and the conditions that came following that interaction. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The commission was designed to seek victim truths in their experiences with residential schools, as well as experience with the Canadian federal government. These stories were told in the format of personal testimonies where victim-survivors, as well as family members and friends of victims, were able to share the stories of trauma that occurred throughout history (Truth and Reconciliation of Commission of Canada, 2015). The objectives were to bring about some degree of justice for victims that have suffered at the expense of the Canadian settler-colonial state.



EMERGENCE OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA

WHAT WAS THE MANDATE OF THE TRUTH COMMISSION?

In 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was established, under the terms of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), outlines that the Commission was mandated to: Firstly, reveal to Canadians the complicated truth about the history and the ongoing legacy of the church-run residential school. This was to be demonstrated in a manner that completely documented the individual and collective harms which took place against Indigenous peoples, while also, honouring the resilience and courage of former students, their families, and communities. Secondly, the commission was expected to guide and inspire a process of truth and healing, which would work toward reconciliation within Indigenous families, and between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous communities, churches, governments, and Canadians all-together.

The process was to be established in hopes of renewing relationships on a basis of inclusion, mutual understanding and respect. Ultimately, the Commissions' focus on truth determination was intended to lay the foundation for the important question of reconciliation. It followed the idea that now we are aware of residential schools and their horrific legacy, however, the focus was on where to go next, and how to bring about healing and reconciliation. To the Commission, reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be recognition of the past, and an acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, recognition for the causes, and commitment to change behaviour.



EMERGENCE OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA

WHO IS INVOLVED?

In order to begin the processes of reclaiming healing, and justice, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada began with the appointment of three commissioners: Justice Harry Laforme, an Ontario Court of Appeal judge and member of the Mississaugas of New Credit First Nation. Lawyer Jane Brewin Morley, and Indigenous health expert Claudette Dumont-Smith (Miller, 2012). However, despite the large-scale anticipation, it was not long before challenges were faced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, causing three new commissioners to be appointed on July 1st, 2015. These new commissioners included Justice Murray Sinclair, an Ojibwa judge from the court of the Queen's Bench, Manitoba. A lawyer and Chief Wilton Littlechild from Maskwacis (Hobbema), Alberta, as well as, Marie Wilson, a well-known CBC broadcaster from Yellowknife, NWT (Miller, 2012).

The second group of individuals included Indigenous victims-survivors who shared personal stories, or stories of loved ones. An integral portion of this Truth Commission was hearing the stories of former Indigenous students enrolled in residential schools, as well as their experiences.



EMERGENCE OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA - OUTCOMES

WHAT WAS FOUND?

The final report drafted by the Canadian Truth Commission titled, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, documents the traumatizing experiences of approximately 150,000 Indigenous children enrolled in residential schools. From these documents, we are able to witness factual evidence that highlights the terrible and raw experiences of Indigenous youth who suffered in Indigenous residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Due to the evidence received from personal victim-survivor testimonies, stories and memories, the Truth Commission found that approximately 3,200 residential school students died of malnourishment, tuberculosis and other diseases caused by poor living conditions (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

However, Justice Murray Sinclair argued that this number is likely higher, perhaps 5 to 10 times as much. Though unfortunately, due to poor burial records, and the Canadian federal government getting rid of historical documents, there is no evidence of absolute statistics and numbers (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These numbers are estimated based on the evidence that exists today from victim-survivors and their loved ones. In addition to this, due to the aggressive assimilation policies implemented by the Canadian federal government, which led to the significant loss of opportunity for Indigenous peoples to practice their customs and heritage in a fulfilling manner, the Canadian Truth Commission also labelled the residential school system as a case of “cultural genocide” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Cultural genocide can be understood as the “destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The report concluded: “these measures were part of a coherent policy to eliminate Aboriginal people as distinct peoples and to assimilate them into the Canadian mainstream against their will (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).



EMERGENCE OF TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA - LEGACIES

WHAT WAS FOUND?

In the legacy section of the Truth Commissions' final report, it calls to action reforming the harms and consequences that originated as a result of Indigenous residential schools (IRS). Examples of the proposed actions are identified in the following **five** main sub-categories.

The **first** of these being child welfare. Ultimately, residential schools served more as foster homes, than educational settings where children were cared for and taught. According to a 1953 survey, 4,313 children of the 10,112 enrolled in residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), were described as “orphans” (Milloy, 1996) that came from unstable homes. However, because of this, by 2011, 3.6% of all Indigenous children under the age of 14 were in foster care, compared to the 0.3% non-Indigenous youth (Turner, 2016). The calls to action are made to raise awareness pertaining to the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in foster care systems (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018).

The **second** category concerns education. Due to the limited funds, a shortage of trained teachers, and an emphasis on manual labour, many students in the IRS systems did not progress beyond a rudimentary education (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Therefore, the education-focused calls to action are to address the current school completion rates and the income gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In addition, the calls to action request the elimination of the ongoing discrepancy in funding of Indigenous education. By targeting these education goals, there is hope to reduce the existing, as well as the increasing inequality between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians.

The **third** category concerns language and culture. Children in residential schools were not allowed to speak their native languages or practise their culture. The Truth Commission found that, according to UNESCO, 36% of Canada's Indigenous languages are listed as being critically endangered (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The calls to action address increased funding for educating children in Indigenous languages and also request that post-secondary institutions provide degrees and diplomas in Indigenous languages (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The **fourth** category considers healthcare for Indigenous residential school students, and how it varied considerably between schools throughout the decades. This is because after the 1940s, health facilities and health care workers became more prevalent, which meant some schools had a nurse on staff and an infirmary with doctors who paid visits, while others did not. From received testimonies, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reveals that a large sum of children were subjected to sexual and physical abuse while attending a residential school (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Therefore, the fourth category's call to action regards awareness on the connection between the poor healthcare provided at residential schools, to the current gap in health outcomes for Indigenous peoples in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The **fifth** and final category considers justice. When the Canadian legal system was given the responsibility of investigating abuse claims, there were little to no prosecutions. In many cases, the federal government and the RCMP compromised on the investigations, making it another aspect of Indigenous concerns brushed off by the Canadian federal government (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Therefore, the calls to action in this aspect surround justice which is sought to develop culturally relevant and effective justice systems (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).



HOW HAVE SCHOLARS AND PUBLIC COMMENTATORS ASSESSED THE TRUTH COMMISSION?

Since the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as the final report, scholars, critics and several political figures, have offered their accounts on the topic, as well as the present-day progress. One of these individuals being historian Ian Mosby, examined how in 2016 and 2017 many of the calls to action had been completed at the one-year and two-year anniversary marks of the Truth Commission. In 2016, Mosby concluded that only five calls were complete and three calls were partially complete, leaving 86 calls unmet (Jewell & Mosby, 2020). Similarly, in 2018 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation established Beyond 94, a website to track the status of each call to action. Through this website, the general public could access the progress that had been made by the Canadian government in the tasks it had been suggested to act on from the Truth Commission. However, as of July 29, 2019, Jewell and Mosby (2020) note that the site has been updated to mark 10 calls to action completed, 21 in-progress with projects underway, and 37 in-progress with projects proposed. However, 26 are still "not yet started" (Jewell & Mosby, 2020).

In addition to this, another scholar named Glen Coulthard, a professor and member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nations has criticized the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in another fashion. His critique being the Commission's strong fixation on the residential school system, which positions reconciliation as a matter of having to overcome a very "sad chapter" in Canadian history (Coulthard, 2014). Coulthard believes this emphasis has failed to consider the ongoing negative nature and impact of colonialism. Moreover, according to Coulthard, because the TRC's approach to reconciliation has been so deeply focused on the residential school systems, it clearly demonstrates why former Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized for the horrific residential school systems, and then a year later denied the history of colonialism within Canada.

Furthermore, a third Canadian academic, by the name of Matt James, from the University of Victoria states that more than two years into its five-year mandate, the Canadian Truth Commission's goals of truth and reconciliation appear "distant—hypothetical at best" (James, 2010). Given the delayed action on behalf of the Canadian federal government, academics such as James (2010) are hesitant in feeling hopeful about the effectiveness of the mandate.

In this aspect, we can note that although the mandates, outcomes and suggestions made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission bear some respect, in most aspects, it is the delayed actions and initiative of the Canadian federal government that disappoints.



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