

Notes on A History of the Indian Residential School System in Canada

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Thank-you for this opportunity to speak on the history of residential schools.

There are many good books on this subject, and of course one may also consult the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples *Final Report*.

As you know, Chapter 10, Volume One of that report presents a history in much more detail than I am able provide today.

We begin, correctly I think, with the context.

After all, if we are going to discuss Reconciliation, it is necessary to ask, “What are we reconciling?”

In my view, the residential school system suggests one answer.

For it demonstrates what happens when a relationship based on agreement is distorted into something else.

You see, education was a part of the treaty negotiations that took place during the nineteenth century.

However, the Governments of the day interpreted the negotiated treaties in ways that did not honour the agreements, except perhaps in a very narrow and distorted manner.

That is where things went wrong.

They went wrong because the history of residential schools is really a small part of a history of assimilation and domination of Aboriginal peoples that was evolving over the same period.

As we consider the residential school system, then, keep in mind that education has been only one of many instruments applied by the state to control Aboriginal peoples.

Although the roots of Canada’s Indian Residential school system reach back to the early 1600s, it was only in the late 19th century that the Government undertook a formal partnership with the churches to run industrial, boarding and residential schools for Aboriginal people.

On March 14, 1879, Nicholas Flood Davin submitted a “Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds” to the Minister of the Interior, also Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald.

In this 16-page document, Davin proposed the following:

1. “the Indians should, as far as practicable, be consolidated on few reservations, and provided with “permanent individual homes” ;
2. that the tribal relation should be abolished ;

3. that lands should be allotted in severalty and not in common ;
4. that the Indian should speedily become a citizen [...] enjoy the protection of the law, and be made amenable thereto ;
5. that, finally, it is the duty of the Government to afford the Indians all reasonable aid in their preparation for citizenship by educating them in the industry and in the arts of civilization.”

The Indian Residential School system was designed to teach Aboriginal children the English language, as well as the religion, values, and work skills of Canadian society.

The overall goal, again set by the Canadian Government, was to – in the words of Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott – “get rid of the Indian problem.”

The “Indian problem” consists in the fact that Aboriginal people, given the choice, prefer to be Aboriginal people, and not something else.

Scott summed up over a century of past and future policy when he said, in 1920, “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian Question and no Indian Department.”

In 1892, the Government officially formalized its funding of the schools through an Order-in-Council, settling upon a per-capita allocation.

Eventually, 130 industrial, boarding and residential schools would operate between 1831 and 1998.

The earliest was the Mohawk Indian Residential School, opened in 1831 at Brantford, Ontario.

The schools existed in all territories, and in all but three provinces – New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland.

In the north, the residential school system also took the form of hostels. Not only children, but entire Inuit communities were relocated by government dictate.

In 1920 Duncan Campbell Scott, the bureaucrat in charge of Canada’s Indian Policy, revised the Indian Act to make attendance at residential school compulsory for all children up to age 15.

At its peak in the early 1930s, the Indian Residential School System was a state-sponsored, church-run network of 80 schools with an enrolment of over 17,000.

Of these 80 schools, over one-half – 44 – were under various Catholic orders, 21 under the Church of England (later the Anglican Church), 13 under the United Church, and 2 under the Presbyterians.

These proportions would remain constant throughout the residential school system's history.

Now, there are others who will speak today about the experience of the schools as well as their intergenerational legacy.

From a historical point of view, the residential school system came to represent both in theory and practice a deliberate systemic effort to sever generations of Aboriginal children, one by one, from family, community, language, culture, and, broadly speaking, Aboriginal ways of living in the world.

The missionary Hugh McKay, writing in 1903, characterized the system itself as an effort “to educate and colonize a people against their will.”

Once applied to Aboriginal people collectively, this outcome would constitute, in Duncan Campbell Scott's phrasing, the “final solution of the Indian Problem.”

I think it is the radical and systemic nature of the schools that is most remarkable. For really we are considering a sweeping social experiment imposed upon people who had asked merely that their children be taught to read and to use the latest techniques in farming – that sort of thing.

The incomplete nature of school records makes it impossible to say precisely how many children attended residential school throughout the entire span of the system.

However, it is clear that the system's intergenerational effects have been felt beyond the attendance role.

As early as 1907, the residential schools were noted by inspectors as places of disease, hunger, overcrowding, and disrepair.

Very gradually, over several decades, this system was discarded in favour of a policy of integration. Aboriginal students began in the 1940s to attend mainstream schools.

The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development assumed full management of the residential school system on April 1, 1969.

Throughout the 1970s, at the behest of the National Indian Brotherhood, Government undertook a process which saw the eventual transfer of education management to Aboriginal people.

In 1970, Blue Quills Residential School became the first residential school managed by Aboriginal people.

The last band-run residential school closed in 1998.

In 1998, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs estimated that, based upon the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, between 105,000 and 107,000 individuals who attended an Indian residential school were living in 1991.

Many former students are today pursuing healing and reparation for the humiliations they suffered in residential school.

In the early 1990s, survivors came forward with disclosures which include:

- sexual abuse;
- beatings;
- needles pushed through tongues as punishment for speaking Aboriginal languages;
- forced wearing of soiled underwear on the head or wet bedsheets on the body;
- faces rubbed in human excrement;
- forced eating of rotten and/or maggot infested food;
- hair ripped from heads;
- use of students in eugenics and medical experiments;
- bondage and confinement in closets without food or water;
- application of electric shocks with an electric chair;
- children forced to sleep outside – or to walk barefoot – in winter;
- forced labour;
- and much, much more.

This is not to say that past experiences were all negative, or that the staff of these schools – some of whom were former students themselves, were all bad. Such is not the case.

Many good and dedicated people worked in the system.

Indeed, their willingness to work long hours in an atmosphere of stress and for meager wages was exploited by an administration determined to minimize costs.

As RCAP noted, the staff not only taught; they also supervised the children's work, play and personal care.

Their hours were long, the remuneration below that of other educational institutions, and the working conditions irksome.

The residential school system is not alone responsible for the current conditions of Aboriginal communities, but it did play a role.

We look back today at a system which tried to erase Aboriginal cultures from history.

And we look forward to a time when there is again a relationship of mutual respect based upon the historic treaties between Aboriginal peoples and the Government of Canada.

With the lessons of history in their service, Aboriginal people have begun to heal the wounds of the past.

On January 7, 1998, the Federal Government of Canada issued a “Statement of Reconciliation” and unveiled a new initiative called *Gathering Strength — Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan*.

A strategy to begin the process of reconciliation, *Gathering Strength* featured the announcement of a \$350-million healing fund.

On March 31, 1998, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, of which I am President, was created.

It was given ten years to disburse this \$350-million fund (plus interest generated), beginning March 31, 1999 and ending March 31, 2009.

Since June 1999, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation has been providing funding support to community-based initiatives which address the intergenerational legacy of physical and sexual abuse in Canada’s Indian Residential School system.

To sustain the healing work once the Aboriginal Healing Foundation is gone, the Legacy of Hope Foundation was in 2001 by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation’s Board of Directors.

The Legacy of Hope Foundation works in conjunction with, and will build on the successes of, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, eventually taking over its work completely.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation and Legacy of Hope Foundation see their role as facilitators in the healing process by helping Aboriginal people help themselves, by providing resources for healing initiatives, by promoting awareness of healing issues and needs, and by nurturing a supportive public environment.

They also work to engage Canadians in this healing process, encouraging them to walk with Aboriginal people on the path of reconciliation.