

Canada's media attacks Truth and Reconciliation report

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In the face of the evidence collected by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the mainstream, corporate-controlled media has had to acknowledge that the Canadian state's Indian Residential School program subjected generations of Indian, Inuit and Metis children to horrific, systematic abuse.

But the Commission's finding that the residential schools were a key element in a more than century-long government Aboriginal policy that aimed at "cultural genocide"—at destroying aboriginal society and the structures that supported it so as to "divest" Canada of its "legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources"—has provoked a storm of protest.

An objective examination of the historical record shows that what was perpetrated by the Canadian state against the Aboriginal peoples was genocide plain and simple, not just "cultural genocide." Moreover, this crime was not accidental or incidental to the consolidation of the Canadian nation state and Canadian "democracy". On the contrary it arose from the very nature of Canadian capitalism, from the clash between capitalist private property and the communal social relations of indigenous society. (See Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Report and the crimes against the native people and Canada's aboriginal Truth and Reconciliation Report—the class issues.)

Yet even the qualified claim of "cultural genocide" that the government-appointed TRC put forth with the aim of "reconciling" the indigenous population to Canadian capitalism has produced a backlash from columnists in the country's newspapers. Taking their cue from Prime Minister Stephen Harper's refusal to endorse the TRC's conclusion, right-wing and liberal commentators alike have accused the TRC of rhetorical overkill and, horror of horrors, impugning Canada's "good name."

Leading the charge was a particularly odious op-ed piece in the neo-conservative *National Post* written by Rodney E. Clifton, professor emeritus of education at the University of Manitoba and retired anthropology professor Hymie Rubenstein from the same institution. In an article headlined "Debunking the half-truths and exaggerations in the TRC Report," the authors argue that the Indian Residential Schools program was simply aimed at teaching "mainstream norms and

practices" by providing a formal education in a "complex multi-ethnic society." What the TRC characterizes as "cultural genocide" was in fact only the standard "acculturation" process "that has occurred around the world since the origins of human beings."

Certainly, the authors concede, there was strict discipline, but strapping and caning (and even the "vile act of child abuse") were the "order-of-the day" in parochial schools right up to the 1960s. Indeed, write Clifton and Rubenstein, similar traumas and indignities "have been reported by the children of wealthy parents forced to attend boarding schools throughout the former British Empire."

One needs to rub one's eyes, not once but twice, after reading such a statement. The Canadian state's Residential School policy forced aboriginal parents, sometimes at the point of an RCMP gun, to surrender their children. They would then be taken to church-run schools hundreds and even thousands of miles away from their homes.

There they were subjected to humiliating and de-humanizing treatment so as to eradicate the influence of native culture and inculcate obedience. Children were routinely beaten for speaking their native language and berated for being "stupid Indians."

The system was designed by the government to be self-sustaining, i.e., to cost it no money. While they were called schools, the church-run institutions that were attended by 150,000 native children functioned far more like prisons. Much of the "school day" was given over to backbreaking chores, including working in the fields. Yet food and schoolbooks were scarce and rationed. In addition to an official regime of harsh corporal punishment, the native children were the victims of wholesale sexual abuse.

As the WSWs reported in summarizing the findings of the TRC, between "5,000 and 7,000 children died whilst in the custody of these residential schools from disease, malnutrition, fires, suicide and physical abuse. Many were buried even without a name recorded. Parents were not notified as a matter of course. Healthy children were consciously placed in dormitories with children suffering from tuberculosis. Sick and dying children were forced to attend class and sit up in church. Malnutrition was rampant. Testimony from school survivors

recounted how hungry children would raid the slop-buckets of livestock for additional sustenance.”

Government legislation in Alberta (1928) and British Columbia (1933) authorized the forcible sterilization of residential school children. In the 1940s and 1950s aboriginal children in some residential schools were deliberately kept malnourished at the government’s order so that researchers could “scientifically” measure the impact of a starvation diet.

Clifton and Rubenstein take particular umbrage with the TRC’s statement that the aboriginal population was treated as “sub-human.” There are numerous survivor accounts and historical documents that back the TRC’s assertion. The 1876 Indian Act—the framework for ongoing aboriginal policy in Canada which legalized the First Nations as an inferior group—stated the “aborigines must be kept in a state of tutelage and treated as wards or children of the state”. Well into the 20th century, speeches from the floors of parliament and the provincial legislatures referred to natives as an “inferior race.”

The residential school system was only a part of a broad-based policy to repress and dispossess the aboriginal peoples. An overt policy of starvation was used to drive First Nations from their ancestral lands on the Prairies. Treaty rights were unilaterally abrogated by the Canadian government. “Pass Laws” were enacted that made it illegal for First Nations people to leave the reserve without the approval of the government’s Indian agent. Authorities from South Africa tasked with framing their own system of apartheid were so impressed by Canadian policy towards the aboriginal peoples that they based elements of their own racist system on it. Only in 1960 were “status Indians” granted the right to vote and other basic citizenship rights.

But for our Manitoba college professors, this particular survivor testimony from Elder Irene Favel might be more directly edifying on the question of sub-human treatment in the residential schools:

“I went to residential school in Muscowequan from 1944 to 1949, and I had a rough life. I was mistreated in every way. There was a young girl, and she was pregnant from a priest there. And what they did, she had her baby, and they took the baby, and wrapped it up in a nice pink outfit, and they took it downstairs where I was cooking dinner with the nun. And they took the baby into the furnace room, and they threw that little baby in there and burned it alive. All you could hear was this little cry, like ‘Uuh!’ and that was it. You could smell that flesh cooking.”

Other prominent columnists in Canadian newspapers have also decried, with more circumspection than the *National Post*, the conclusion of the TRC’s report. Jeffrey Simpson of the *Globe and Mail* just wishes Canadians would simply move on from a “relentless fixation on the past”. “Cultural genocide ... was practiced for a long time throughout much of the world, often more violently than in Canada, to the point where the word has lost much of its meaning except as a rhetorical

debating point.” Richard Gwyn of the *Toronto Star* wonders, “Did Canada really commit cultural genocide?” For Gwyn the history detailed by the TRC report is incongruent with Canadians’ self-image and the world’s view of Canada as a land of democracy, tolerance and fair play. After all, he opines, in comparison to Australia and the United States, in the 19th century, “our native policies were widely praised.”

But this is not all “just history.”

The legacy from the genocidal policies of the Canadian state reverberates through native communities up to the present time. Life spans for native people fall far below the national average. More than half of all native children live in poverty. HIV and AIDS rates are higher on some western reserves than in the most vulnerable of African countries. In the far north, diseases such as tuberculosis are rampant in some communities. Overcrowding in dilapidated homes is endemic. Almost half of all residences on native reserves require urgent, major repairs.

Education opportunities are deplorable—fewer than 50 percent of students on reserves graduate from high school. The federally funded schools on native reserves receive on average 30 percent less funding than other Canadian schools. Numerous native communities don’t have access to potable water, with boil water advisories in effect, on average, at over a hundred of the 631 native reserves at any given time.

Incarceration rates for aboriginals are nine times the national average. A native youth is more likely to go to prison than get a high school diploma. Although they make up just 4 percent of Canada’s population, 25 percent of those held in federal prisons are aboriginal.

Poverty conditions are not restricted to those living on reserves. Natives in urban centres, which comprise about half of the rapidly growing 1.2 million native population, have the country’s highest unemployment rates, second only to the rates for native reserves. Nationwide, about 50 percent of First Nations people and Inuit are unemployed.



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