

Canada's Forced Schooling of Aboriginal Children Was 'Cultural Genocide,' Report Finds

Photo



Aboriginal Canadians were forced to attend boarding schools like this one in the Northwest Territories, shown around 1936. Credit Library and Archive of Canada

OTTAWA — **Canada's** former policy of forcibly removing aboriginal children from their families for schooling “can best be described as ‘cultural genocide.’”

That is the conclusion reached by the country's **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** after six years of intensive research, including 6,750 interviews. The commission published a **summary version** on Tuesday of what will ultimately be a multivolume report, documenting widespread physical, cultural and sexual abuse at government-sponsored residential schools that Indian, Inuit and other indigenous children were forced to attend.

The schools, financed by the government but run largely by churches, were in operation for more than a century, from 1883 until the last one closed in 1998.

The commission documented that at least 3,201 students died while attending the schools, many because of mistreatment or neglect, in the first comprehensive tally of such deaths.

The report linked the abuses at the schools, which came to broad public attention over the last four decades, to social, health, economic and emotional problems affecting many indigenous Canadians today. It concluded that although some teachers and administrators at the schools were well intentioned, the overriding motive for the program was economic, not educational.

“The Canadian government pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to aboriginal people and gain control over their lands and resources,” the report said. “If every aboriginal person had been ‘absorbed into the body politic,’ there would be no reserves, no treaties and no aboriginal rights.”

The Canadian government [apologized to former students](#) in a landmark 2008 court settlement and established the commission to document what had happened and to reconcile [Canada's](#) native and nonnative peoples.

The commission, led by Justice Murray Sinclair, an Ojibwa who was the first aboriginal judge in the province of Manitoba, said Tuesday that it would take considerable effort and significant social, legal and political changes to achieve that mandate.

“A just reconciliation requires more than simply talking about the need to heal the deep wounds of history,” the report said. “Words of apology alone are insufficient; concrete actions on both symbolic and material fronts are required.”

In contrast, the commission found that “all too often, policies and programs are still based on faded notions of assimilation.”

In its report, the commission offered 94 recommendations, including an overhaul of the child welfare system for aboriginal children, which continues to produce cases of abuse and neglect, and a change in Canada's oath of citizenship to include a promise to “faithfully observe the laws of Canada, including treaties with indigenous peoples.”

A principal recommendation is a step that has long been a sore point between aboriginal groups and the government. The report repeatedly calls on the government to fully adopt the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) as the basis of a new relationship.

Canada, along with the United States, Australia and New Zealand, has been reluctant to take that step, saying instead that the country endorses the declaration only as a “non-legally-binding aspirational document.”

The major sticking point is the declaration's requirement that issues involving the lands, territories and resources of aboriginal people be subject to their “prior and informed consent.” The government is

concerned that the requirement would essentially give aboriginal groups a sweeping veto over Canadian law.

The commission said, however, that the declaration affirmed rights already held by native groups under treaties with the government and was consistent with recent decisions by the Supreme Court of Canada related to aboriginal rights.

Aboriginal groups and the government see reconciliation very differently, the report said: The government appears to believe that it involves aboriginal people's accepting "the reality and validity" of the government's power "in order to allow the government to get on with business."

"Aboriginal people, on the other hand, see reconciliation as an opportunity to affirm their own sovereignty and return to the 'partnership' ambitions they held," the report said.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government has had a strained relationship with indigenous people, even though it was Mr. Harper who made the apology in 2008. When a reporter at a news conference on Tuesday asked whether the Conservatives were at all likely to adopt the commission's recommendations, Justice Sinclair said, "We are writing for the future, not just for this government," a remark that met with prolonged applause and cheers from the largely aboriginal audience.

Bernard Valcourt, the aboriginal affairs minister, said Tuesday: "This dark chapter in Canada's history has left a mark on our country. I'm confident that we can build on the important work that's been done and continue to heal as a nation."

Leaders of the Protestant churches that ran many of the schools apologized long ago. But the report and Justice Sinclair urged Pope Francis to formally take that step for the Roman Catholic Church, which ran some of the schools, saying that apologies from local Catholic officials were not enough.

The research and interviews conducted by the commission detailed a boarding school system that was woefully underfunded, inadequately staffed and largely ineffective at its stated aim of providing useful education.

Some former students interviewed by the commission cited school sports and music and arts programs as bright spots in their lives. But those programs were not generally part of the system, and most former students, even those who were not physically or sexually harmed or neglected, said their daily lives had been heavily regimented and lacked privacy and dignity. At many of the schools, students were addressed and referred to by number as if they were prisoners.

"In the school, I didn't have a name," Lydia Ross, a former student, told the commission. "I had No. 51,

No. 44, No. 32, No. 16, No. 11 and then finally No. 1, when I was just coming to high school.”

The commission found that the government had in effect blocked criminal investigations of some sexual predators employed at the schools. The report documented widespread bullying and beating involving both staff members and older students.

Many staff members were paid poorly, and the government justified the policy by arguing that “because many employees belonged to missionary organizations, pay was a ‘minor consideration,’ ” the commission found. Nuns at one school in the 1960s were paid just \$50 a month, the report said, a situation that made its principal “feel like a heel.”

The report documented instances in which students tried to burn down their schools or died after running away from schools in remote locations. Justice Sinclair said at the news conference that although the commission was able to document 3,201 student deaths, research suggested that 6,000 or more may have died.

A disproportionate number of aboriginal people are imprisoned in Canada, and aboriginal children account for a much larger part of the child welfare system’s caseload than their share of the population. The commission said both of those trends were consequences of the regimented residential school system.

People raised in the schools, the report said, “sometimes found it difficult to become loving parents.” Those who were abused often went on to abuse other people as adults, or fell victim to substance abuse.

“Students who were treated and punished like prisoners in the schools often graduated to real prisons,” the commission wrote. “For many, the path from residential school to prison was a short one.”