

## 10.

## Global comparison

**Note:** This overview provides a background to the policies and practices that authorised the removal of Indigenous children from their families in Canada. It is not intended to be used as a comprehensive historical document.

### Early contact

Soon after Christopher Columbus landed in the 'Americas' in 1492, British and French monarchs encouraged traders and explorers to journey across the Atlantic Ocean to North America. John Cabot (English) and Jacques Cartier (French) are just two explorers who landed in North America.

During this early period, there was little contact between First Nations (Indigenous Canadian) people and Europeans. Most contact was between First Nations people and traders. Trading required co-operation and relationships were based on mutual recognition of this need. Many traders relied on the knowledge and guidance of the First Nations in order to survive and succeed in the 'New World'.

The main source of conflict came with the missionaries, who tried to convert many First Nations communities to Christianity. The Europeans also brought diseases with them that First Nations people had not encountered before, and these devastated their communities.

### Alliances and conflict

By the 1600s, trade across the Atlantic had increased dramatically, with trading posts and military outposts to protect trade spread across the east coast of North America.

The Europeans, particularly the French, soon established settlements on the coast and began moving inland. The further inland they progressed, the greater the supply of raw materials for trading. However, this also meant increased contact with First Nations communities.

Gradually, the Europeans increased their military presence to protect trade – building military outposts along mainland trade routes. This increased military presence brought serious conflict with the First Nations, such as the French campaign against the Iroquois in 1665.

More devastating though, was the conflict between Britain and France, who brought their religious and political wars in Europe to North America. They were also competing for supremacy in trade in the 'New World'.

During this conflict, both British and French made military alliances with First Nations peoples. While these alliances recognised the sovereignty of First Nation peoples, the wars caused division and conflict between them. For example, the British allied with the Mohegans (or Mohegians) to fight against the Pequot people, resulting in a drastic population decline in both nations.

In 1763, there was a dramatic turn when France agreed to give its land in North America to the British through the Treaty of Paris. First Nations people were excluded from this treaty, even though the land was originally theirs.

With the war against France over, Britain could turn its attention to problems with settlers in its southern colonies (United States of America). In recognition of the support from First Nations people, and to discourage them from making alliances with American settlers, the British made the Royal Proclamation of 1763.

The Proclamation recognised:

- the sovereignty and self-government of First Nations people
- First Nations ownership of their land, unless it had been given away.

This meant that First Nations people continued to have control over their land and could only lose it by signing a treaty with the Colonial Government.

## Treaties and the path to assimilation

During the American War of Independence, many settlers from the south migrated north to escape conflict. These settlers, and new migrants from Great Britain, increased the demand for land. First Nations lands were now a major target for settlement.

From the mid-1800s, treaties were made with First Nations communities whereby those communities would hand over their land in exchange for reserves. First Nations communities saw this as an opportunity for protection, peace, guaranteed livelihood and economy. However, their understanding of what these treaties involved often differed from British understandings. They thought, in accordance with their own cultural practices, the treaties set up a system where land and resources were shared. In other words, they believed the treaties were no different to the agreements they would make between themselves.

The British had a very different idea of property (based on private property to the exclusion of others), and it was this idea of property that lay behind the treaties. As a result, First Nations people were removed from their land and resettled on reserves. These reserves would later allow the government and missions to control their lives.

When Canada confederated in 1867, its first Prime Minister declared that he would 'do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion'. To this end, the government passed the *Indian Acts* of 1876 and 1880.

The government used the reserves to control every aspect of the lives of First Nations people. For example, it could control elections, decide how resources on the reserves were to be used, control land ownership and determine the education of children.

## Education of Native Canadian children

Since colonisation, missionaries had established schools for First Nations children. By the 1800s schools set up by the government were run by the churches. There were two main types:

- boarding schools: located on or near the reserves
- industrial schools: located in the cities, and responsible for training First Nations children for manual labour.

Schools were central to the government's assimilation policy, a policy aimed at 'civilising' First Nations people and bringing them into colonial society. It was believed that education was the key – First Nations people would be instructed in 'civilised' ways from their early childhood. The only way to do this, the authorities argued, was to remove young children from their communities and raise them in a European setting.

Government and school operators believed that the further students were from their families and communities, the greater chance there was of them getting a successful education and responding to 'civilising' influences. So, First Nations children were taken to schools distant from their families and communities.

Students were taught reading, writing, maths and labouring skills in class. They were taught mainly in English (French in some cases), but there was no instruction in their traditional languages. In fact, at many schools students were severely punished if they spoke their native tongue.

As boarders, they were trained in all aspects of living, from early morning to late at night. Once they finished school, they were generally forced into domestic service for white families or manual labour in the cities. They were not encouraged to return to their communities.

The conditions in these schools were far from 'civilised'. Epidemics of tuberculosis and influenza, made worse by unhealthy and unsanitary conditions, spread through the schools. Many children died or suffered from severe illness. For example, at Duck Lake School nearly 50 percent of the students died from disease and malnutrition. Discipline was harsh and punishments were severe.

By 1908, after a government inquiry, it was clear the boarding and industrial schools had failed.

## The Residential Schools

In 1923, the government introduced the Residential Schools System and did away with the old industrial schools. The boarding schools were changed in name to 'residential schools' – new ones were also opened across the country. The government was attempting to deal with the problems centuries of forced education had created. About 105,000 First Nations children attended some 80 residential schools across Canada before the last ones closed in the 1980s.

While the residential schools were less harsh and better run, the problems of health and conditions continued. However, there was success in some schools, particularly in academic achievement. Many students performed well in their studies, especially in the arts. Even so, the removal of First Nations children from families and their cultures continued as it had under the old school system.

In 1948, the Canadian Government held yet another inquiry, again supporting the assimilation policy. However, the big difference was the gradual closure of Residential Schools and a move to end segregation. This meant that First Nations students attended the same day schools as non-First Nations students. These changes were, to some extent, brought on by calls from First Nation communities themselves.

Residential Schools continued to operate for First Nations children subjected to severe 'neglect or abuse'. What 'neglect' or 'abuse' meant, however, would still depend on the opinion of government and mission leaders.

In 1969, the Canadian Government released a policy promoting the assimilation of First Nations people into non-Indigenous culture and ways of life. The response of First Nations peoples was strong, defiant and swift (refer to the National Indian Brotherhood's *Indian Control of Indian Education* campaign). The government later withdrew the policy. While First Nations communities were then given some administrative control over the education of their children, they had little input or control over the practical aspects of this education.

The Canadian Government has adopted a three-pronged approach to addressing the issues faced by people sent to residential schools. The first stage was in 1988 with the creation of an independent Aboriginal organisation known as the Aboriginal Healing foundation to promote community healing projects for residential school survivors. The Foundation was required to fully allocate \$350 million to healing projects for residential school victims. This funding had to be allocated over a five year period and expanded over a 10-year period.

The Healing Foundation has mapped the histories of each of the residential schools, promoted reunions and assisted communities to develop their capacity to run their own programs which address the needs of those who were sent to residential schools. A major focus of this work has been dealing with the consequences of sexual abuse and violence.

- For information about the work of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation visit: <http://www.ahf.ca/>

The second stage of the Canadian Government's response to the residential schools has been the creation of a national language maintenance initiative of \$170 million over the next decade.

The third stage is a claims settlement process – known as the Resolution Framework. The Framework allows those who were mistreated through the residential school system to make an application and participate in a mediation process to be conducted by a former judge of Canada's highest court and ultimately be awarded monetary compensation on a sliding scale according to the harm inflicted. In 2005, the Canadian Government set aside \$1.9 billion for this process, as an alternative to litigation.

In May 2006, this compensation package became a settlement agreement, setting aside money for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, for commemoration, for a Truth and Reconciliation program, as well as for individual claims for compensation. Compensation claims will vary depending on the number of years that students attended residential schools, with \$10 000 payable for the first year and \$3000 for every additional year of attendance.

The compensation package was approved by Canadian courts at the end of 2006. In 2008 the Canadian Government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## Links

- Canadian Human Rights Commission: <http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/>
- Kids' Stop — Indian and Northern Affairs Canada: <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ks/index-eng.asp>
- History of the First Nations: <http://www.tolatsga.org/Compacts.html>
- Details of the Residential Schools Settlement:  
<http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/English.html>