

Centuries of failed policy does not equal evil intent

by Conrad Black



Flags mark where ground-penetrating radar recorded hits of what are believed to be 751 unmarked graves in this cemetery near the grounds of the former Marieval Indian Residential School on the Cowessess First Nation, Sask. PHOTO BY THE CANADIAN PRESS

Almost all Canadians who have given it any thought have serious regrets that the country's policy towards native people over the whole history of Canada since the arrival of the Europeans as settlers more than 400 years ago has failed. The reason for this is not "systemic racism." Canada was underpopulated and if New France had not passed into the hands of the British just before the American colonies seceded from the British Empire, it would have been assimilated into the United States. If the British governor, Sir Guy Carleton, had

not succeeded, after four years of lobbying, in gaining adoption of the Québec Act by the British Parliament in 1774, the French Canadians would have accepted the invitation of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin (who was sent packing from Montreal), to join the Americans. In either scenario, the Indigenous Peoples of Canada would have had a much more difficult time with the American government than they have had with Canada. Many natives on American soil sought refuge in Canada including the great Chief Sitting Bull, who defeated the Seventh Cavalry and killed General George Armstrong Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876 (274 American dead).

The legitimate grievance of the natives is not that Europeans came here. Their grievance was that the expansion across North America of the settlers and the conversion of arable land to agriculture shrunk the ability of the Aboriginal people to feed themselves in traditional ways, and the natives were extremely susceptible to some illnesses brought from Europe, including smallpox and tuberculosis. A few utterances of colonial and Canadian officials can be removed from context and magnified to indicate fundamental hostility to the natives, but the principal attitude of successive authorities in Canada to Indigenous people was patronizing, feckless, ill-considered, and generally ineffectual benignity. We have to make up for our mistakes, our condescension, and at times our nastiness, but not for evil intent and particularly not genocidal ambitions of any kind. The reparations that have already been paid are more than adequate; what is needed now is a new policy worked out with responsible Indigenous leaders, of whom there are many. It is not beyond the wit of all of us to make a clean break from the past and produce a sharp improvement in the condition and of our long suffering Indigenous fellow citizens. Everyone can agree it is scandalous that the drinking water of many of the native people is unsanitary and the conditions in which many of them live are intolerable.

In the sudden national prostration of guilt and shame over centuries of Indigenous policy, Canada has allowed the charlatans of the victimhood industry to defame French and English Canadians with the blood libel of racism, and their principal victim has been the distinguished chief founder of this country, Sir John A. Macdonald. Macdonald lamented in Parliament that Canada "had defrauded the Indians time and again under the Liberals, giving them inferior grain and oxen." There was nothing he could do about tuberculosis for which an adequate treatment was only successfully tested in 1949. It was also impossible for him to deal with the famine of the mid-1880s as rations would have had to be taken to the farthest reaches of the country where there were no roads. Macdonald said "We cannot allow the natives to starve and we cannot make them white men." The TRCR claims that Macdonald was "present at birth" of a policy of genocide, and that he went to "war" against the Indigenous people. These are malicious falsehoods. It is claimed that a policy of starvation between 1879 and 1883 constituted genocide. The Canadian government did what it could and the total number of deaths from famine as can best be calculated was 45; this does not meet any reasonable standard of genocide.

It is generally agreed that approximately 150,000 Indigenous children in the period of about a century after 1860 attended the infamous residential schools. But even the TRCR acknowledges that the schools began before Confederation so the attempt to blame them on Macdonald was simply a sadistic method of singling out for defamation the most admired figure in the history of Canadians. As for the dubious offence of "cultural genocide," insofar as it occurred, the culprits are the modern economy and technical advances in communication. Native children were strongly encouraged to speak English or French but no effort was made to deprive them of their native languages or prevent them from being spoken. Macdonald told the House of Commons in 1884 that the official hope was "the education in the ordinary branches of learning and the

instruction in the industrial pursuits as well as the moral and social elevation of the Indian children," an unexceptionable mission. Macdonald demanded that girls be permitted to attend and opposed the imposition of mandatory attendance.

Macdonald championed the right to vote of the natives. Shortly after the so-called Frog Lake Massacre of 1885, Liberal MP David Mills demanded to know if Macdonald would permit Aboriginal people to "go from a scalping party to the polls." Macdonald said "Aboriginal Indians, formerly lords of the soil, formerly owning the whole of this country... are, in their own land, prevented from either sitting in this House, or voting for men to come here and represent their interests ...(They) are disenfranchised, and justly complain that they have no representation ... They have the same rights as the white man." The TRCR's assault upon John A. Macdonald is an outrage and the craven submission to it of many people and institutions throughout the country is even more contemptible.

Two final points: hysteria has been propagated about the discovery of unmarked graves at the Marieval cemetery in Saskatchewan, when it may include adults and people unconnected to the residential school. The Archdiocese told the Post that it has been made aware that there were grave markers at the cemetery that were removed in the 1960s. The widespread assumption that the graves were deliberately concealed are unfounded, and dramatic conclusions about the identity of the dead and manner of their deaths are, to say the least, premature.

Finally, Martin Lee, in a letter published in the National Post on July 5, disagreed with my statement that Quebec's Bill 96 comes closer to cultural genocide than the residential schools did. I believe that banning the country's majority official language in federal government offices and federally chartered corporate workplaces in Québec and restricting English language primary and secondary education to ever

smaller numbers of people is a heavier blow aimed at the English language in Québec than encouraging one third of native children over a century for a few years each to learn English or French with no effort to prevent retention of their native tongue. Readers who are interested may judge the issue for themselves.

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