

Foreword

How could any government think that putting sick Indigenous children on a medevac flight without a parent or caregiver's "hand to hold" was a good idea, let alone an idea worth defending?

Native American legal scholar Robert Williams (2012) links contemporary colonialism to the dehumanization of Indigenous Peoples as "savages" and the exaltation of settlers and their governments as "civilized." Williams argues that dehumanization clears the way for the unlawful taking of Indigenous lands, resources, cultures, and rights in the name of "progress" of western civilization and its attendant institutions and structures. In a landmark book, Mi'kmaw historian Daniel Paul (2006) tests the validity of the "civilized" label by analyzing the actions of Canadian governments and preceding colonial powers in relation to First Nations people, and concludes that "we were not the savages."

Paul's conclusion is supported by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) 2015 finding that Canada's residential schools amounted to "cultural genocide." The TRC had some powerful allies in making this proclamation, including then Supreme Court chief justice Beverley McLachlin, who delivered a speech in May 2015 affirming that Canada had attempted cultural genocide through the assimilative and often abusive residential school system, which removed Indigenous children from their families to be "properly cared for." The schools operated for more than a century, with the last one closing in Saskatchewan in 1996 (McLachlin 2015). While there were some detractors, most Canadians accepted that residential schools amounted to cultural genocide.

Yet, when the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG 2019a, 2019b) reaffirmed this finding four years later, many Canadians were not ready to take the next step. In June 2019, the

National Inquiry released a final report that said Canada's long history of colonial acts, including the docile response of Canadian governments and institutions to the dramatic rates of violence against and disappearance of Indigenous girls and women, was genocide – full stop.

The mainstream media pundits were largely aghast, suggesting that it was a serious over-reach to say that Canada's colonialism met the definition of genocide. The naysayers failed to present cogent arguments to counter the MMIWG report's detailed evidentiary support for the finding – instead, many said that the declaration of genocide rests on the “intent” of the wrongdoers and that Canada *did not mean* to kill and mistreat Indigenous Peoples. Interesting, but wrong. As renowned Jewish Holocaust historian and survivor Raul Hilberg (2003) notes, there was no “smoking gun” document linking Hitler to an explicit direction or intent to murder the Jews and others in the death camps, and yet reasonable people agree that Hitler was clearly responsible for genocide.

Another narrative is that genocide is obvious and will be called out as it is happening, but this too has not historically been the case. For instance, many countries chose to recast the brutal and systemic genocide in Rwanda in 1994 as merely an “act of genocide” to foreclose any obligations they may have to intervene based on international law. I believe the strength of the pushback on the MMIWG finding of genocide is sourced in Canada's colonial anointment of itself as “civilized” and Indigenous Peoples as “savage.” The report confronts these myths by suggesting that Canadian governments and institutions representing the “civilized” *were, and are*, committing acts of “savagery.” This is not to suggest that individual Canadians are perpetuating acts of savagery, but rather to say the construction of Canadian society enables its governments and institutions to commit acts of “savagery.”

For example, in July 2019, citizens of Attawapiskat First Nation were told to open their windows if they turned on the taps in their homes because the water vapour was toxic to breathe and an independent report found that 40 per cent of First Nations deaths in northern Ontario were preventable if equitable and effective health care was available (Mamow Ahyamowen Partnership 2019). The media covered the stories, but both were eclipsed by “more important” stories like the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission. While there was some public outrage at the gross inequity in public services experienced by contemporary First Nations people, it was not

enough to press politicians into meaningful action. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who came into his first term in office on a reconciliation platform, told supporters at a Liberal Party fundraiser that, when it comes to reconciliation, “we have to be patient. We have to be present. We have to be unconditional in our support in a way that a parent needs to be unconditional in their love – not that there is a parent-child dynamic here” (quoted in Smart 2019). He then went on to say that it does not matter how many experts provide advice to First Nations people on how to run businesses, change has to come from First Nations. The narrative underpinning the prime minister’s comment foists the responsibility for the slow pace of reconciliation onto Indigenous Peoples while immunizing “patient” and “unconditionally loving” Canadian governments from accountability.

Canadian governments voice an interest in reconciliation, but too often, this interest wanes when it involves large-scale government reform and sacrifice. This may sound harsh but with a few exceptions, it is a fair characterization. As the TRC (2015) and historian John Milloy (1999) make clear, throughout the more than one hundred years that Canada operated residential schools, people of all walks of life constantly reported the maltreatment and preventable deaths of Indigenous children. Despite this, Canada actively chose to take inadequate action to fix the problem. For example, in 1907, Dr Peter Henderson Bryce, a physician, blew the whistle on the preventable deaths of children in residential schools related to Canada’s chronic underfunding of health care and the ill-treatment of the children. Bryce provided scientifically based recommendations to the Canadian government to save the children; the federal government persecuted Bryce for making his report public. The TRC (2015) estimates that 4,000–6,000 children died at the schools; Daniel Schwartz, reporting for the CBC, noted that child death rates in the schools approximated those of Canadian soldiers in the Second World War (2015). While it is proper to honour those lost in the Second World War with monuments and ceremonies, one has to ask why there is no national monument to the Indigenous children who died in residential schools in what lawyer Samuel Hume Blake characterized in 1908 as an “uncomfortable nearness with manslaughter” (Milloy 1999).

To give a more recent example, in 2016 the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found that the federal government’s inequitable provision of public services racially discriminated against more than 165,000 First Nations

children and ordered the government to immediately cease its discriminatory conduct (*First Nations Child and Family Caring Society et al. v Attorney General of Canada*, 2016 CHRT 2). The Tribunal explicitly linked the federal government's conscious underfunding of child welfare prevention services to there being more First Nations children in care today than at the height of the residential school system. Canada welcomed the decision and then did little to nothing to fix the problem until it was forced into action by the Tribunal's issuance of a further ten orders over subsequent years (Blackstock 2019). The Tribunal continues to retain jurisdiction in this case and more orders are possible. This all happened on the heels of Canada's residential school apology and after the federal government had said that its most important relationship is with Indigenous Peoples.

Professionals are often viewed as safeguards to human rights abuses. Their high levels of education and training, and the ethics oaths they swear, all suggest that they hold a higher obligation to identify and address human rights violations. However, as Dr Shaheen-Hussain argues in this book, these professions are founded in colonial cultures and many were silent or actively involved in the perpetration of some of the worst colonial abuses in Canada. For example, lawyers drafted the Indian Act and its related provisions banning "Indian" ceremonies, forcibly removing "Indian" children to be "properly" cared for in residential schools, and removing Indigenous Peoples from their lands in the name of colonial progress (RCAP 1996b). Social workers served on admissions committees for residential schools and failed to turn their social justice mandate onto the obvious abuses of Indigenous Peoples (Blackstock 2013). And government and university-based medical researchers conducted nutritional experiments on First Nations people, depriving them of fundamental nutrients to see what would happen (Mosby 2013).

Federal, provincial, and territorial governments perpetuated the savage/civilized dichotomy and its attendant dehumanizing stereotypes by denying Canadians, including professionals, proper education on Canada's historical and contemporary relationship with Indigenous Peoples. By keeping the Canadian public in the dark, governments were free to violate Indigenous Peoples' rights by seizing their lands, resources, and even their children in ways that would be intolerable if applied to other Canadians. While governments in some provinces and territories are making good progress address-

ing the problem, the Ontario government, under Doug Ford, is rolling back the clock on reconciliation education. In a hopeful sign, teachers continue to share reconciliation knowledge and activities with their students regardless of government positions and mandated curricula.

A recent CBC poll suggests that 69 per cent of Canadians believe that Canadian governments should be doing more to support Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Still, only 9 per cent listed it as one of their top three election issues (Grenier 2019). Rinsing Canadian society from the ravages of the colonial savage/civilized dichotomy can happen if the 69 per cent who want more to be done make this a sustained and top political priority. The best hope for reconciliation has been and continues to be everyday Canadians who translate their caring into reconciliation-based action. That is why the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society has seven free ways that people of all ages and backgrounds can help achieve culturally based equity for First Nations children.

As exemplified by Dr Shaheen-Hussain's work through the #aHand2Hold campaign, individuals have the power to turn the tide in Canada's colonial relationship with Indigenous Peoples. It takes the courage to stand up to a system designed to be deaf to the suffering of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, but with the action of enough individuals united for this common cause, caring Canadians can make a difference in the lives of Indigenous children. Thanks to the collective efforts of the entire #aHand2Hold team, children who require medical evacuation from remote areas in northern Quebec are now able to travel with a loved one. As the saying goes, a rising tide lifts all ships. Ensuring substantive equity for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people stands only to empower Indigenous communities while enriching Canada's national fabric at the same time. This will take confronting colonialism in governments, in professions, and in ourselves.

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