

An overview of government policies for the operation of Native residential schools in Canada between the years 1879 to 1995

(1995 draft)

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Residential Schools

In the first few decades of the life of the new Canadian nation, when the government turned to address the constitutional responsibility for Indians and their lands assigned by the Constitution Act, 1867, it adopted a policy of assimilation.¹ As described in the previous chapter, the roots of this policy were in the pre-Confederation period. It was a policy designed to move communities, and eventually all Aboriginal peoples, from their helpless 'savage' state to one of self-reliant 'civilization' and thus to make in Canada but one community – a non-Aboriginal, Christian one.²

Of all the steps taken to achieve that goal, none was more obviously a creature of Canada's paternalism toward Aboriginal people, its civilizing strategy and its stern assimilative determination than education. In the mind of Duncan Campbell Scott, the most influential senior official in the department of Indian affairs in the first three decades of the twentieth century, education was "by far the most important of the many subdivisions of the most complicated Indian problem".³ As a potential solution to that 'problem', education held the greatest promise. It would, the minister of Indian affairs, Frank Oliver, predicted in 1908, "elevate the Indian from his condition of savagery" and "make him a self-supporting member of the state, and eventually a citizen in good standing."⁴

It was not, however, just any model of education that carried such promise. In 1879, Sir John A. Macdonald's government, pressured by the Catholic and Methodist churches to fulfil the education clauses of the recently negotiated western treaties,⁵ had assigned Nicholas Flood Davin the task of reporting "on the working of Industrial Schools...in the United States and on the advisability of establishing similar institutions in the North-West Territories of the Dominion." Having toured U.S. schools and consulted with the U.S. commissioner of Indian affairs and "the leading men, clerical and lay who could speak with authority on the subject" in western Canada, Davin called for the "application of the principle of industrial boarding schools" – off-reserve schools that would teach the arts, crafts and industrial skills of a modern economy. Children, he advised, should be removed from their homes, as "the influence of the wigwam was stronger than that of the [day] school", and be "kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions" – the residential school – where they would receive the "care of a mother" and an education that would fit them for a life in a modernizing Canada.⁶

Davin's report received the unqualified support of the churches and the department, with the latter going so far as to suggest that within the wide range of assimilative policies, it would be through residential education, more than any other method, that "the solution of that problem, designated 'the Indian question' would probably be effected..."⁷

Politician, civil servant and, perhaps most critically, priest and parson all felt that in developing the residential school system they were responding not only to a constitutional but to a Christian "obligation to our Indian brethren" that could be discharged only "through the medium of the children" and "therefore education must be given the foremost place".⁸

At the same moment, however, they were driven by more prosaic motives. Macdonald's deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs, L. Vankoughnet, assured him that Indian expenditures were "a good investment", for in due course Aboriginal people, "instead of being supported from the revenue of the country...would contribute largely to the same."⁹

The socializing power of education had a similarly self-serving utility. Schools were part of a network of institutions that were to minister to industrial society's need for order, lawfulness, labour and security of property.¹⁰ Scott admitted frankly that the provision of education to Indian communities was indispensable, for without it and "with neglect", they "would produce an undesirable and often dangerous element in society."¹¹

Residential schools were more than a component in the apparatus of social construction and control. They were part of the process of nation building and the concomitant marginalization of Aboriginal communities. The department's inspector of education wrote in 1900 that the education of Aboriginal people in frontier districts was an important consideration,

not only as an economical measure to be demanded for the welfare of the country and the Indians, themselves, but in order that crime may not spring up and peaceful conditions be disturbed as that element which is the forerunner and companion of civilization penetrates the country and comes into close contact with the natives. That benefit will accrue to both the industrial occupants of the country covered by treaty and to the Indians by weaning a number from the chase and inclining them to industrial pursuits is patent to those who see [that] a growing need of intelligent labour must occur as development takes place.¹²

The Aboriginal leader George Manuel, a residential school graduate, was rather more blunt. The schools, he wrote,

were the laboratory and production line of the colonial system...the colonial system that was designed to make room for European expansion into a vast empty wilderness needed an Indian population that it could describe as lazy and shiftless...the colonial system required such an Indian for casual labour...¹³

Selfless Christian duty and self-interested statecraft were the foundations of the residential school system. The edifice itself was erected by a church/government partnership that would manage the system jointly until 1969. In this task the churches – Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian – led the way. Indeed, their energetic proselytizing resulted in the opening of residential schools in Ontario, the north-west and British Columbia even before the Davin report was submitted in 1879. Thereafter, the system – a combination of boarding schools built close to or in reserve communities and Davin’s centrally located industrial schools – was expanded rapidly, reaching a high point with 80 schools in 1931 (see Table 10.1) and growing again in the 1950s as part of the nation’s post-war expansion into Inuit homelands. It was maintained until the mid-1980s. Schools were built in every province and territory except Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland.¹⁴ They registered children from every Aboriginal culture – Indian, Inuit, and Métis children too – though the federal government assumed no constitutional responsibility for Métis people.¹⁵ While Métis children would be invisible, rarely mentioned in the records, they were nevertheless there and were treated the same as all the children were.

Put simply, the residential school system was an attempt by successive governments to determine the fate of Aboriginal people in Canada by appropriating and reshaping their future in the form of thousands of children who were removed from their homes and communities and placed in the care of strangers. Those strangers, the teachers and staff, were, according to Hayter Reed, a senior member of the department in the 1890s, to employ “every effort...against anything calculated to keep fresh in the memories of the children habits and associations which it is one of the main objects of industrial education to obliterate.”¹⁶ Marching out from the schools, the children, effectively re-socialized, imbued with the values of European culture, would be the vanguard of a magnificent metamorphosis: the ‘savage’ was to be made ‘civilized’, made fit to take up the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship.

Tragically, the future that was created is now a lamentable heritage for those children and the generations that came after, for Aboriginal communities and, indeed, for all Canadians. The school system’s concerted campaign “to obliterate” those “habits and associations”, Aboriginal languages, traditions and beliefs, and its vision of radical re-socialization, were compounded by mismanagement and underfunding, the provision of inferior educational services and the woeful mistreatment, neglect and abuse of many children – facts that were known to the department and the churches throughout the history of the school system.

