

No exaggeration needed



by Conrad Black

Once again we are indebted to the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and retired judge Brian Giesbrecht for their diligent research that has unearthed the proportions of some of the embellished claims about Canada's past treatment of its Indigenous population and particularly some of the claims made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) about "missing children." There is no doubt that there are very serious legitimate grievances that Aboriginal people rightfully hold about the wrongs committed against them in Canada, including very serious abuses that were perpetrated against children in the residential school system. But all Canadians of European extraction are the subject of blood libels by the TRC and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and former Supreme Court chief justice Beverley McLachlin and others of comprehensive racism and genocidal intent against this country's Indigenous people. Trudeau has disgraced Canada by pleading guilty on behalf of all of us to the charge of past

efforts to exterminate the culture of First Nations and in the deliberate or negligent deaths of Indigenous children, and he humiliated Canada by lowering all federal flags, including on embassies and other offices abroad, to half-mast for over five months over these false charges. Many other accusers stand in the dock for falsely proclaiming or accepting this collective guilt. There has never been any general or official desire to eliminate Canada's First Nations.

The research of the Frontier Centre and Giesbrecht has unmasked the dearth of conclusive evidence of the claims of atrocities committed against the infamous 215 Indigenous children who were allegedly killed and secretly buried in Kamloops, B.C. This charge began with the revelation by First Nation of Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Chief Rosanne Casimir that she "knew" of this secret burial because "knowledge keepers" told her about "oral histories" of six-year-old children being taken from their beds at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in the dead of night to bury fellow students in the apple orchard. Stories such as these have been circulating for decades, and were amplified by less precise allegations about mysterious unmarked graves near the locations of other residential schools.

The underlying problem is that even sophisticated audiences that do not accept that thousands of Indigenous children were murdered and secretly buried, as has been alleged, have been receptive to the claim that death rates at residential schools were greatly higher than on nearby reserves. This is a misconception, according to Giesbrecht. Tuberculosis was long one of the leading causes of death for the whole population, more than a century ago, when life expectancy was generally significantly lower than it is now. Indigenous people were at much greater risk of death from tuberculosis and a range of other illnesses that they had not encountered before the Europeans came to Canada, and which European-Canadians had had centuries to develop immunity to.

This vulnerability of the Indigenous population to European-originated diseases was aggravated by the fact that by the late 19th century, Plains Indians had lost their principal source of protein – the buffalo – and lived on government rations that were not nutritionally adequate and led to weakened immune systems. When the federal government took over the residential schools in 1883, the Canadian Pacific Railway had not quite reached the prairies and supplies for the Natives were imported from Montana by wagon train. Though this was certainly unintended by the authorities, the diet imposed upon the Plains Indians was insufficiently healthy. Canada's First Nations were revealed by Peter Bryce of the Indian Affairs department in the early 1900s to have a mortality rate more than double that of the whole population, though the Aboriginal population was slowly rising despite these problems. He established that the greatest threat was a lack of familiarity with the requirements of sanitation in their residences, which were frequently overcrowded. This resulted in mortality rates that were higher than those in residential schools in many cases.

Bryce also reported in 1906 that the 189 Indian reserve medical officers toiled constantly to deal with these problems, and that a number of government-subsidized hospitals had been built in or around reserves to serve the Indigenous population. There has never been any explanation for why the media and Indigenous activists have never mentioned, nor even implied, that they were aware that death rates on reserves often exceeded those in the residential schools. Nor has there been adequate attention to the fact that attendance in residential schools was entirely voluntary to the parents until 1920, when attendance was made compulsory in order to try to ensure that all First Nations youth enjoyed the benefits of literacy. Sending the children to the residential schools was in fact a prudent measure, despite the many and sometimes terrible problems in the schools, including documented cases of abuse. Giesbrecht has established that

these unheralded facts have been known and have gone practically unmentioned for over a century.

We have heard endlessly that parents “had their children ripped out of their arms, taken to a distant and unknown place, never to be seen again. Buried in an unmarked grave, long ago forgotten and overgrown,” as TRC commissioner Marie Wilson put it. The blood-red banner famously unrolled by the NCTR in 2019 is claimed to carry the names of 2,800 children who died in residential schools, but Giesbrecht’s research shows that many of those names are of children who died from many different causes, in some cases away from the schools themselves.

There have been other well-publicized issues with the list, as well. Indigenous leaders were “disgusted” and “mortified” when they discovered that the NCTR’s list of deceased children in the residential school in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., contained four adults, including an Anglican archdeacon and the wife of an Anglican bishop. The TRC has exaggerated this issue: its commissioners have suggested that up to 25,000 children “never returned home,” implying that they died in the schools and their corpses vanished. TRC Commissioner Murray Sinclair and his colleagues have promoted the likely embellished claim that more than 6,000 children were exterminated in the schools and secretly disposed of by the Catholic clergy. And the Kamloops claim that caused such an uproar last year was based on 200 “soil disturbances,” which even the researcher who performed the ground-penetrating radar search was forced to list as “probable burials,” because the sites need to be excavated in order to be confirmed.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission should be required to restate its conclusions on a basis consistent with its own research and all research conclusions should be rigorously verified and cross-indexed. The TRC’s bloated budget makes the sloppiness of its sourcing inexcusable. There should not be another cent of reparations paid out over these claims of

heinous crimes until we have more clarity. Native jurisdictions should be held to the same standards of fiscal honesty as other jurisdictions in Canada and a plan of action should be produced by the collaboration of all bona fide parties and implemented to address the genuine grievances of First Nations people. Sinclair and the other commissioners must answer these very serious findings and Trudeau and McLachlin and the other defamers of this country should be rebuked and must recant their false allegations. Justice must be done, at last, for First Nations, and for Canada.

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