

Native Canadian History

Excerpts from *Last Steps to Freedom* by John Boyko

1763 - The Proclamation Act bound the British government to make treaties with the native nation to, among other things, win access to native land. The government signed eight "peace and friendship" treaties based on the act's assertion and, in so doing, officially recognized the sovereignty of native nations, for only states can enter into treaties.

Mid-1800s - Native nations were no longer needed economically or militarily. Consequently, they were robbed of their rights and their land in order to shuffle them aside to make way for territorial expansion.

December 31st, 1873 - The Indian Commissioner J.A.N. Provencher made a speech in which he stated "Treaties may be made with them simply with a view to the extinction of their rights, by agreeing to pay them a sum, and afterwards abandoning them to themselves."

Late 1800s - the white people's destruction of the buffalo led to an evolution of an agrarian lifestyle among the Cree and other plains nations. It was at that time that the Canadian government entered into treaties with them. The leaders of the largest Cree groups acted to influence negotiations in attempts to win guarantees of Cree autonomy and, in exchange for the land and the complete abandonment of the buffalo culture, guarantees of adequate farming tools and training.

Treaty commissioner Edgar Dewdney feared the growth of an Indian confederacy but agreed to reserves at Cyprus Hills while promising increased farm assistance. He broke every promise he made.

New regulations prohibited leaving one's reserve without permission from the Indian agent. Thirst dances, which were the center of the Cree's cultural, political and spiritual lives, were banned. Prime Minister Macdonald received reports on how the Cree were treated and, obviously pleased with Dewdney's activities, he added the position of Lieutenant-Governor to his responsibilities.

In 1885 a few small acts of resistance were used as an excuse by Dewdney to occupy the reserves and arrest the leaders. The trials were travesties of justice. The injustices suffered by the Cree people typified the attitudes and manners in which the Canadian government dealt with native nations and leaders and the way it negotiated and enforced treaties.

1876 - all laws pertaining to native peoples were swept into one law called the Indian Act. Sir John A Macdonald clarified in the House of Commons that "the great din of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the dominion, as speedily as they are fit for the change."



The Indian Act was created without consultation with the people against whom it was directed. Indians became wards of the state.

Until the act was amended in 1985, any Indian woman who married a non-Indian man was declared a non-Indian. All Indians were stripped of their names and assigned numbers. The legal definition of Indian split the Native peoples of Canada by placing thousands outside the law. The entire Metis nation ceased to exist. The Inuit people, then referred to by the derisive term "Eskimo" meaning "meat-eater", also fell into judicial limbo. The legal definition allowed the government to violate the constitution, for the British North American Act clearly stated that the federal government was responsible for all aboriginal peoples. It allowed Newfoundland, which had witnessed the total annihilation of the Beothuk nation, to enter Confederation in 1949 claiming that not a single Indian lived within its jurisdiction.

Traditional and cultural ceremonies were banned. The ceremonies were Native societies' core, connecting a communities economic, political, spiritual and social strands. Sweat lodges, pipes, sweet-grass ceremonies and other traditions became illegal.

1884 the federal government amended the Indian act to abolish Potlatch and all other cultural ceremonies. Anyone found participating in one of the banned ceremonies, or even encouraging others to participate, would be imprisoned for 2 to 6 months.

It became illegal for Indians to buy, make or possess liquor. As late of the 1950's, it was illegal for Indians to enter an establishment that sold liquor. This meant that after serving in two world wars and in Korea, Indian veterans were not allowed to set foot in a Canadian Legion.

The government controlled the personal finances of all Indians through a number of Indian Act clauses. Except under special circumstances, Indian people could not own land on reserves. Without collateral, obtaining bank mortgages or other bank credit was difficult or impossible. The sale of livestock and crops were illegal except as organized by the Indian agent. The Indian agents approval had to be sought before cutting wood on reserve land. His approval was also needed to seek employment off the reserve.

The Indian Act afforded government the legal right to appoint justices to administer Canadian law on reserves. All Native laws and traditional systems of justice were banned. A 1927 amendment banned the raising of money for Native political action groups or the spending of band money to support such groups. The amendments rendered it illegal for bands or individuals to pursue legal claims against the government or Indian agents.

In 1868, the federal government awarded itself the responsibility to educate Indian children. If the government's sole intention was education then schools would have been established on reserves and proper funds allocated to run them.

An 1892 amendment to the Indian Act empowered the Department of Indian Affairs to establish and operate boarding schools that children aged six to sixteen were obligated to attend. Christian church leaders were consulted, then approved the legislation. Indian band councils were not consulted.



Missionaries established curricula and procedures and church leaders hired the teachers.

With the schools ready, they went for the children. The fall round-ups as they became known, were horrendous, tragic affairs. In many cases, the RCMP arrived in force. They encircled the reserve to stop runaways, then moved door to door taking school-aged children over the protests of the parents and children themselves. Legislation rendered it illegal to refuse to surrender one's child.

A normal day at a typical residential school saw the children up at 6:00 am for morning prayers. Classes generally took place in the morning. Afternoons were spent working at various tasks to render the schools profitable. Organized sports after supper were followed by silent studies, more prayers and then bed. The routine was broken only on holidays when children were allowed to sleep in to 6:30am, work all day with no classes and take an extra hour for recreation.

Until the 1940s all residential schools ended at grade 8. Many schools continued to deny secondary-school education to Native children well into the 1960s. All residential school lessons were taught in English. It was forbidden for any student to use his or her own language even in private conversation. Those breaking the English-only rule suffered incredibly torturous punishments.

Incidents of sexual abuse went unreported at the time but in the late 1980s victims began coming forward. A dorm supervisor at the St. George's residential school in BC, for example, was convicted of six counts of indecent assault and eleven counts of buggery, but in handing down the sentence the judge spoke of seven hundred other incidents of sexual assault for which the accused had been suspect but not charged. In a 1991 BC inquiry, it was revealed that more than half of the Native people interviewed had suffered sexual abuse while residential school students.

Residential schools began to close in 1951. The Indian Act was amended to allow provincial governments to share the responsibility for Indian education. An Educational Division of Indian Affairs was established and procedure was put in place to bus Native students to the closest public schools. Band councils and Native parents were not consulted about the decision to bus children far from home every day to integrate them with white children.

A popular Canadian secondary school text book published in 1951 instructed school children about Indians coming to North America across the Bering Strait explaining,

"This experience developed in them a sort a stolidity and endurance that gave them exceptional physical vigor and courage, but it deadened their minds; it killed their imagination and initiative...the Indian was wholly unfit to cope with the more civilized, more intelligent white man."

By 1964 only eighteen percent of Native children were left attending residential schools.

The notion that Indian children needed to be rescued from the catastrophic social problems caused by generation of residential school abuse had been recognized by the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons.

They believed, and the committee concurred, that the best way to address the problem the government had created was to remove Native children from their homes and place them with white families.



The kidnapping began in 1955, when provincial government inspectors and social workers arrived on reserves. Children were taken from homes where there was even the slightest evidence of alcoholism, where amenities normally found in suburban houses were absent, or where children were being tended to by grandparents during even a temporary absence of parents. The children were placed in foster homes often out of the province, and in many cases even out of the country, to dissuade the children from running away. Social agencies claimed to try to keep brothers and sisters together but siblings were nearly always separated.

In 1955, there were 3,433 children in protective care in BC; less than one percent were Native children. By 1964, BC had 4,228 children in protective care but thirty four percent were Native children. Native parents protested vehemently but in vain about the abductions. Band councils had not been consulted about the plan and were not informed when social workers arrived.

The cultural differences between whites and Natives had again been ignored. Native child-rearing traditions allow children much more freedom than western, European traditions. Social workers viewed Native parenting as too permissive by white middle-class standards and, consequently, deemed it bad parenting. The possession of material things is far more important in the dominant Canadian culture than the Native culture.

Native people had been growing increasingly politicized in the politically charged 1960s. Part of the reason for this development was a 1951 Indian Act amendment that after several years finally awarded Indians the right to leave reserves without seeking permission from the Indian agents. Another 1951 amendment removed the 1927 prohibition on the creation and funding of Indian political organizations. These changes allowed the development of Native political action groups representing the needs and desires of not just Indians but of all Native people. The Native Indian Council was formed in 1954. By 1968 it had split into the Canadian Metis Society and the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB). The NIB, led by David Courchene, was the most influential Native voice of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Native people were, for the first time, being given the right to vote in a federal election. Indians won that right in Newfoundland and the Northwest Territories in 1949, in Ontario in 1954, in the Yukon, Manitoba and Saskatchewan in 1960, in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and PEI in 1963, in Alberta and BC in 1965 and finally in Quebec in 1969.

1968 - Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced a set of ideas regarding Native people, contained in a document called The Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, but it was quickly dubbed the White Paper. Trudeau's minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development who was in charge of the White Paper was Quebec MP Jean Chretien.

In 1969 Chretien invited several prominent Chiefs and the leaders of Native political action groups to Ottawa. They were shocked to see Chretien rise in the House of Commons and introduce the White Paper. They were even more shocked to hear him claim that the document was the result of extensive consultations with Native bands.

The White Paper proposed to complete the process, begun in 1951, of transferring responsibility for Indian affairs from the federal to provincial governments. The proposal seemed reasonable. Native leaders, however, could read between the lines.



In 1970 the Indian Association of Alberta had presented the federal government with Citizens Plus. The document argued that Indian affairs should never be transferred to the provinces because there were no treaties with provincial governments. Such a transfer would split Native groups as they began dealing with twelve governments rather than one. Native nations whose borders crossed provincial, territorial and national lines were also ignored in the proposed transfer of responsibility.

1972 - The NIB worked in concert with other Native groups across the country to develop a document called Indian Control of Indian Education. It argued that only if Native parents influenced the hiring of teachers and the setting of curricula could Native children learn to appreciate their history and culture. Only this appreciation, it was argued, would address the social problems plaguing Native communities that were the legacy of white control of Native education. It proposed the creation of Band Education Authorities to oversee the education of Native children. It proposed affording Native parents the right to keep their children in the integrated schools but the changing of provincial legislation to ensure Native representation on appropriate school boards.

In 1973 Jean Chretien officially accepted the document and expressed full agreement with its accusations, arguments and recommendations. Either Chretien lied or his bureaucrats operated without his knowledge to turn his pledges to mush. His department studied the proposals for two years. Finally, a guideline stating that bands were free to create Band Education Authorities was issued, but it ensured they would have no power. The guideline said, "When a band operates any educational program it must establish guidelines which must be acceptable to the Department"

By 1980, over three thousand Native children had been taken. The new struggle to save children was fought in the media. The most important public protest was the Indian Child Caravan, organized in 1980 in Vancouver. On Thanksgiving Day, over one thousand people staged a vigil outside the office of BC's minister of human resources. The plea was simple. They asked that their children be returned and no more be taken. The action received national notice.

In the 1960s a number of provincial studies sought to discover reasons for the disproportionate number of Native people in prison. A 1969 Manitoba study, for example, noted that while Native people made up only four percent of Winnipeg's population they made up twenty-three percent of its inmate population. For too long, these and other statistics were dismissed as evidence that Native people were more criminally oriented than non-Native people.

More resources for change at <http://www.accesstomedia.org/change> .
For more information about the Access to Media Education Society, visit <http://www.accesstomedia.org> or contact us at ames@gulfislands.com

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/ca/> .

