

Two hundred and fifteen Indigenous children: Yet another reckoning
Real reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit and Métis is Canada's historic task for coming decades, writes Paul Smith

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Two hundred and fifteen Indigenous children in Kamloops. Another 104 in Brandon, 35 at Muskowekwan and at least 35 in Regina. Our lost children. Buried in mass unmarked graves. In Canada. Not some far away country under an authoritarian dictator or torn by civil war. The country united in an emotional outpouring of grief; across the political spectrum.

At the vigil for the 215 children in Guelph June 1, many Indigenous speakers shared their own traumatic stories and those of their mothers, fathers, kokums, mushoms, uncles, aunties, and cousins. Painful stories about residential schools, day schools, the sixties scoop (forced adoptions), foster care, intergenerational trauma. All under the shadow of Guelph's Basilica of Our Lady, a symbol of the Catholic and all churches culpable for residential schools.

Canada has long known about the mistreatment of Indigenous children and people — but turned away. It is six years since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. Thirty years since residential school issues were documented in the shelved Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report. One hundred and fourteen years since Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce revealed abuse

and the high rate of death of children in residential schools. Still profound ignorance of our true history.

Residential schools were a key part of the elaborate colonial policy system to subjugate Indigenous peoples. Many more residential schools existed than the 139 covered by the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, and still await acknowledgement. Unethical medical experimentation occurred on these children. The “day scholars” reached a separate class action agreement. John A. Macdonald’s starvation policy, pass system, and Indian agents controlled the location, travel and activities of First Nations; banned legal representation, ceremonies, organizing and many other aspects of First Nations and Inuit life. Just a sample of the vast colonial policy system that has diminished but not disappeared.

Almost 1.7 million people in Canada identify as Indigenous, or 5 per cent of the population (2016 census). About 60 per cent of those are First Nations, 36 per cent are Métis and 4 per cent are Inuit. In Guelph in 2016, around 2,300 people or 1.5 per cent of the population identified as Indigenous; 54 per cent identify First Nations ancestry, 41 per cent Métis, 1 per cent Inuit and 4 per cent mixed ancestries. Let’s compare those stats with statistics on social well-being and dysfunctions.

Many say child welfare is the “new residential school” system, with more children in care now than were ever in residential schools. Fifty-two per cent of children in care are Indigenous! Thirty-eight per cent of Indigenous children live in poverty, versus 7 per cent of non-Indigenous children. Thirty per cent of prison inmates are Indigenous, and as high as 75 per cent in some provinces. Indigenous women and girls have a homicide rate roughly 4.5 times higher than all other women. We could fill pages with statistics on the poverty, poor social and health outcomes all linked to colonial policy, including residential schools.

Yet enormous hope springs from the accelerating pace of reform. A growing Indigenous middle class of scholars, lawyers, doctors, and other highly skilled people are influencing public opinion and public policy. The explosion of Indigenous literature, music, and arts. Growing graduation rates. A young, sophisticated, media-savvy Indigenous generation is taking on the world.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Idle No More resistance changed Canadians’ attitudes forever. A new generation of non-Indigenous Canadians stand resolutely for fairness. The outpouring for racial justice in 2020 also transformed public opinion as have recent crimes rooted in racial and religious intolerance. Real reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit and Métis is Canada’s historic task for coming decades — it will take sustained action, investment, and time to close the gaps that took centuries to create. Buckle up, it may be a complex, uncomfortable, but ultimately honourable national journey. Canada will be a better place for it.

Tou lii Aafaan kishchiitaytakooshiw (Every Child Matters in Michif).

Paul Smith is a Guelph writer and a citizen of the Métis Nation.