

Canada 150 is a celebration of Indigenous genocide

This year, the federal government plans to spend half a billion dollars on events marking Canada's 150th anniversary, prompting a great deal of debate about its historical treatment of Indigenous peoples. The majority of Canadians don't have all the facts about that, while First Nations continue to live the crisis-level effects of that legacy. Perhaps Canada should cancel its celebrations and undertake the hard work necessary to make amends.

BY **PAMELA PALMATER** MARCH 29, 2017 5:43 PM



The Scream, on the cover, The Subjugation of Truth, by Kent Monkman.

For many Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island (North America), it's difficult to imagine Prime Minister Justin Trudeau – who has said that "no relationship is more important to Canada than the one with Indigenous peoples" – celebrating the last 150 years of brutal colonization and the foundation of what is now known as Canada.

This year, the federal government plans to spend half a billion dollars on events marking Canada's 150th anniversary. Meanwhile, essential social services for First Nations people to alleviate crisis-level socio-economic conditions go chronically underfunded. Not

only is Canada refusing to share the bounty of its own piracy; it's using that same bounty to celebrate its good fortune. Arguably, every firework, hot dog and piece of birthday cake in Canada's 150th celebration will be paid for by the genocide of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

Many places are struggling with the nation's genocidal origins.

In Halifax, the school board voted to change the name of Cornwallis Junior High because its namesake, Edward Cornwallis, was responsible for putting bounties on the scalps of Mi'kmaw people, causing many deaths.

Likewise, in Toronto, Ryerson University has come under scrutiny for its namesake, Egerton Ryerson, a strong supporter of residential schools, where thousands of Indigenous children died violent, torturous deaths.

Even the "Famous Five" women long celebrated as champions of women's rights have had their hero status questioned because of their support for sterilization of Indigenous women. Celebrating genocide is not what most would consider a modern Canadian value.

While use of the term "genocide" to describe Canada's treatment of Indigenous peoples has created a great deal of debate, there has always been a recognition that, at minimum, Canada was guilty of "cultural genocide," even if individuals couldn't bring themselves to accept more sinister intentions.

Former prime minister Paul Martin told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that it was time to call the residential schools policy what it was: "cultural genocide."

Supreme Court of Canada Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin weighed in on Canada's dismal human rights record, saying that residential schools were attempts to commit "cultural genocide" against Indigenous peoples.

While these comments were made before the TRC report was tabled in late 2015, they did raise questions in the public sphere about how to recognize genocide when it's not part of something like the Holocaust or the war in Rwanda.

Despite the sensitive nature of making the claim of genocide, the TRC went further after investigating the historical record, stating that the totality of policies toward Indigenous peoples amounted to cultural, biological and physical genocide.

The difficult part about public discourse related to genocide is that the majority of Canadians don't have all the facts.

Most mistakenly believe genocide only occurs when millions of people are killed in concentration camps. They're not taught in school about the real history of the atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples that over time resulted in millions dying. Some universities teach genocide studies without any mention of the lethal colonization process in Canada.

The real history, however, shows that even after signing peace treaties with First Nations, laws were enacted in Canada offering bounties for scalps of Indigenous men, women and children. The treaty negotiation process itself was conducted under conditions of starvation or threats of violence. While some argue that these acts were committed pre-Confederation, it must be kept in mind that they are in fact how Canada became Canada.

"Indian policy" was based on acquiring Indigenous lands and resources and reducing financial obligations to Indigenous peoples. The primary methodology was either assimilation or elimination. These acts included confining Indigenous peoples to tiny reserves and forbidding them to hunt, fish or provide for their families, forcing them to live on unhealthy and insufficient rations that caused ill health and starvation.

It didn't stop there. Other genocidal acts included the forced sterilization of Indigenous women and little girls and the mass theft from families of Indigenous children, many of whom were physically and sexually assaulted, experimented on, tortured and starved at residential schools – leading to the deaths of thousands.

This is how Canada cleared the land for farms, mining, oil extraction and development. It simply would not be the wealthy country it is, one of the best countries in the world to live and raise a family, were it not for the removal of Indigenous peoples from the source of Canada's wealth.

The real crime, however, is not only Canada's failure to take steps to right the wrongs of the past.

Today, more Indigenous children are taken from their families – now put into foster care – than at the height of the residential schools cruelty. The over-incarceration of Indigenous men, women and children continues at alarming rates. Even though Indigenous people represent only 4 per cent of the population, some prisons contain nearly 100 per cent Indigenous inmates.

The federal government and law enforcement agencies have allowed the crisis of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls to continue with little intervention – suggesting complicity in the deaths.

The prime minister spoke at National Aboriginal Day ceremonies in 2016 about "the importance of reconciliation and the process of truth-telling" in healing Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples.

He has no right to speak about reconciliation before he takes the necessary steps to make amends. Canada has no right to ask any one of us to talk about moving forward until the prime minister and all premiers take responsibility for what their institutions have done – and continue to do – to Indigenous peoples. No amount of token showcasing of Indigenous art, songs or dances in Canada's 150th celebration will stop the intergenerational pain and suffering, suicides, police abuse, sub-standard health care, housing and water, or the extinction of the majority of Indigenous languages.

Perhaps Canada should humble itself, step back, cancel its plans and undertake the hard work necessary to make amends for its legacy. Then we could all celebrate the original treaty vision of mutual respect, prosperity and protection envisioned by our ancestors. Until then, I'll pass on the cake.

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HOW THE UNITED NATIONS DEFINES GENOCIDE

According to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide is defined in Article II as acts "committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." Described by the UN as an "odious scourge" (repulsive evil causing great suffering), genocide can be committed in any one of following ways: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm; inflicting conditions of life meant to bring about their destruction; preventing births within the groups; and/or forcibly transferring the children of the group to another group.

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