Aspirin or Amplifier?

Reconciliation, Justice, and the Performance of National Identity in Canada

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To some people, *reconciliation* is the re-establishment of a conciliatory state. However, this is a state that many Aboriginal people assert never has existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. To others, reconciliation, in the context of Indian residential schools, is similar to dealing with a situation of family violence. It’s about coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward. It is in the latter context that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has approached the question of reconciliation.¹

In 2008, the then Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized on behalf of the federal government to the First Nations of Canada.² This official apology represented one of several aspects of the national process of reconciliation with the indigenous population. Harper’s gesture of atonement addressed the legacy of forcible relocation and cultural re-education of First Nations’ children under colonial rule; a system which was designed to eradicate indigenous culture and languages.³ The system operated until the mid-1990s,


² The term ‘First Nations’ refers to all indigenous peoples of Canada, including all Indian tribes, the Inuit, and Métis.

³ The Canadian Indian Residential School System (IRS) was officially operating from 1879 until 1996. Behind each school stood the federal government which had created an educational collaboration with the churches for that matter. The system was designed by the state, but the
but has largely remained absent from the public agenda until now. As a result of legal disputes taken up by former victims, a settlement agreement between them and the federal government of Canada was reached. The settlement entailed the provision of the so-called Common Experience Payment to former Residential School attendants. Furthermore, the agreement foresees the

children were in the immediate care of the churches. The proclaimed aim was the ‘elevation of indigenous people from their savagery’ and to attain cultural re-education. Progress of native communities could only be achieved if they adapted to a world of industry and agriculture. Two initial forms of schools were erected: ‘boarding schools’ were supposed to teach basic skills like reading, writing, and mathematics, and they were located in proximity to the reserves of First Nations. The second type was made in the image of British ‘industrial schools’, which were in fact trade schools. The latter were more centrally located. These two school forms targeted children from the age of seven onwards. The schools were designed to equip and prepare a child for the transfer of Aboriginal communities to agriculture: boys were schooled in husbandry, agriculture, and mechanical skills, whereas the girls had to learn domestic arts and basic skills, including dairying, needlework, and cooking. The situation in most of the schools may be described as heinous: rapid deterioration of buildings, overcrowding, and chronic underfunding shaped school facilities; sexual abuse, neglect and violent oppression characterized the relationship between teachers and students. The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by epidemics of white plague and tuberculosis in the schools. An unknown but substantial number of residential-school attendees did not survive their stay. In 1973, 71 schools were still operating, housing and teaching 5,347 children. More than 150,000 Indians, Inuit, and Métis children were placed in these schools; an estimated 80,000 former students are still alive today. As has now been widely agreed, the schools were among the most damaging effects of colonization on the First Nations of Canada. For further reading, see, for example, Agnes Grant, No End of Grief: Indian Residential Schools in Canada (Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1992), or J.R. Miller, Shingwauk’s Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1996).

Until the early 1990s, the Canadian public remained mostly unaware of this educational system. Chief Phil Fontaine, leader of the First Nations Council and a member of the TRC Canada, went public with his experiences in the system. Other victims followed his lead, and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was founded as a predecessor to the TRC of Canada. It still needed increasing legal actions for reimbursement and the settlement agreement to spark greater public attention. See Kim Stanton, “Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Settling the Past?,” International Indigenous Policy Journal 2.3 (2011): 1-18.


The Common Experience Payment (CEP) “is a lump-sum payment that recognizes the experience of living at an Indian Residential School(s) and its impacts. All former students who resided at a recognized Indian Residential School(s) and were alive on May 30, 2005 were eligible for the CEP. This includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit former students.” Only 139 schools were designated as ‘recognized’, whereas several institutions have been requested to add themselves to this list of schools by former attendees. This ongoing negotiation was perceived by several represen-