

What is your vision for Canada?

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation

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The discovery of children's remains on former residential school grounds in Canada earlier this year sparked outrage and an outpour of grief across the country. Tensions between Canada's Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government have been entrenched in our history, dating back to when Canada became a country, and even before that. Officially acknowledging the need for Truth and Reconciliation between our government and First Nations people has been long overdue, but it took the horrific uncovering of the remains of children for anger to finally boil over and real change to be seen.

For years, Canada ran an extensive network of schools designed to assimilate and conform the Indigenous to white colonial standards. Residential schools often provoked what is commonly referred to as a "cultural genocide" because countless children were forced to deny their heritage, which resulted in the loss of tradition and languages, and sometimes their lives. Sexual violence, verbal and physical abuse was prevalent in residential school environments. These schools, though run by Christian churches, were funded by the Canadian government, cementing their role in the trauma Canada's First Nations faced.

The black mark of residential schools is still fresh on the paper of Canadian history. The last residential school, located in Saskatchewan, closed less than three decades ago, in 1996. Despite running residential schools and understanding their horrors, the Canadian government only officially apologized, on the behalf of all Canadians, in 2008. The same year a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as an organization responsible for documenting the stories of survivors and spreading awareness regarding the legacy of residential schools and the stigma surrounding Indigenous individuals. It was this commission that proposed a Truth and Reconciliation day.

The first Truth and Reconciliation Day in Canadian history occurred this year on September 30th and symbolizes a step toward admitting past wrongdoings and working towards rectifying them. National Truth and Reconciliation Day is important because it dedicates a day solely for reflection and honouring residential school survivors, their families, and the communities affected. This reflection helps to solidify collective awareness surrounding Canada's tense relations with First Nations peoples and ensure continuous growth between Canadians and Indigenous. The day also gives time for ceremonies of remembrance and the sharing of stories by survivors. Essentially, Truth and Reconciliation Day provides aboriginal individuals with a national stage in which their voices, opinions, and stories can be heard; this is vital in ensuring that Indigenous peoples feel that their voices are being respected and valued.

In addition to the federal holiday, another way to build collective consciousness is to prioritize the incorporation of Indigenous voices into Canada's political environment. An example would be Governor General Mary Simon and how her prominent position in the federal government garners

recognition across the country and act as an inspiration to other Indigenous individuals. An increase in the number of Indigenous representatives elected would allow them to make changes within the government after years spent in its shadows. One way to expand Indigenous representation would be enacting public policy that would allocate a specific number of seats in the House of Commons to First Nations representatives. Universities often designate a percentage of enrollment for racial or ethnic minorities to diversify the student body; the same should be done within the government. There is currently an under-representation of visible minorities, especially Indigenous ones, at the federal level, and implementing a program that would work toward diversifying parliament would introduce unique viewpoints beneficial to changes in public policy. Being involved in parliament will provide Indigenous peoples with a platform to educate and the ability to directly influence policy affecting them.

Canada currently lacks programs of study of Indigenous culture and history at the postsecondary level; the University of Alberta is home to the only Faculty of Native Studies in North America. Many provincial curriculums include learning and understanding the tragedy caused by the government's harmful treatment of First Nations at the primary and secondary levels, but this form of education should continue well into post-secondary education. Faculties focused solely on Native Studies should be found across Canada in multiple universities because First Nations have played a large role in Canada and that role, as well as systemic oppression they faced, should be recognized. To meet this objective, the Canadian government should provide incentives, in the form of school grants, to universities as a way to convince them to create courses and establish faculties focused on Indigenous studies. Educating young adults on the importance of our country's history allows us to learn from the mistakes of the past and avoid repeating them.

In addition to educating young adults, schools with emphasis on learning Indigenous traditions and languages at the elementary level should be government-funded as reparation for years of cultural and language loss caused by residential schools. Funding such schools would allow Indigenous peoples to reclaim their heritage and prevent any more language and cultural loss. Heritage and cultural connections play a significant role in one's life; it is only when one is reconnected to them then one can truly begin to heal from wounds of the past. The First Nations deserve better than to be robbed of any opportunities to embrace their languages and culture.

While reflection and reconciliation are slowly but steadily occurring, Canada still has many years and many more steps to take to redeem themselves from their spiteful years of segregation and maltreatment of aboriginal peoples. Beginning with amplifying Indigenous voices in Parliament and working toward arranging more opportunities for Indigenous studies are simple but effective ways to boost cognizance that Indigenous persons matter and repression of them must end. After all, a history of ignorance and oppression is not part of a legacy Canada wants to uphold.