

Research Note

Indian Residential Schools as Seen Through House of Commons Debates, 1876-1951

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Legally mandated in the 1884 amendment to *The Indian Act* (1876) by the Canadian federal government, the Indian Residential School (IRS) system forcibly removed at least 150,000 Indigenous children from their homes and communities, many of whom experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of their “caregivers.” The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s (2015) conclusion that the Canadian government willfully engaged in cultural genocide while administering the IRS program suggests that the government purposefully endeavoured to cause harm to the children in its care. Considering the fastidious records kept by the federal government concerning Indigenous populations, their movement, and where they lived, it seems peculiar that they the Canadian government as a whole, but members of parliament in particular, were unaware of how Indigenous children were treated. The purpose of this brief paper is to demonstrate how Members of Parliament serving from 1876-1951 were a) aware of the deplorable conditions in Indian Residential Schools during the aforementioned period, and b) despite this knowledge, did nothing about it. In doing so, this paper will elucidate how the Canadian government willfully committed cultural genocide.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary framework that examines the relationship between groups as they function within texts. More specifically, as Fairclough (2013) indicated, CDA is the “analysis of dialectical relations between discourse and other objects, elements or moments, as well as analysis of the ‘internal relations of discourse’” (p. 4). Offering another interpretation, Van Dijk (2001) believed that CDA is a way to examine how “social power abuse, domination, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk” (p. 352). As such, I interpret CDA as a way to examine how ideas about language correlate to greater social systems.

Fairclough’s (1995) framework for textual analysis, which will be employed in this paper, is composed of three parts. *Text* examines sentence structure, semantics, and meaning; these are social representations, the relationship between author and reader, and the identities between writer and consumer (Fairclough, 1995). *Discourse practice* consists of the institutional process (how the text was produced) and discourse processes (how the text may change from production to consumption) (Fairclough, 1995). Finally, *sociocultural practice* is comprised of economic, political, and/or cultural analyses (Fairclough, 1995). Though all three aspects were utilized in my analytic process, since this is only a research note, I am only focusing on the sociocultural practice aspect.

Context

I was able to obtain how government officials spoke—and presumably felt—about the Indian Residential School program by examining transcriptions from House of Commons debates. As such, what I am presenting here is only a part of the story: my analysis does not factor in their speech and actions in other kinds of communication, personal or published. When examining the context of these quotations, three matters must be considered. First, these debates were taking place in the House of Commons and were between elected Members of Parliament, who were predominantly men, all of whom were white¹. The racial and ethnic backgrounds of the MPs therefore, are a possible indicator of how tolerant they were towards Indigenous peoples. Second, the 1876-1951 period was a time of intense nation-building in Canada. A number of events—including participation in two World Wars as well as the Yukon Territory, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador joining Confederation—solidified Canada’s presence as a nation-state. Similarly, the quotations used in my analysis come from the perspective of men whose goal was to continue settling the “Canadian Frontier.” Third, I selected the 1876-1951 period because of its historical significance to Indigenous peoples, and in particular those categorized as status Indians. In 1876, the single most detrimental piece of legislation devised by the Canadian government for First Nations —An Act to amend and consolidate the laws respecting *Indians* (or more simply, *The Indian Act*)—was passed. Between 1876 and 1951 there were 17 major amendments to *The Indian Act* which negatively impacted the lives of First Nations peoples.

Methods

My search of the Hansard database yielded 327 results, where a result was equal to one “hit”; a sentence or phrase with the words “Indian school.” I initially isolated 92 comments from the 327 results for analysis. Of those 92 comments from Hansard, I selected 35 for further analysis, and have chosen 10 to be included here. In my analysis I identified one primary discourse: Indigenous peoples are seen as something to be dealt with or overcome; or more simply, the “Indian problem.” I will explore how this discourse manifests in House of Commons debates through a) discussion on passing the Indian Act, b) the idea that residential schools were not “civilizing” attendees to a desired effect, and c) ignoring medical reports on the health and welfare of children as well as the facilities in Indian Residential schools.

Analysis

“Indian Problem”

The discourse that Indigenous peoples were hindering settler progress comes directly from Prime Minister Sir John. A. MacDonald. He believed that “If the Indians were to disappear from the continent, the Indian problem would cease to exist” (MacDonald, 1880, p. 1991). According to Foucault (1972/1995), the construction of a discourse is a way to produce knowledge and categorize it, as well as create a version of reality. What MacDonald was doing was using his position of authority to construct Indigenous peoples as a detriment to Canadian progress. Thus, MacDonald was devising a system that hierarchized EuroCanadian peoples as superior to

Indigenous peoples, thereby facilitating genocidal processes.

The discourse crafted by MacDonald carried forward well into the twentieth century. Speaking on an amendment to *The Indian Act* in 1920, then-Minister of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott declared,

I want to get rid of the Indian problem ... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill (Titley, 2004, p. 50).

Supporting Scott was then-Prime Minister Sir Arthur Meigan, as well as MP Frank B. Stacey (1920b), who said,

I was so impressed with a remark made by Mr. Scott, whether it personal or official I am not prepared to say, but in my opinion it presented the ideal and correct solution of the whole Indian problem, when he stated that he hoped, in time, not in his day, not perhaps for 100 years hence, but some day, in Canada, there would be no 'Indian problem.' (p. 4027)

Although only these two men agreed with Scott's point within the context of the House of Commons debates, the absence of contrary opinions speaks volumes. The discourse created by the Canadian federal government—that Indigenous peoples were a problem to be solved—is unmistakably identifiable within the 1876-1951 time frame, and as a result is intertwined with policies from the *Indian Act*.

The Indian Act. *The Indian Act* (1876) of the late nineteenth century is intricately tied to how MPs saw Indigenous peoples as a problem. For example, MP David Laird (1876) stated that The Indian Act “would give the Indians some motive to be industrious and sober, and educate their children” (p. 750). Likewise, MP Hector-Louis Langevin (1876) noted that “it must be considered that Indians were not in the same position as white men. As a rule, they had no education and they were like children.” (p. 752). In both instances, the MPs treated Indigenous peoples as if they lacked agency and the ability to look after themselves and believed that Indigenous peoples did not have methods of teaching and learning within their cultures. This assumed absence of capacity meant that establishing residential schools would resolve the “Indian problem.” More specifically, through being educated with Eurowestern curricula and norms, Indigenous peoples would transcend their juvenile tendencies, and would become contributing members of Canadian society. The presumed need for intervention was still present three quarters of a century later. MP M. J. Coldwell (1951), for instance, noted that Indigenous peoples

are capable of independence, of initiative, of making a contribution to the cultural, economic and social life of the country in which we live, and they have been denied that opportunity. To a very large extent I think that is due to the fact that our attitude has been purely paternalistic, and the Indian Act has been administered purely from the paternalistic point of view. (p. 1528)

Coldwell was articulating that Indigenous peoples were able to contribute to Canadian society, and perhaps one of the reasons they were not doing so at that time, was a result of the implementation of and policies within *The Indian Act*. Despite this, there is no move by Members of Parliament to eliminate *The Indian Act* or residential schools. This implies that MPs—and by extension, the federal government—viewed Indigenous peoples as a challenge to

be overcome.

Issues assimilating. The “Indian Problem” discourse is also identifiable when considering the functionality of residential schools. In the early 1880s, church and government officials were concerned that residential schools did not meet their expectations of assimilating Indigenous children. For example, MP William P. C. Paterson (1884) reported on the contents of a letter sent by Reverend Wilson to the Department of the Interior, describing how the schools were “not working as well as might be desired,” (p. 1264). In particular, Reverend Wilson appears to have meant that the assimilatory processes that were expected to resolve the “Indian problem” did not have the anticipated effect. Thus, *The Indian Act* was amended, so “the attendance at school of children between the ages of six and fifteen years” became compulsory (Venne, 1981, p. 97). This attitude was echoed in later years as well. MP George Coote (1930), for example, believed “our educational system is falling down in that it does not provide some means whereby these children upon whom we have spent so much money can go on living in what we term a civilized way, rather than returning to the Indian way” (p. 1109). For Coote, the sociocultural “integration” practices (manifesting in residential school “curricula”) were not working to the desired outcome since Indigenous children were still “too Indian” when they returned to their communities. According to these members of parliament and others (Borden, 1906; Meighen, 1920a; 1920b; Oliver, 1906; Stacey, 1920b; Stewart, 1927), assimilatory practices were not working; thus, the discourse of the “Indian problem” remained.

Fatality rates. How successful the discourse of the “Indian Problem” was can be demonstrated by the callous attitudes Members of Parliament had towards the treatment of Indigenous children in residential schools. According to Miller (2001), by the early twentieth century, the death rates at residential schools were creating “a public scandal” (p. 265). Dr. Peter H. Bryce investigated the health conditions of Prairie schools from 1904-1907, culminating in a report that identified the appalling environments of the institutions he visited (Miller, 2009; Sproule-Jones, 1996). Though some Members of Parliament were disturbed by Bryce’s report, none drafted a policy motion to terminate the operation of residential schools. For example, MP George Eulas Foster (1907) commented, “What struck me the most was the amount of appalling carelessness regarding the health of students, causing such mortality” (p. 624). Despite acknowledging the poor treatment of students, as well as the statistically high rates of illness and death (Bryce, 1907), Foster did not make a motion that the Indian residential school program be discontinued; likewise neither did his colleagues. What the government’s intent was at this time was unclear. Perhaps, because the schools had an average fatality rate of 24% (Bryce, 1907), the government wanted to continue the IRS program since—according to late nineteenth and early twentieth century rhetoric—Indigenous peoples were a “dying race” (Cornelius, 1999; Francis, 2000), and Indian residential schools were facilitating the process. This conclusion correlates with reports from the (unnamed) principal of Gordon’s Indian Boarding School and J. G. McKechnie, Saskatchewan’s Inspector of Schools. In 1920, both of these officials outlined in detail the ways in which Gordon’s Indian Boarding School was “unsanitary” and “wholly inadequate” for the attending students (Johnston, 1920, p. 3270). It seems as though Bryce’s (1907) report did nothing to change the lives of the children who were forced to attend residential schools; in later decades, similar violence was still occurring. MP Roy Knight (1951) hinted at this when he stated,

Too many children, for example, who are attending these [residential] schools are paying for their education. In many cases in the form of work ... Where you have children in a boarding school away

from their parents and there is a lot of work to be done around the school farm, there is room for abuse. (p. 726)

The fact that Knight identified labour as potentially exploitative implies that the terrible treatment of Indigenous schools was well-known. Nonetheless, the discourse of the “Indian Problem” was so strong that despite the government reports, media stories, and survivor accounts of the many kinds of abuse that were occurring, the Canadian government actively chose to keep the residential school system going.

Conclusion

The “Indian Problem” discourse—implicit in the excerpts from Hansard—demonstrates xenophobic and racist perspectives held by Members of Parliament between 1876-1951. Indigenous peoples were a problem to be solved, not peoples whose lives were valued and respected. This was demonstrated by the implementation of *The Indian Act* (1876), discussion of the assimilatory methods of residential schools, and the hard-hearted mindset MPs had toward the health and welfare of Indigenous children. My brief analysis demonstrates that Members of Parliament serving from 1876-1951 not only knew about the deplorable conditions within residential schools, but did not act on them. This coincides with the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, wherein the Canadian government willfully engaged in cultural genocide.

Consequently, as MP Walter Dinsdale commented in 1956, “it seems to be that in dealing with the Indian problem it might be considered to be more of a white problem than an Indian problem” (p. 5194). Indeed, it is—and always has been—the discourses and mythologies (re)produced by non-Aboriginal peoples that stand in the way of Canada’s progress (Epp, 2012).

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Note

¹ White women were not allowed to vote federally in Canada until 1919: the first (white) woman MP, Agnes Macphail, did not begin her service until 1921. The first racialized person to serve as an MP, Douglas Jung, was not elected until 1957.

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