

Australia is being held back by its unresolved relationship with its Indigenous population. Drawing on attempts at reconciliation overseas, this [series of articles explores different ways of addressing this unfinished business](#). Today, we move to the northern hemisphere for lessons from Canada.

The relationship between Canada's Aboriginal peoples and non-indigenous population has never been an equal one, even though the 1982 national constitution recognises Aboriginal rights. In fact, the process of revealing what's probably the darkest chapter of the country's history has only just begun.

Like Australia, Canada had its "stolen generations". More than 150,000 Aboriginal children attended residential schools largely run by churches, over a period of more than 100 years.

The schools' goal was to "civilise" First Nations (previously called Indians), Inuit (people indigenous to the northern parts of the country) and Métis ([communities that emerged from European-Aboriginal intermarriage](#)) children – and to break their link to their cultures and identities.

Thousands of children died. Many more were physically and sexually abused. The last schools closed in the 1990s, but the harm they caused is still felt today.

The legacy of cultural genocide

Only recently have former students received compensation, following the settlement of thousands of lawsuits in 2006. In 2008, then prime minister Stephen Harper made a [formal apology](#) for the practice on behalf of the country.

The government also established the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) (TRC) in 2008, to educate all Canadians about the residential school system and its effects.

Canada's progress shows indigenous reconciliation is a long-term process

Written by The Conversation USA

In the years since, the TRC has heard almost 7,000 witnesses across the country. In its final report (issued in 2015), it described residential schools as part of a policy of “cultural genocide”.

Among its 94 recommendations, the TRC called for: the development of “culturally appropriate curricula”; the promotion of the use of Aboriginal languages; and an increase in Aboriginal programming on Canada’s national public broadcaster.

The TRC’s hearings and reports are only the beginning. Socioeconomic data show huge differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

The numbers are baffling. Life expectancy is ten years shorter for Inuit people than other Canadians. The suicide rate is up to ten times higher.

In 2004, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [noted that](#) :

Poverty, infant mortality, unemployment, suicide rates, criminal detention, child prostitution, women victims of abuse are all much higher among Aboriginal peoples.

Many children are still [removed from their families](#) by welfare agencies. And recent allegations of police abuse again highlighted the difficult everyday life of many Aboriginal men and women, as well as the longstanding systemic discrimination they face.

As recently as October 2015, several Aboriginal women living in a remote town in Quebec [accused white police officers](#) of abuse and sexual assault.

Ambiguous history of treaties and laws

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Nearly 100 treaties form the basis of the relationship between the government and most of today's 1.5 million Canadians who identify as Aboriginal (roughly 4% of the population).

These treaties were concluded from 1701 onward, when France and more than 30 First Nations signed what was called the [Great Peace of Montreal](#) to stop violence between the French and Aboriginal peoples and to share the land.

In 1763, the British Crown proclaimed it would seek permission from First Nations before allowing settlements in their territories. Dozens more treaties saw First Nations give up their lands in exchange for payments and other benefits, such as the right to hunt and fish.

But treaty negotiations were often marked by coercion and many of their provisions were never implemented. Various federal laws also contributed to disempowering Aboriginal peoples. The [1876 Indian Act](#), for instance, imposed a new system of internal governance and inheritance, subject to federal government control.

The ban on traditional ceremonies, such as the potlatch, had a particularly disturbing impact on the Aboriginal way of life. Potlatches included the exchange of gifts and were performed to strengthen social cohesion. But the government didn't approve of this way of distributing wealth and settling debts.

Some of the most intrusive sections of the Indian Act were repealed in 1951, but it still regulates various aspects of life and prevents effective self-government by Canada's Aboriginal peoples.

On the positive side, recent land claims agreements have secured some benefits. One of them led to the establishment in 1999 of Canada's newest administrative entity, the territory called [Nunavut](#), or "our land" in the Inuit language. This enhanced Inuit political autonomy and control of their land in Canada's Arctic region.

But, in most cases, treaty negotiations and litigation are both lengthy and costly, and provide

little opportunity for genuine dialogue. Still, there are reasons to be optimistic.

Reconciliation takes time

The TRC has shown that present forms of discrimination are deeply rooted in past injustices. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during his election campaign that the residential school system constituted “cultural genocide”. And, once elected, he [appointed a female First Nations leader](#) justice minister and attorney-general.

Trudeau’s government [has also officially adopted](#) the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and [set up a national inquiry](#) into the more than [1,000 missing or murdered Aboriginal women](#) over the past three decades.

The previous Conservative government had rejected calls for such an inquiry, [saying it was a criminal problem](#) unrelated to systemic discrimination.

The lesson Australia can learn from Canada’s experience is that reconciliation takes time. Constitutional recognition and formal rights, compensation payments, [archives](#) and apologies for genocidal practices are all important gestures.

But if we’re serious about establishing mutually respectful relationships, efforts to improve the situation of Aboriginal peoples must be continuous and pluralistic. Aboriginal ways of life, including legal traditions and forms of authority, must be recognised as valid and equal to those of the rest of society.

Maybe reconciliation also means that we must all be open to change. As the [final report](#) of the TRC says:

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Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. Virtually all aspects of Canadian society may need to be reconsidered.

This is the third article in our series on [efforts towards indigenous reconciliation in settler countries around the world](#). Look out for snapshots of other countries' progress in the coming days.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/canadas-progress-shows-indigenous-reconciliation-is-a-long-term-process-49893>