

Canada and the Indigenous people – A History

Extracted from: Canada's Dark Side: Indigenous Peoples and Canada's 150th Celebration by Susan Neylan in ORIGINS – Current Events in Historical Perspective.

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On July 1, 2017, as a crowd gathered to celebrate Canada's 150th birthday on Parliament Hill in the nation's capital of Ottawa, a group of Indigenous activists, the Bawating Water Protectors, erected a teepee. In defiance of the uncritical vision of Canada's past held by many Canadians, this act functioned as an Indigenous ceremony and as a declaration of Indigenous presence on this land.

Canada's Houses of Parliament (its House of Commons and the Senate chambers) sit on the unceded traditional territory of Omàmiwininiwak (Algonquins), which also made this action a reoccupation of a traditional homeland. When the tepee went up the police had attempted to remove the protestors. But security authorities soon had a change of heart and allowed them to move to a more central location.

The Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, personally met with the Indigenous activists in the tepee to listen to their concerns even as the official national celebrations commemorating that history—which had so failed Indigenous peoples in Canada—were heating up.

Many assume that the Canadian motto “Peace, Order, and Good Government” informed the practice of Canadian “Indian” policy. Instead, violence, disorder and mismanagement, and a colonizing government have characterized Indigenous peoples' experiences with the state.

Birthdays and National Origin Stories

"It has been very trying for Indigenous populations to have their existence annulled—that's what the last 150 years have been. The 150th anniversary has to be marked by the fact that things have to change. We must confront our colonial thinking and attitudes and redefine what Canadian-ness means. We must move beyond the false notion that Canada was founded by the French and the English, recognizing that we started off with the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, and have become a society that thrives on diversity and knows how to share resources fairly among everyone." – [Karla Jessen Williamson \(Inuk\)](#), June 2017.

A century and a half ago, three colonies in British North America united to form the new Dominion of Canada. Popular understanding of this moment often refers to the “birth” of an independent country. On July 1, 1867, the four new provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec) constituted a tiny fraction geographically of what has become Canada today.

Canada in 1867 was hardly an independent nation. It had no power to negotiate agreements with external foreign nations, no standing army, no national flag or anthem, and no power to amend its own constitution.

Subsequently borders to the provinces were expanded and the country grew as other colonies and British-claimed territories joined or were added (Manitoba and the Northwest Territories in 1870; British Columbia in 1871; Prince Edward Island in 1873; Yukon Territory in 1898; Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905; Newfoundland and Labrador in 1949; and Nunavut, created in 1999).

However, Confederation as a process was not a democratic creation and until the most recent additions, several groups were excluded from direct participation, Indigenous peoples among them. When Indigenous peoples did have input—for example, when Manitoba entered the Confederation in 1870—it was quickly disregarded.

Given they formed the majority population in all of the western and northern provinces when each joined Canada, lack of consultation followed by subjugation are more historically accurate descriptors of what Confederation meant for the Indigenous peoples.

Canada was created on top of Indigenous territories. Indigenous peoples’ place in the national narrative of the “birth” of Canada has been minimized and viewed as peripheral to the dominant culture’s stories.

The history Canadians don’t like to tell is that Canada’s nation-building has come at the expense of its Indigenous peoples.

Questions

- 1) What is the colonial thinking behind the founding of Canada?
- 2) What were some of the injustices the Indigenous people faced when the new Dominion of Canada was formed?